

## 10. Talking about the future: German and Swedish special education students' perspective on their prospective mission

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### Introduction

Special education can be understood as being premised on basic didactical questions of teaching: What is to be taught? How should it be taught? Why should it be taught (and why should it be done in this manner)? In that sense, special education is no different from 'regular' education; the primary difference regards the answers to the questions regarding who is to be taught and who should do the teaching. In other words, the primary definitional motor behind special education regards the differentiation of pupils and, in many cases, the organisation of their education. We can assume that much work that can be viewed as special education is carried out by regular teachers, adapting and adjusting their teaching and teaching materials to the varying needs of their pupils, although the degree to which they need to do so will, of course, differ between countries and education systems, regionally, and even between individual schools and classrooms.

As this book illustrates, special education is also a matter of expertise or specifically designated work, and as such, it is also an object for particular occupational groups receiving particular education and training. Institutionalised education has historically organised such work as belonging to what we have termed 'special educators (SEs)'. The education philosopher Gert Biesta (2009) has described all education as encompassing three dimensions: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. Qualification regards the knowledge and competencies a student should have after completing education, while socialisation regards the entrance into a profession, for example. In contrast, subjectification regards the individual's understanding of themselves in relation to others. When it comes to SEs, their education and training ideally prepare them with certain knowledge and skills that are designated in state examination decrees, curricula and syllabuses.

Their socialisation into the profession and their subjectification, however, are not as clearly stated.

This chapter takes a sneak peek into these latter two dimensions of the education of SEs through interviews with students in their second year of training, asking them to reflect upon their future occupation, the roles of SEs, and the work that they will do. The students are engaged in SE training programmes in both Sweden and Germany, which differ significantly in focus, organisation, and content. Hence, the comparison of our results can illustrate both differences and commonalities that can be related to context, on the one hand, and special education as a professional field on the other. Against this backdrop, Chapter 10 aims to investigate what types of practice the students in Germany and Sweden expect to become a part of, and which images they use to describe their future as SEs. To understand the construction of the SE profession and to be able to make meaningful comparisons between the two studied countries, it is important to describe and illustrate how these professions and the organisation of their education have developed. This work is conducted in Chapters 2 and 3 of this book.

## **Background**

### **The German system**

In Germany, the special education teacher profession developed in parallel with the establishment of the special school in the last third of the nineteenth century. Thus, from the beginning, the profession existed alongside that of the regular school teacher but was exclusively associated with the special schools (Moser, 2003). Today, these special educational needs include up to seven different areas of support: learning, vision, hearing, speech, physical and motor development, mental development, emotional development and social development, meaning the training of special needs education teachers is specialised, depending on the focus. This explicit localisation of the special education teacher at the special school continued into the 1990s (Ludwig et al., 2023) until the supranational UNESCO campaign ‘Education for All’ provided the impetus for change with the aim of implementing global political strategies for the implementation of the principles of special education.

In the course of the discussion about inclusion and its implementation, the field of work for special needs education teachers in Germany has expanded,

and in addition to the traditional classroom teaching role in special schools, there is a possibility to work in inclusive schools. However, training to become a special education teacher continues to exist as an external programme. In Germany, initial teacher training consists of a university-based academic programme (elementary school, middle school, high school, vocational school, special education, and grammar school), followed by a pedagogical internship at the respective school type. Both phases end with a state examination. Because the German education system is not organised on a federal level, the courses of study differ from one federal state to another. For this article, the special education programme in the state of Hessen will be used as an example. The standard length of study in Hessen is 4.5 years, and the programme requires an orientation in two special education fields (learning, intellectual development, emotional and social development, speech therapy, vision, hearing, or physical and motor development) as well as a teaching subject (e.g., biology, chemistry, German, history, etc.). In addition to the individual focus, there are required educational science courses. The course is followed by a 21-month teaching internship at a specific school. After graduation, special education teachers can teach in a special school or a school with an inclusive approach to all types of schools.

