

# 9. Growing importance, bureaucracy and dissolution of boundaries: Swedish special educators between 2012 and 2022

---

Gunnlaugur Magnússon and Wieland Wermke

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

A prerequisite for the implementation of special support is that there is competence within the walls of the school that enables the necessary adaptations based on the students' different needs. In Swedish schools, this competence can be expected to exist in the form of the two professional categories of special education teachers and special education pedagogues (the term is 'specialpedagoger' in Swedish, which translates to 'special pedagogues'). For many people, both those working in schools and those outside of school, it is still not clear what the differences between the two occupational groups are; the emphasis here is on the word 'still'. In 2015, a report was published of which the Swedish title translates to *Special professions? The work and education of special education pedagogues and special education teachers* (Göransson et al., 2015). The report presented results from what was then a unique total-population study that aimed to map the professional role of special educators (SEs) in Sweden and their perceptions of their education and its relevance. The study that formed the basis for the report was carried out in 2012 by the research group around Professor Kerstin Göransson (later at

---

<sup>1</sup> In relation to this study, Helene Gerle and Therese Hannus have written their thesis in the Special education teacher programme at Stockholm University. Gerle, H. & Hannus, T. (2021). Speciella yrken mellan år 2012 och 2021. Ett långtidsperspektiv på skolans specialprofessioner. [Självständigt arbete i akademisk yrkesutbildning på avancerad nivå, Stockholms universitet]. Extended results of this study have even been published in Swedish. Gerle, H., Hannus, T., Magnússon, G. & Wermke, W. (2024). Profession i utveckling – skolans specialprofessioner mellan 2012 och 2022. I W. Wermke, G. Höstfält, & G. Magnússon (Red.), *Specialpedagogik som politik och praktik: Specialpedagogiska professioner i den svenska skolan sedan 1980*, s. 179–199. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bcq.j>. Licence: CC BY.

Karlstad University) including Gunilla Lindqvist, Nina Klang, Gunnlaugur Magnússon and Claes Nilholm among others.

We replicated this questionnaire in 2022 as 10 years had passed since the first study and the need to follow it up was perceived as vital, among other reasons due to subsequent reforms of education and as the education and professional role of the special professions had undergone changes. This chapter is therefore in direct relation to the book's perspective on changing and developing professions, which will here be reported through comparisons of the results from the two questionnaires. In that sense, this chapter has a longitudinal comparative perspective, studying a growing population over a tumultuous decade of professionalisation and education reforms on several different levels. It is also unique as it presents results from total-population studies.

## Methodology

The chapter is based on the two surveys mentioned above. Both surveys were sent to all practising and qualified (i.e. graduated) SEs in Sweden in 2012 and 2022. Both studies were administered by Statistics Sweden, which maintains several registries of the Swedish population, including those who have completed university education and are presently practising staff in the education system. In the 2012 study, 3,190 people participated out of a total population of 4,252 people, meaning a response rate of about 75% of the total population. 10 years later, in 2022, 4,089 out of a total of 7,208 possible respondents participated, representing a response rate of about 56% of the entire population.<sup>2</sup> The reworked version of the first survey was piloted in the fall of 2021 with a study of about 500 special education teachers and special education pedagogues.

An initial analysis of the population shows clearly how the population has changed during the ten years that separate the surveys. First of all, the population of SEs has grown extensively. However, the composition of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Only 5,449 individuals or 75.6% of the total population had digital mailboxes, which reduced the contacted population somewhat. In fact, 75% of the recipients of the survey responded, which is 56.7% of the total population. In that sense, the rate of correspondence is no lower in the second survey, although a lower part of the population participated.

respondent group has also changed to a high degree. In the questionnaires, respondents were asked to indicate their form of employment. Overall, the results show that a majority of the respondents are employed as special education pedagogues but that the proportion and number of special education teachers has increased significantly since 2012 (see Figures 9.1 and 9.2). Figure 9.1 shows the results of the 2012 survey and Figure 9.2 shows the results of the 2022 survey.

This change is not unexpected, as a reform that re-introduced special education teachers into the education system was conducted only shortly prior to the previous survey of 2012 (see Chapter 2 in this volume). Hence, special education teachers were a relatively new occupational group, whereas special education pedagogues had been an established group for almost 20 years at the time of the 2012 survey. However, this development also illustrates that there is a significant market for the special education teachers and that the most significant growth has been among that occupational group.

The questionnaires consisted of several different sections.<sup>3</sup> The first section asked questions about employment and education. Here the respondents had to answer questions about where they were employed, what job title they had, and what their basic education was (i.e. what level of the education system they were educated for during their teacher education). The respondents who indicated that they had been employed as SEs (rather than as teachers or principals) then answered questions about the type of school in which they were employed and the scope of their duties. A question about the extent to which the respondents work with different activities consisted of several alternatives where the extent was indicated in four different Likert-scale response options: 1) *not at all*; 2) *to some extent*; 3) *to a large extent*; and 4) *to a very large extent*. Here we had to adapt our response options between the two questionnaires. In this particular question, the respondents in the 2012 study were asked to indicate how much, out of 100%, they felt they spent a working day on certain tasks. This response format proved to be complex to answer, resulting in many incomplete responses. To ensure some comparability, we transformed the results of the 2012 study in relation to the new design using a Likert scale. If a respondent answered with 0%, the respective task did not

---

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed English version of the survey used in the relevant sub-studies in volume, please see Chapter 6, Appendix.

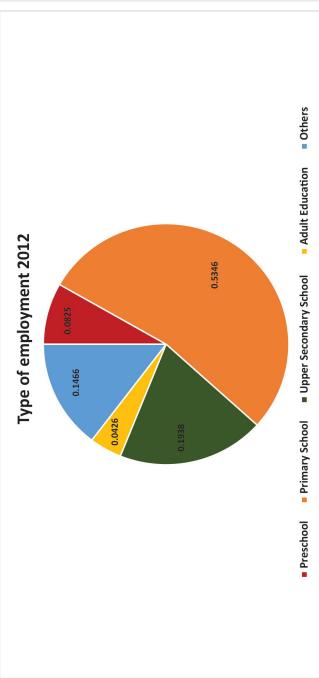


Figure 9.1: Types of employment in 2012

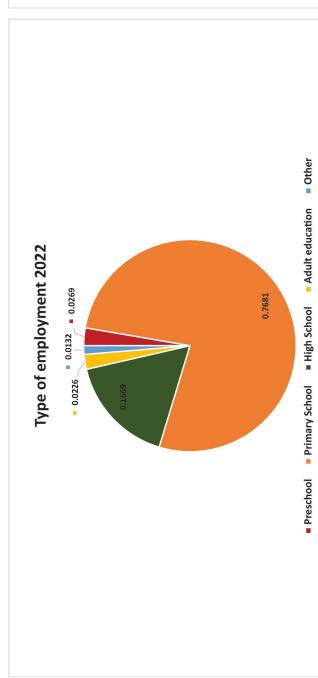
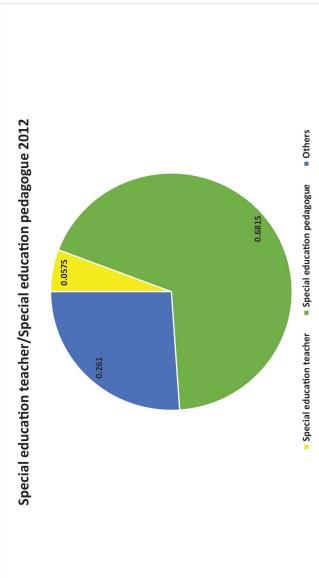


Figure 9.2: Type of employment in 2022

take any part of the day (coded with 1). If a respondent had indicated a percentage between 1% and 25%, we translated it to 'to some extent' (2), while between 26% and 75% was translated to 'to a large extent' (3). Everything above 75% was translated to 'very large extent' (4). The boundaries were chosen to depict the difference between 'to no extent' and 'to some extent', that is, a rather small share in a clear way.