### **The Swedish System**

The comprehensive primary education system in Sweden was established in the 1960s. In the following decades, different varieties of segregated special educational provisions were common (albeit often criticised). This could be smaller groups, segregated schools or individual teaching, commonly through a differentiation of the pupils focusing on behavioural and/or learning difficulties with the teaching usually in the hands of a 'special needs teacher'. However, the education and experience of that occupational group could vary significantly, ranging from university-based training to as little as a course spanning a few weeks or even just personal interest in special education. In 1990, the education for special needs teachers was discontinued, and the occupation and education of 'special education pedagogue' was introduced. This new profession was supposed to work with a focus on the organisational level and to develop more inclusive practices, in contrast to the special education teachers' focus on individual children and their deficits. Special education pedagogue was the 'only' profession working with special educational

work for almost 20 years. However, the system demonstrated considerable confusion about what to do with this new profession, which led the special education pedagogues performing tasks more traditionally associated with special education teachers. In 2010, the government re-introduced the special needs teacher occupation into the ecosystem of educational professions in Sweden. These were again supposed to work more hands-on with teaching, focusing more on school subjects and particular learning disorders. Due to these developments, the Swedish education system now has two professions intrinsically connoted with special education, one more oriented towards the pupils and the other more towards the organisation. Both programmes are 1.5 years (90 ECTS) at the postgraduate level, and to enrol, students must both have a degree as a teacher and at least four years of work experience as a teacher (Wermke et al., 2024).

## Methodology

The selection of participants for this study was made among active second-year students in both countries. We turned primarily to students that we had contact with, and of course, participation was voluntary.

The German data was collected using semi-open guideline interviews. These were conducted with student teachers (primary school, secondary school, grammar school, special school). The participating students were at different stages of their degree programmes. The interview guidelines consisted of eight questions about the students' understanding of inclusion and heterogeneity (e.g., *Whose responsibility is inclusion; In your opinion, what characterises a heterogeneous learning group?*), their practical experience in the context of inclusion (e.g., *What experiences have you already had with inclusion in your studies/practice?; In which areas do you feel well prepared for dealing with heterogeneous groups?*) and their ideas about inclusive teaching (e.g. *What challenges are associated with inclusion in schools?*). The semi-open guideline interview was particularly suitable for this project, as it provided the students with a certain structure but, at the same time, was open enough to allow them to develop the topics freely. The interviews themselves were recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were then analysed using qualitative content analysis (c.f. Magnússon, 2024; Mayring, 2022). For the following

article, however, only the interviews with the special education teaching programme students are considered.

In the Swedish case, the students had been enrolled in a longitudinal interview study during their first semester. The interviews analysed here are thus the second of three qualitative, semi-structured interviews that were conducted in total, where four students participated in this second round of interviews. Each interview took around one hour and was conducted via ZOOM; this was primarily because, at the time of interviewing, the students were enrolled in distance courses and had long commutes to the university as they lived in different cities in the country. Several of the students were also studying along with work and thus had to be at or near their place of employment when the interviews were conducted. ZOOM interviews also have the advantage of being recordable in terms of both video and audio and, in contrast to telephone interviews, the interviewer and respondent can see each other and react to facial expressions and other movements.

The audio recordings were transcribed and analysed with conventional qualitative content analysis, identifying themes, in this case around the particular questions of 'What is your view on your future practice?' and 'Has your practice changed, and if so, how?'

## Findings

### Germany – looking towards practice

#### Theme 1: Differentiation

One of the most important themes for the student was the pedagogical differentiation of pupils with and without assigned special educational needs. For most students, differentiation is the key to successful inclusion. This, in turn, is very closely linked to the theme of cooperation between different teaching professions, whereby differentiation also seems to go hand-in-hand with different responsibilities in the classroom. According to this, the targeted and deliberate unequal treatment of pupils is given greater importance than equal treatment. Our results suggest that differentiation is seen as a task for (special needs) teachers, relates primarily to individualised teaching materials and is associated with a high, almost unrealistic workload for teachers. The following quote shows that differentiation is not only seen as important for

successful inclusion, but also as a central task of the teacher in the context of lesson planning:

First and foremost, I would say that differentiation is totally important when teaching pupils with different needs. The teacher has to prepare differently for the lesson. Learning material must be differentiated be prepared. And in a homogeneous learning group, I can, say, work together with the class together with my, pupils. Pupils simply continue to work together in a workbook and perhaps answer any questions that arise.