At the same time, this very transformation reveals the general problem with self-assessment surveys. Asking an individual respondent to determine what they perceive as a large or small extent is always somewhat arbitrary. Hence, we try to stick mostly to a comparison between the results below and above our scale level 2 – 'to some extent'. This is the advantage of using an even numbered four-point scale, as it should incentivise the respondents to choose between a greater/positive and a lesser/negative amount or experience.

The third section of the survey dealt with special education as a field of practice and with SE training. Here, questions were asked about which year the respondents graduated and the specialisation they studied. Questions were also asked about the extent to which the respondents felt prepared to work with different tasks after the education and the extent to which the education provided knowledge in different areas. These questions were also answered with a Likert-scale rating of 1) *not at all*; 2) *to a fairly low degree*; 3) *to a fairly high degree*; and 4) *to a very high degree*. Questions with ranking options were also asked about how crucial they considered different factors to be in causing children/young people/adults to have difficulties at school and the importance of children/young people/adults having a diagnosis to receive support.

Under the heading 'the view of school problems', questions were asked about how important the respondents currently consider the reasons why children/young people/adults have difficulties at school and the importance of diagnosis, as well as a question about the possibility of influencing employees' views on this. The final area dealt with the school's function and approach. Questions were asked about what role the respondents believe the school should have in society, for example, when it comes to contributing to an equal society, and about what the school should prioritise, for example, in terms of students' personal development. The above-mentioned areas were answered with the following Likert scale: 1) *Not at all*; 2) *Slightly*

*agree*; 3) *Strongly agree*; and 4) *Completely agree*. To increase the validity of the answers, respondents were given the additional option of '*I don't know*'. These answers were coded as non-responses and were not included in the results presented below.

The following section compares descriptive results from both studies. In particular, we compare mean values to provide the reader with a quicker overview of commonalities and differences between the two surveys. In the following results, the three dimensions will be presented.

1. *The mission*, operationalised through questions about tasks regarding the professionals' conduct.
2. *The training*, operationalised through questions about how prepared special education teachers and special education pedagogues felt after their training.
3. *The values*, operationalised through special education teachers' and special education pedagogues' approaches to school problems and special support.

The group of special education teachers who responded to the first questionnaire was very small in relation to the rest of the group. The second questionnaire was also answered by more special education pedagogues than special education teachers but the proportions had shifted significantly as can be seen in Figure 9.1. For this reason, comparisons of the different groups should be exercised with some caution. We have attended to comparability, however, through several tools. First, scales have been adapted to achieve comparability (see above). Second, averaging has its limitations, especially in relation to self-report surveys. Large differences can, for instance, emerge if the groups vary greatly between the response options 'to a large extent' and 'to a very large extent'. In the presentation of results, we therefore want to show and interpret larger, smaller and no differences at all in terms of percentages between both studies to show possible change and continuity in the special occupations and set these in relation to changes in the Swedish school system. Finally, we treat both populations (over time) as total populations of SEs and keep the comparisons of the two groups (special education teachers and special education pedagogues) to a minimum in this report of the results.

## Findings

### The tasks

In both surveys, the tasks the respondents state that they work with to the greatest extent are collaboration with a pupil health team, collaboration with school management and investigation, preparation of intervention plans and documentation. Consultancy, advice and/or qualified conversations with student assistants and collaboration with guardians are also tasks that the SEs work with to a large extent. The results show that the tasks the professional groups work least with are teaching in regular classes and collaboration with the municipal school administration. However, we see a sharp increase in the mean values in most areas in how the respondents answered between the different questionnaires; the only exception being the task of collaborating with the municipal school administration. The tasks that show the significantly largest increase are investigation, preparation of intervention plans and documentation and collaboration with school leadership and parents; tasks that can be said to belong to more bureaucratic types of tasks. Other areas with a large increase in mean values are collaboration with student health care, collaboration with school management and operational development in addition to collaboration with school management. Consultation and advice and/or qualified discussions with teachers and student assistants also show a clear increase.

Overall, the results show that collaboration and consultation are areas that have increased since the first survey was conducted, and are also the areas that the respondents indicated that they work with to the greatest extent. As can be seen in Figure 9.3, the greatest difference in mean value is seen in the increase in the tasks of investigation, preparation of intervention plans and documentation.

### Differences between the tasks over time

Figure 9.4 shows differences in the extent to which SEs estimated that they work on different tasks. In order to gain an overview of differences and changes, we have chosen to highlight a question from the different categories of teaching, consultation, organisational development and investigation. Here, we present the summarised percent of respondents marking either 'to a fairly high degree' and 'to very high degree' to each of the categories. As we will illustrate, a higher proportion of SEs claim they work to either

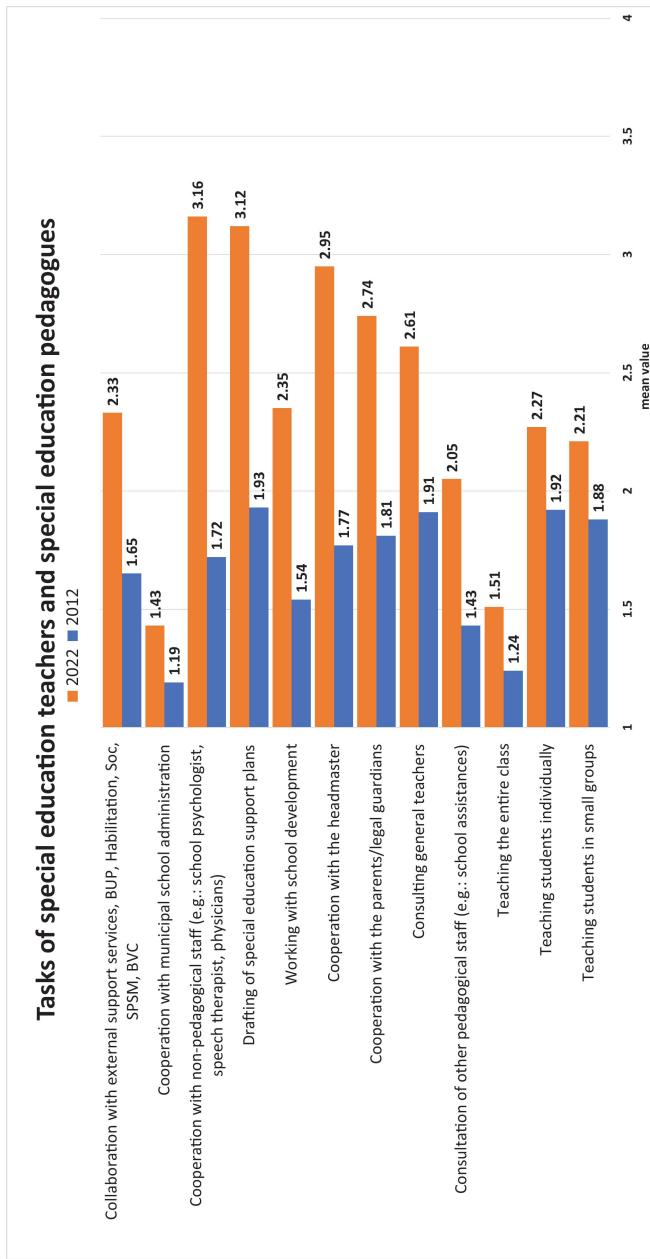


Figure 9.3: Tasks of SEs

a high degree or a very high degree with all different tasks. This may have several explanations, as we will discuss later on.

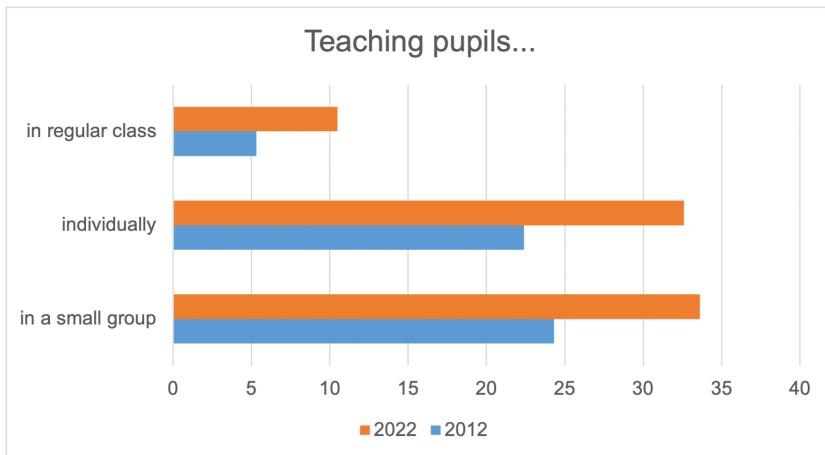
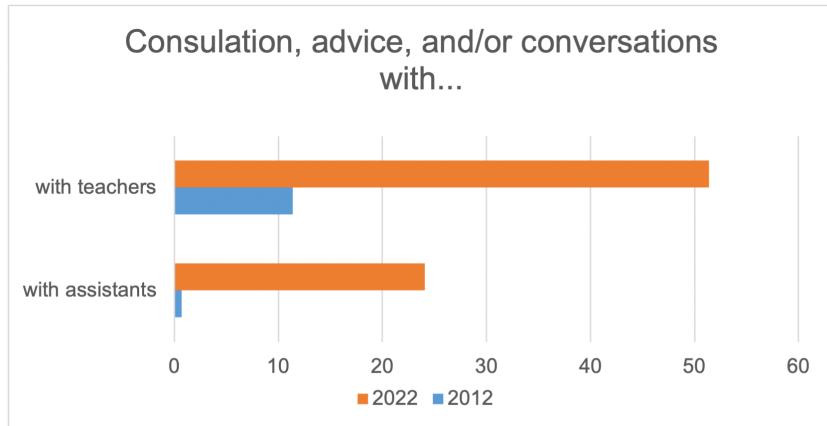


Figure 9.4: SEs' teaching responsibilities in different contexts

In the statement regarding individual teaching of children/youth/adults, we see that this is a task that has increased significantly over the ten years that have passed. While we can assume that this is true to a higher degree for special education teachers, we can see an increase in the frequency of individual teaching in the whole population. The same is true for teaching in smaller groups and classes; also here, a significantly higher proportion of the SEs' mark that they spend a higher degree of their work teaching than what was the case in 2012. The lowest proportion is among those who teach in regular classes, 10.5% in 2022, although there has been a doubling of the proportions also there from the level of 5.3% in 2012.

As Figure 9.5 illustrates, the results also show an increase in tasks related to consultation and advice with both teachers, teacher teams, and assisting staff.

The SEs also perceive consultation as a task they work with to a high degree. While consultation with assistants has grown extensively, consultations with teachers and teams of teachers is something over 50% of what the SEs spend much time doing. Consultation can regard anything from teaching tips and designs or implementation of special support interventions to amendments

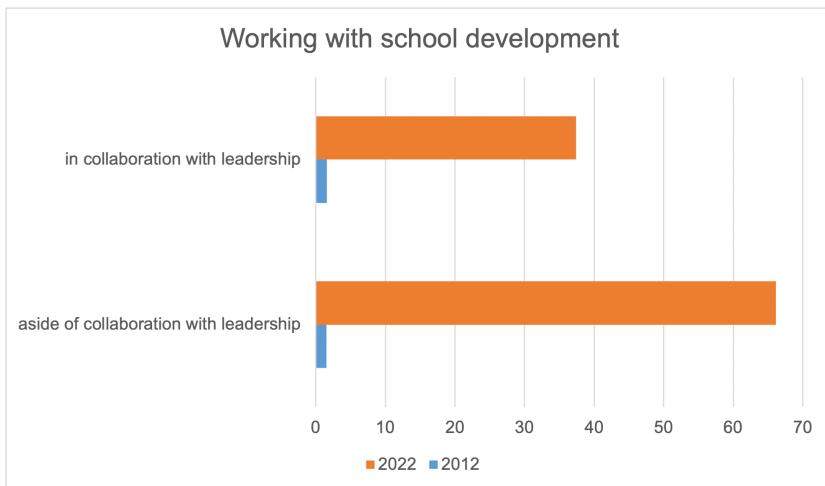


**Figure 9.5:** SEs' work with consultation, advice/interaction with assistants and teachers/teacher teams

of the educational environments and the social climate. It is therefore not surprising that consultation primarily regards teachers, but it is interesting to see that class/pupil assistants are also objects of the SEs' attention. This increase in consulting can also be a result of increased focus on the competence development of teachers and other school staff in questions relating to special education that grew forth in the last decade (see Chapter 2). Here, the SEs carry a particular set of knowledge that can be presented to other professions in the schools as teachers and assistants are to carry out more of the special educational support. The same can be said about the next topic, school development.

A similar trend of growing proportions of SEs finding themselves occupied with a particular task emerges when it comes to the task of organisational development, both in collaboration with school leadership and other professions.

As can be seen from Figure 9.6, a very low proportion of the SEs dealt with school development to a high degree in 2012. In 2022, however, a high proportion of the SEs mark this task as something they do much of. The emphasis on school development has been in the zeitgeist so to say for the last couple of decades. A constant focus on how to improve schooling in order to improve attainment goes hand-in-hand with the discourse of



**Figure 9.6:** SEs' work with school development

cost-effectiveness and competition that has been prevalent in education since the 1980s. In Sweden, the notion of developing inclusive schools has to a high extent been connected to the SEs, where inclusion has regarded the placement and education of pupils seen as in need of special educational support. Thus, the SEs are not only made responsible for the special educational work, but increasingly also for the development of the schools as educational organisations. This is even named as an educational goal of their training in the University Act (SFS 2007:638).

### **Investigation, preparation of intervention plans and documentation**

The results in Figure 9.7 show a significant increase for SEs when it comes to tasks involving investigation, preparation of intervention plans and documentation. Ironically, the problem of increased documentation has been a recurring problem in the Swedish education system, and several attempts have been made to reduce documentation and bureaucracy through more or less encompassing education reforms. The key problem, however, lies in the fact that Swedish schools are public institutions and that much of their work thus is a wielding of power through official exercise of authority, which

must be exercised equitably and justly. Decisions regarding the designs and implementation of special support are also matters of resources between individuals who often belong to marginalised social groups. These must be examinable and, in some cases, appealable, which in turn leads to an emphasis on the secure documentation of each step in the process, from reporting the likely need for support to the investigation of the need, the decision-making surrounding resource allocation, the design of interventions and the evaluation of their effects. These demands have only grown in alignment with the juridification of the education system (Novak, 2018; Rosén, 2024). We noted documentation as a large portion of some groups of SEs' work in 2012 (Göransson et al., 2015), where some SEs were described as very busy with bureaucratic documentations. However, in 2022 we see a much larger proportion – over 70% work with such matters to a high degree.

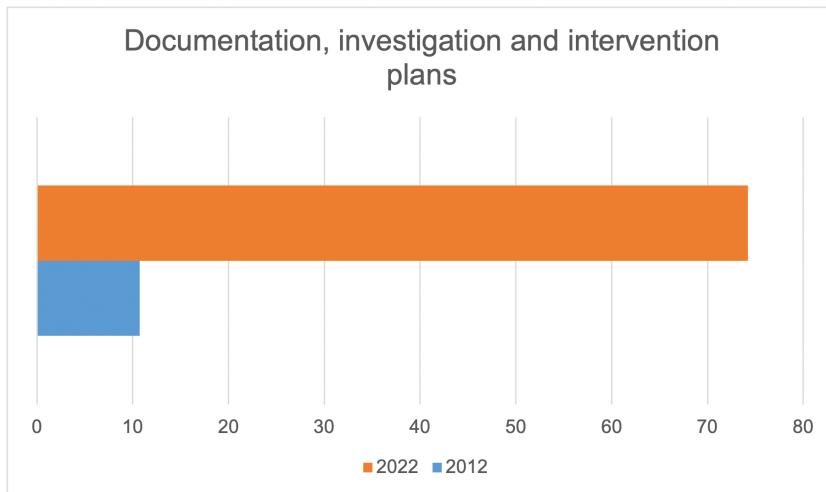


Figure 9.7: SEs' work with investigations, intervention plans and documentation

The 2012 survey showed that the special education teacher's role had more teaching elements, mainly teaching in small groups and individually, whereas consultation, advice and/or qualified discussions with teaching teams and school management were primarily part of the special education pedagogues' role. The results show that, in 2022, special education

teachers responded that they devote themselves to individual teaching of students to a greater extent than special education pedagogues and that special education pedagogues have an increased collaboration with school management and work with school development. The results also show that, across the board, SEs today indicate that they work more with collaboration, consultation and advice than before. This confirms the previous hypothesis about a historical expectation that SEs carry the school's work with students with special needs, by both identifying and working with school problems at the same time as they are expected to work with school development (Göransson et al., 2015; Magnússon & Göransson, 2019; Tinglev, 2014; von Ahlfeld Nisser, 2014).

The often-described bureaucratisation of the Swedish school through documentation requirements, recurring inspections and a general New Public Management culture (Höstfält, 2015; Wermke & Forsberg, 2017; Wermke & Salokangas, 2021) is therefore clearly reflected in the work areas of these SEs. An alternative interpretation could also be that the importance of the SEs is growing, through their ability to respond to NPM and the demands of bureaucratisation.

Changes in the school world are usually incremental and often take considerable time. Some differences emerge in the professional roles, and the results generally point to a clearer separation of the tasks of special education teachers and special education pedagogues. According to von Ahlfeld Nisser (2014), schools should take advantage of the existence of two different specialist professions and therefore clearly distinguish roles and functions. This may be a result of the political effort in recent years to increase competence and the availability of further training in the different specialisations. Although previous studies have indicated that there may be dissatisfaction among SEs when it comes to certain political decisions involving their profession (Magnússon and Göransson 2019), the increase of about 3,000 authorised persons in the profession may still be a result of the political decisions of recent years. The tasks of both groups are apparently more and more distributed according to the intentions of the special education reform implemented in 2007/2008.

However, a large part of the work for both special education teachers and special education pedagogues is still similar, including documentation, intervention plans, and collaboration with student health personnel and

guardians. Consultation and qualified conversations have become a common task for the group as a whole compared to 2012. Furthermore, the results show that the tasks that respondents indicate have increased the most for the SEs is investigation, preparation of intervention plans, and documentation. The complexity and variety of these tasks show the breadth of requirements within the school system (Magnússon & Göransson, 2019). Thus, it is also possible to draw parallels to several dilemmas that exist within special educational activities (Ahlberg, 2007; Persson, 2019).

### **The education**

Figure 9.8 shows the perception of preparation the respondents felt for different tasks after completing their education between the two years, here shown in terms of average number calculated from the four-step Likert scale. The results show an increase across the board where the respondents state that after completing their studies, they felt prepared to work individually with children/young people/adults with special needs. An increase also appears regarding how they feel prepared to work with documentation and investigation, school development, collaboration and adaptation of materials. Preparation for leadership remained the same between the two surveys.

In summary, the results of the two surveys show an increase in the respondents' level of preparation for their education in terms of work with both pupils, school staff, and other actors. This is, of course, a positive result for the universities that organise the programmes, although the results are likely to vary at a more granular level than throughout the total population of working SEs. Even if the differences are small, the increase in almost all questions shows that the education of the SEs has apparently been more clearly professionalised in relation to the educational requirements of the special professions, at least in terms of preparedness to work as such after finishing the training. The result is not marginal either, when you consider that the 2007/2008 reform not only re-introduced a professional education, but also made both educations programmes at the advanced level (i.e. second cycle level corresponding to masters-level degree).

The respondents also express that their training has provided a scientific basis for their work as well as increased knowledge about administrative tasks such as documentation and investigation, something that is important for the

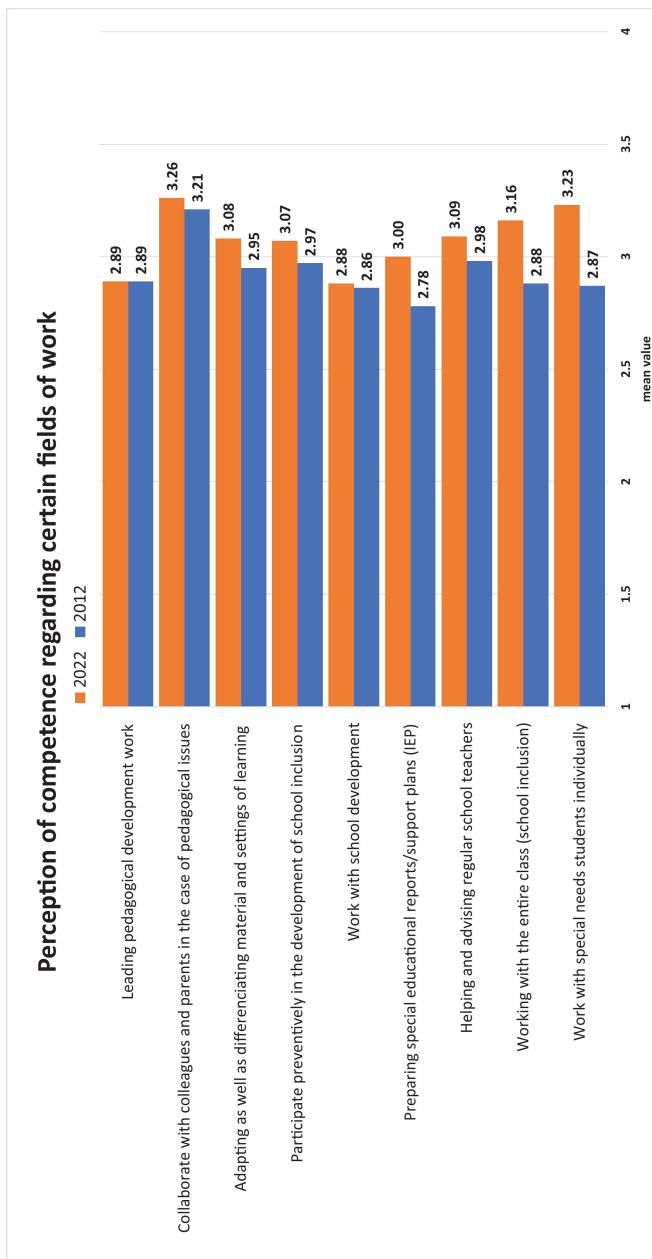


Figure 9.8: Summary of the areas SEs feel prepared to work in after training

legitimacy of the SEs in the workplace. A decrease has, however, occurred in how prepared the respondents feel after their training with respect to development work and pedagogical issues concerning, for example, guardians. This decrease may be the price paid for the academisation of education, which occurs mostly through a greater amount of methodological and theoretical scientific literature and courses in education (Wimmer et al., 2023), as well as a greater emphasis on documenting tasks; all this must 'fit' into an education that only covers 90 ECTS.

The results illustrate a difference in whether the respondents feel prepared to work individually with students, where an increase is shown in the special education teachers. This can be seen as a kind of operationalisation of the special education teachers according to the overarching idea (and their own wishes) that they are supposed to work 'closer to the student'. Here, we see a differentiation between the groups in the results where our respondents indicate that they are trained more specifically for their respective tasks. The latest degree regulation from 2011, which in turn led to the introduction of several specialisations in special education, further strengthened the trend. For instance, the introduction of explicit knowledge requirements related to neuro-psychiatric diagnoses show differentiation through specialisation, that is, a re-introduction of different types of special education experts for kids with different special education problems. In other words, the SEs are categorised in and of themselves. This movement is also built on government initiatives, which focus primarily on support for teachers who explicitly want to become special education teachers.

Finally, political and governmental decisions also affect the willingness and demand for formal qualifications, which may not have previously been considered important. It has also become financially easier and more accessible to obtain formal qualifications thanks to political decisions, such as various targeted state funding initiatives that have enabled an increase in SEs in Swedish schools. Here, we can also draw a parallel to what Colnerud & Granström (2015) refer to as *authorisation*, and what Harries-Jenkins (1970/2010) calls professional groups striving for formal legitimisation. Interest in formal authorisation may thus have increased as a result of increased interest in the legitimacy of the special profession, which was requested by the SEs as early as 2012 (Magnússon & Göransson, 2019). The simplest way is then differentiation through specialisation during training and in practice.

## The values

Respondents in both surveys were asked about their perception of the reasons why children/young people/adults experience difficulties. These are important questions, as they can reveal normative assumptions at the base of professional work, that is, where the SEs place the reason for school problems and the sort of support, they are likely to design and implement.

In Figure 9.9, we see differences in the responses from the 2012 and 2022 surveys. When it comes to the goals of the school/preschool being too difficult for students, the results show a slight increase among respondents in the 2022 survey. However, a prominent difference is seen in the statement that children/young people/adults have individual difficulties, where the SEs from the 2022 survey estimated this as an important cause to a greater extent. The mean score for the statement that some teachers have difficulties, and that this in turn causes children/young people/adults' difficulties at school, has also increased. On the other hand, the 2022 survey responses show a lower mean value for the statement that some classes/groups do not work. We also see a decrease in the mean value of the statement that the school/preschool is not adapted to deal with individuals' differences.

These results indicate that the general shift in discourse of special education, where the individual is set in the centre to a higher degree, is also affecting the SEs, who have otherwise to a higher extent tended to explain school problems as results of the school and the teaching.

Figure 9.10 presents the results from the 2012 and 2022 surveys, respectively, in which the specialist professions take a position on how important or unimportant it is that children/young people/adults receive a diagnosis in order to receive special support in their respective school/organisation. Here, we see a very big change as the diagnosis is now considered much less important for receiving special support in 2022 than what it was in 2012. This is a somewhat unexpected shift, as there have been indicators that a diagnosis functions as a key to receive resources to finance special support. However, the usage of extra adaptations (see Chapter 2), implemented first in 2014, has to a large extent shifted the responsibility of special support over to the regular class teacher. This also alleviates some of the documentation of special support as it prolongates the time from the first indications of a need of special support through requiring the teacher to adapt their teaching first for a while before graduating into the next level of support measurements.

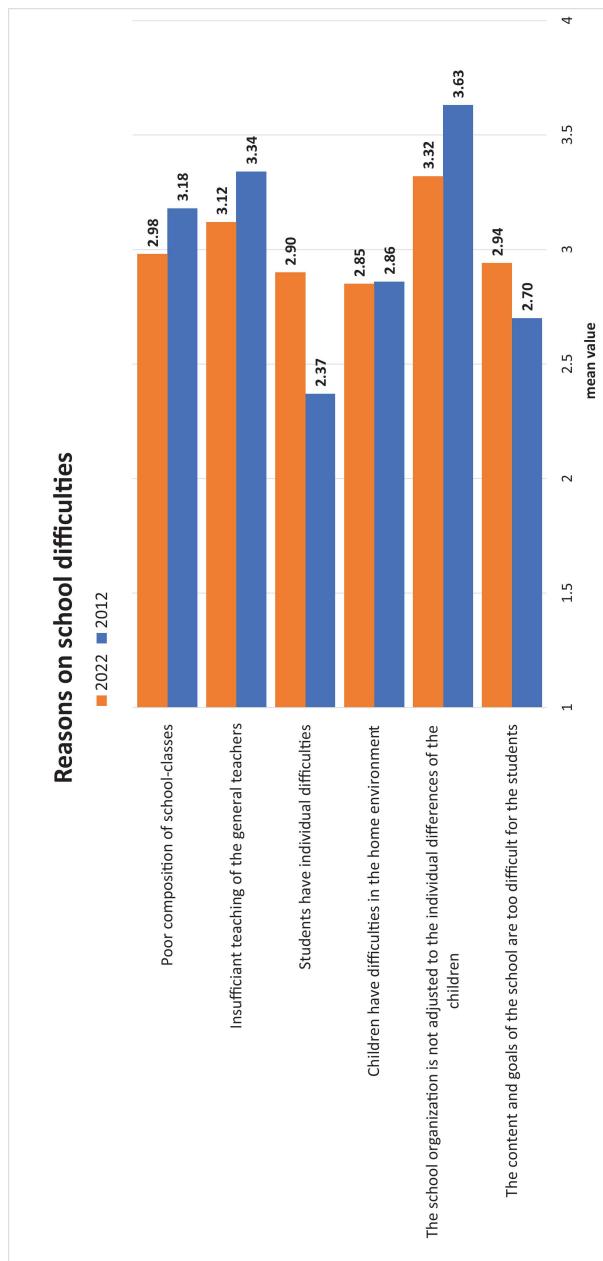


Figure 9.9: Reasons for students' difficulties at school

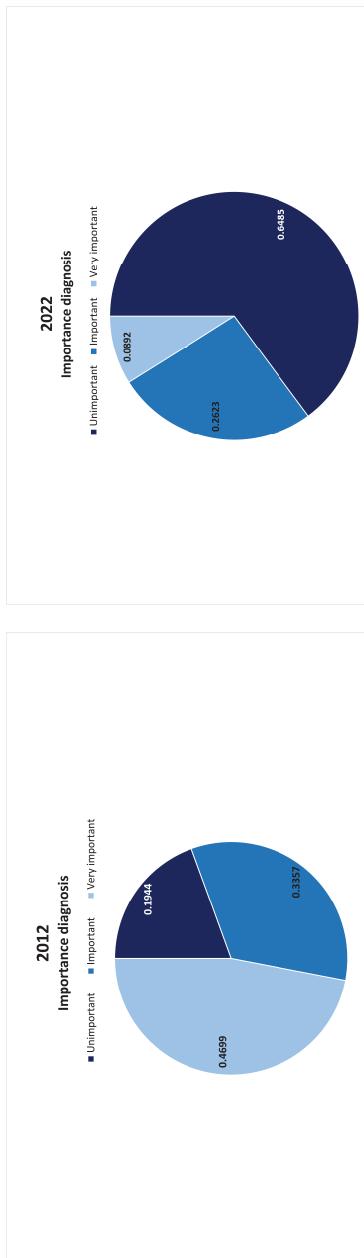


Figure 9.10: Importance of diagnosis for special support, 2012 and 2022

In practice, thus, the pupils do not need a diagnosis as there are additional steps of support compared to ten years earlier.

After years of focusing on the individualisation of schools (Höstfält, 2015; Montelius et al., 2022), difficulties are now much more often attributed to the students themselves, the primary indicator of which being that the student does not achieve the intended goals. Difficulties are thus today seen to lie with the individual, and the interventions are aimed at the individual student (Persson, 2019). This also means that respondents think that those schools or classes that do not work have become less important as explanatory models for school problems. Simply put, school problems have increasingly become student problems. This can perhaps be explained by changes in society, where social problems become individual challenges. The latter is the dark sibling of free choice. However, it is also in the nature of individualisation.

This entails a shift from school problems to pupil problems, but with a much smaller emphasis on the diagnosis of special support. How can this be interpreted? Here we also see the school's individualisation as a reason. Special support is operationalised in Swedish schools via goal attainment (Magnússon, 2015; 2023), or rather, the risk of not reaching the knowledge goals is justification to investigate the need for special support. It does not matter *why* the goals are not achieved – a medical or psychological diagnosis is not needed – rather, any risk is to be investigated and interventions decided upon. Here, a differentiation is made between the degree of interventions, with 'pedagogical' solutions premiered under the moniker of 'extra adjustments', and amendments the teacher can make within their regular teaching and classroom. These types of selective interventions can, for instance, be adjusted learning materials, clarified instruction, longer time for tasks, technical solutions such as computer support, hearing protection, etc. If the 'response' to the 'intervention' does not result in the desired goal achievement, special support is continued, which is documented in a legally binding manner through an intervention plan (Höstfält & Johansson, 2023).

## Conclusions

In our results, we see that tasks and assignments differ for SEs between the two surveys. This can, on the one hand, be seen as the everyday practices and school organisation catching up with educational reforms from

several years ago. On the other hand, as almost all the changes regard large increases; it also illustrates how the SEs have become 'busier' (i.e. have more things on their plate) and are used more as a general solution to several different problems in an increasingly anaemic education system. However, the decentralised Swedish education system is to a large extent dependent upon the principals – partly because they are legally responsible for many dimensions of schooling (such as the identification and provision of support). They are also responsible for their schools' economy, and again, the Swedish decentralised education system means that different municipalities organise the financing of the schools and special support differently (Magnússon & Göransson, 2019; Magnússon, 2023). It can be added that the municipalities have also made economic cutbacks throughout the education system, which has negatively affected the provision of special support (Magnússon, 2023). These negative consequences regard anything from layoffs of support staff, the centralisation of SEs and pupil health services, and larger class sizes, which in turn raise the workload of teachers. Hence, the fact is that the tasks differ not only among the individual professionals in the group of SEs, but primarily between the individual municipalities and individual schools. This also risks creating a variety of interpretations of inclusion as a policy that can lead to shortcomings when it comes to achieving a fair and democratic school for all (Magnússon & Pettersson, 2021).

However, as there appears to be a clearer division of tasks between the SEs, there is a better opportunity to meet the different needs of the school at both the organisational and individual level. A clearer division of tasks can also enhance professionalism and quality as it has been seen as problematic for the professional status of the profession if SEs perform too diverse tasks. Performing tasks that the profession itself considers inappropriate or contrary to their own beliefs further damages the profession's status (Magnússon, 2015; Magnússon & Göransson, 2019). Clearer tasks also indicate a clearer jurisdiction, which is easier to defend, not the least through a clearer definition of what their tasks *do not* encompass.

On the other hand, we also see a clear increase in almost all tasks. This can be understood as a *dissolution of boundaries*; the work increases and each task encompasses more and more of their time. In the previous study in 2012 (Göransson et al., 2015; Magnússon, 2015), many respondents indicated that they had secondary tasks along with their work as SEs. This could be

responsibilities as class teachers, as principals or even as substitute teachers filling in as needed. This may explain the increase of all tasks to some extent. This would then go hand-in-hand with the potential professionalisation we notice when the tasks of the professions become clearer. A final possible explanation would set this development in relation to the decade of cutbacks in education, which has led to a higher workload among school staff and fewer assistive services. The result might then be an indicator of the SEs feeling the heat of the cutbacks. However, without more detailed data, it is difficult to draw succinct conclusions from this development.

The tasks that the respondents indicate have the greatest increase are the tasks that revolve around investigation, the preparation of intervention plans and documentation. Collaboration and consultation are also areas that are said to have increased to the degree of being the largest part of their everyday work. The large increase that the respondents describe has occurred in the work of establishing implementation plans and other documentation may be due to new formulations that have occurred in the steering documents since the previous curricula were launched in 2010 and 2011.<sup>4</sup> There is a feeling of an increased documentation requirement in general in the school since the previous survey, revolving around the extent to which documentation should be written and partly about who is responsible for it. Here, it could be argued that the SEs have become bureaucrats, as have their immediate superiors, the principals. In 2009, Nicklas Stenlås writes (with reference to Persson, 2006) about the role of the school leader, which from our perspective also fits perfectly for SEs:

The role of the school leader has changed. From being 'first among equals' (*primus inter pares*), the school leader has evolved into 'last among superiors' (*ultimus inter superiores*) [...] The client (the municipality) wants to transform the school leader from one of other teachers and place him/her as a head of administration in the administrative hierarchy. A collegial/professional governance system has changed or will change into a bureaucratic one. (Persson, 2006, p. 25)

In other words, because of the current governance of Swedish schools, the SEs become *frontline* bureaucrats who support their immediate boss, the principal,

---

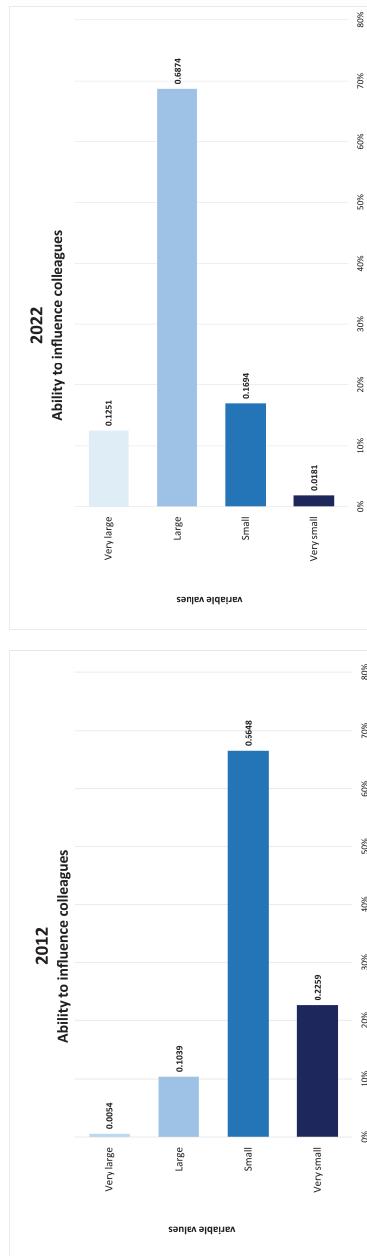
<sup>4</sup> A new curriculum was launched in 2022 – but after the gathering of data was complete. Hence, it did not affect the results of this study.

in their bureaucratic duties. They are also elevated from the teaching profession, with higher salaries and clearer management powers. Incidentally, the lift in status is also experienced by our respondents (see Chapters 7 and 11). When asked whether they feel they can influence their colleagues, we see a large increase in the perception of these opportunities, as Figure 9.11 shows. Perhaps that is the price to be paid? From colleague to middle manager, from educator to bureaucrat?

Much smaller albeit systematic differences can be seen in the respondents' perception of their training. After completing their education, the special education teachers in 2022 stated that they felt more prepared to work individually with students with special needs than the special education pedagogues did. The results also show that the difference between the groups increased, which can be seen as a shift towards an increasingly clear division of tasks between the two types of SEs. This can be linked to the introduction of two different educational programmes and two different degree regulations. The SEs generally indicate that they are more satisfied with the content and working methods of their education in 2022 than those in place in 2012, which we interpret as a feature of a professionalisation process following the re-introduction of the special education teachers.

On the other hand, the results also show that the respondents are less satisfied with the programme regarding development work and pedagogical issues, which may be worth paying attention to since it is stated as the main reason for starting the programme. This can be seen as two-dimensional: on the one hand, expectations may not be met if they are very high, while on the other, the education may not live up to reasonable expectations. The education is primarily stated to provide a scientific basis for future professional tasks. This can be linked to the fact that the formally organised educational process not only leads to the high level of skills and knowledge required, but also helps to maintain the traditions of the profession (Harries-Jenkins, 1970/2010).

Finally, we see an interesting alteration over time concerning the attitude of SEs towards school problems and the pupils' right to special support. Our material shows an increase in the respondents' view that individual difficulties are the cause of school problems. This can be conceptualised as a shift from viewing the need for special educational support as a school-problem



**Figure 9.11:** Ability to influence colleagues, 2012 and 2022

to viewing it as a student-problem. This aligns with the increased individualisation of society (and thus the school) over time, where societal problems are interpreted as individual challenges, and where the professionals who work with these individual challenges are viewed as specialist teachers and SEs. This also shows a differentiation in the system of the professions within the school system. With the introduction of compulsory education, a teaching profession grew and gained social status (Vanderstraeten, 2007). The focus of the teaching profession has been the pupil collective, or more concretely, the collective pupil (Bromme, 2014/1992). With the individualisation and shift of problems to the individual pupil, a new profession gains importance; a profession, specialised in the individual, within the school world and the school's special professions.

These professionals do not need a diagnosis to step in. The support is linked to the individual student's feared lacklustre achievement of goals. A school for all becomes a grade for all. However, it also means that the idea of inclusion in the sense of the Salamanca Declaration, creating a social place where all children go to school together, changes to inclusion in the spirit of PISA student competence measurement. The latter seeks to premiere a notion of *achievement for all*. The latter is operationalised in an equivalence work that results rather in *one* (suitable) school for all. All in the spirit of individualism.

## References

Ahlberg, A. (2007). 'Specialpedagogik av igår, idag och imorgon'. [special education yesterday, today and tomorrow]. *In Pedagogisk Forskning i Sverige*, 12(2), 84–95.

Bromme, R. (2014/1992). *Der Lehrer als Experte* [The teacher as expert]. Waxmann.

Colnerud, G., & Granström, K. (2015). *Respekt för lärarprofessionen. Om lärares yrkesspråk och yrkesetik* [Respect for the teaching profession. About teachers' professional language and ethics]. Liber.

Göransson, K., Lindqvist, G., Klang, N., Magnússon, G., & Nilholm, C. (2015). *Speciella yrken? Specialpedagogers och speciallärares arbete och utbildning: En enkätstudie* [Special professions? special education pedagogues' and special education teachers' work and education]. Karlstad University.

Harries-Jenkins, G. (1970/2010). Professionals in organisations. In J. A. Jackson (Ed.), *Professions and professionalization* (pp. 51–103). Cambridge University Press.

Höstfält, G. (2015). *Resultatinriktad individualisering i skolans inre arbete: En grundad teori om utvecklingssamtal, skriftliga omdömen och individuella utvecklingsplaner på grundskolans högstadium* [Result focussed individualisation in the school's work. A grounded theory about individual development talks and individual education plans in the secondary school]. Stockholm University.

Höstfält, G., & Johansson, B. (2023). Regulatory Support Activities in the Swedish Policy and Practice Nexus: Inclusive Culture of Education Policy in Different Contexts. In Prøitz, T. S., Aasen, P., Wermke, W. (Eds) *From Education Policy to Education Practice*. (pp. 227–246). Springer.

Magnússon, G., & Göransson, K. (2019). Perimeters of, and challenges to, the jurisdiction of Swedish SEs: an exploration of free text responses. *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 34(3) pp. 257–271.

Magnússon, G., & Pettersson, D. (2021). *Imaginaries of Inclusion in Swedish Education*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education. Online. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1682> [11-11-2025].

Magnússon, G. (2015). *Traditions and challenges: Special support in Swedish independent compulsory schools*. Mälardalen University.

Magnússon, G. (2023). From Salamanca to Sweden: inclusive education as policy in transit. *International Encyclopedia of Education* (4th Ed.), 386–396.

Montelius, A., Wermke, W., & Höstfält, G. (2022). *Att bygga en friskola: Om skolors organisation och lärares autonomi* [Building an independent school. About schools' organisation and teacher autonomy]. Makadam.

Novak, J. (2018). *Juridification of educational spheres: The Case of Swedish school inspection*. Uppsala University.

Persson, A. (2006), Nöjda som lärare, missnöjda som anställda – skolexistens mellan mening och missnöje [Satisfied as teacher, unsatisfied as employee. About being in schools between feeling

meaningful and unsatisfied]. In Petersson et al. (Eds), *Villkor i arbete med människor – en antologi om human servicearbete [Conditions of the work with people – A book volume about people service work]*. Arbetslivsinstitutet.

Persson, B. (2019). *Elevers olikheter och specialpedagogisk kunskap [Pupils differences and special education knowledge]*. Liber.

Rosén, M. (2023). *Juridifiering som demokratiseringsprocess? Fallet likabehandling i svensk skola. [Juridification as democratisation? The case of the equality in the Swedish school]*. Uppsala University.

SFS 2007: 638. *Public Law. Förordning om ändring i högskoleförordningen. (1993:100)*. [Regulation for changes in the university regulation]. Swedish Code of Statutes.

Stenlås, N. (2009). *En kår i kläm - Läraryrket mellan professionella ideal och statliga reformideologier [A cornered profession. The teaching profession between professional ideal and state reform]*. Regeringskansliet.

Tinglev, I. (2014). *Elevhälsan. En specialpedagogisk överblick [Pupil health. A special education review]*. Skolverket.

Vanderstraeten, R. (2007). Professions in organizations, professional work in education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(5), 621–635.

von Ahlefeld Nisser, D. (2014). 'Specialpedagogers och speciallärares olika roller och uppdrag'. [Specialpedagogues' and special teachers' different roles and missions]. *Nordic Studies in Education*, 34(4), 246–264.

Wermke, W., & Forsberg, E. (2017). The changing nature of autonomy: Transformations of the late Swedish teaching profession. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 61(2), 155–168.

Wermke, W., & Salokangas, M. (2021). *The autonomy paradox: Teachers' perceptions of self-governance across Europe*. Springer.

Wimmer, H., Höstfält, G., & Wermke, W. (2023). Reading towards a school for all? Comparing course literature lists in academic Swedish special education teacher training between the 1980s and 2010s. In: Denise Mifsud & Stephen P. Day (Eds), *Teacher Education as an Ongoing Professional Trajectory: Implications for Policy and Practice* (pp. 143–159). Springer.

## Appendix

### Descriptive statistics

**Table 1**

<b>Items</b>	<b>2022</b>			<b>2012</b>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> (1-4)	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> (1-4)	<i>SD</i>
Collaboration with external support services	4,087	2.33	.776	2,321	1.65	0.500
Collaboration with municipality school administration	4,078	1.43	.612	2,321	1.19	0.405
Cooperation with other professions	4,084	3.16	.895	2,321	1.72	0.492
Drafting of special education support plans	4,079	3.12	.882	2,321	1.93	0.544
Working with school development	4,080	2.35	.869	2,321	1.54	0.534
Cooperation with the headmaster	4,083	2.95	.865	2,321	1.77	0.468
Cooperation with parents/legal guardians	4,085	2.74	.820	2,321	1.81	0.466
Consulting general teachers	4,083	2.61	.782	2,321	1.91	0.585
Consultation of other pedagogical staff	4,084	2.05	.826	2,321	1.43	0.514
Teaching the entire class	4,084	1.51	.851	2,321	1.24	0.574
Teaching Students individually	4,081	2.27	.873	2,321	1.92	0.789
Teaching students in small groups	4,080	2.21	1.010	2,321	1.88	0.864

**Table 2**

<b>Items</b>	<b>2022</b>			<b>2012</b>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> (1-4)	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> (1-4)	<i>SD</i>
Leading pedagogical development work	4,070	2.89	.815	2,321	2.89	0.757
Collaborate with colleagues or parents	4,066	3.26	.675	2,321	3.21	0.654
Adapting/differentiating material/ learning settings	4,067	3.08	.769	2,321	2.95	0.746

*(Continued)*

**Table 2** (*Continued*)

<b>Items</b>	<b>2022</b>			<b>2012</b>		
Participate in preventive school development for inclusion	4,071	3.07	.791	2,321	2.97	0.755
Work with school development	4,071	2.88	.864	2,321	2.86	0.794
Preparing special education support/IEP	4,063	3.00	.801	2,321	2.78	0.814
Helping and advising general school teachers	4,063	3.09	.779	2,321	2.98	0.723
Working with entire class including students with need of special support	4,058	3.16	.816	2,321	2.88	0.784
Working with special needs students individually	4,060	3.23	.820	2,321	2.87	0.808

**Table 3**

<b>Items</b>	<b>2022</b>			<b>2012</b>		
Items	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> (1-4)	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> (1-4)	<i>SD</i>
Poor composition of school classes	4,080	2.98	.683	2,321	3.18	0.702
Insufficient teaching of the general teachers	4,079	3.12	.658	2,321	3.34	0.609
Students have individual difficulties	4,084	2.90	.647	2,321	2.37	0.916
Students have difficulties in their home environment	4,082	2.85	.680	2,321	2.86	0.759
School organisation is not adjusted	4,079	3.32	.610	2,321	3.63	0.546
School content and goals are too difficult for students	4,075	2.94	.757	2,321	2.70	0.856