The students attach the greatest importance to the teaching material here – especially in direct comparison to lessons in regular school classes or in supposedly homogeneous learning groups:

In homogeneous learning groups, for example, you can give everyone the same task in maths lessons and they can complete it. In heterogeneous groups, however, you have to see which pupils are at which level and adapt accordingly and then prepare different material.

In addition to the importance of differentiation for planning inclusive lessons, it is clear that the student teachers also see this as a major workload, which seems almost impossible to manage in actual teaching practice:

So, it's definitely challenging that there's more to do for all teachers. You also have to differentiate in lessons, and that's a lot more work. Then you must make many more arrangements with other teachers and cooperate with them. There's usually not enough time for that, so the resources are usually unavailable to implement inclusion well. So, there's also a lack of. Usually, there should be two teachers in the class, that's hardly ever possible at the school and if it is, then maybe in one class.

It can therefore be stated that students associate the practice of inclusive teaching primarily with the differentiation of pupils according to their performance requirements. This is particularly evident in comparison to how students imagine teaching in homogeneous learning groups. Equally important is the associated workload for teachers, which in turn seems to be closely linked to collegial cooperation. What is striking here is that differentiation is seen as an undeniable prerequisite for inclusive teaching, but at the same time is considered difficult, if not impossible, to implement.

## Theme 2: Cooperation

The issue of collaboration between regular and special needs education teachers is discussed in the interviews as a central theme in the context of inclusion. For example, shared responsibility for all pupils and shared decisions and goals are necessary to provide the best possible support and differentiated instruction. In this context, cooperation is described as a basic requirement for inclusion. In contrast, the role model of the teacher as a 'lone fighter' could make intensive and equal cooperation difficult. Therefore, many students anticipate tensions within the different professions and their responsibilities, respectively. The following excerpt from an interview illustrates the need for cooperation in implementing inclusion: A prerequisite for inclusion is that

[...] the cooperation between the primary school teacher and the special education teacher is very close and that they appreciate each other and also perceive and take seriously the opinions and expertise of the other and accordingly try to involve the students in the classroom as much as possible without making them feel uncomfortable.

Scepticism about equal collaboration is evident in the following interview excerpts:

I think as a special education teacher you get a lot of resistance from the regular teachers.

The following interview excerpt illustrates the conflict between the professions:

In general school, for example, you are often or exclusively responsible for your teaching and, therefore, plan it all by yourself. Everyone does it for themselves. And that, when special education teachers come to provide support, they are not seen as such. It's seen negatively that somebody interferes with your planning, rather than it just contributes to differentiation as a small positive addition, so to speak.

It is noticeable that the contribution of the special education teacher is described as a positive addition or support. In this example, an equal partnership is not described as a goal. The aspect of cooperation can thus be presented as a central aspect in the implementation of inclusion, and at the same time, the challenges for the professions behind it can be made clear.

### Theme 3: Lack of resources

Another key issue discussed by the students was the resources needed to implement inclusion. The interviewees found that a certain amount of structural equipment must be available in order to implement inclusion. They mostly discussed structural and spatial aspects, as well as the need for barrier-free access. For example, to accommodate a heterogeneous student body, there needs to be basic access to the building for everyone, as well as spatial retreats for small group work. In addition to that, the teaching staff's lack of time resources was also mentioned in many interviews. In their opinion, the teaching staff lacks time to consult with each other or plan together. Lack of human resources was also discussed as a prerequisite for implementing inclusion. Issues such as excessive workload with insufficient staff or special education teachers being responsible for too many different classes were most frequently discussed. Interestingly, the students mostly mention systemic barriers or systemic resource issues, things which they consider outside their area of responsibility but nevertheless affect their practice as future teachers.

The following quote is an example of an assessment of the necessary physical resources and the issue of physical barriers, despite new buildings.

In the elementary school where I work. It's relatively new, it's about three years old now, and I'm just going to give you my assessment. I would say that inclusion is not possible there at all [...]. Then I would also say that the school does not offer the possibility of additional rooms, so that you could somehow go out with a group to work there. That it's difficult. Inclusion is also about adapting the facilities to the needs of different children. And I would say yes. The shelves are already at the height of the children, but I would actually say that if a child was in a wheelchair or something, it would be relatively cramped in the classroom, given the size.

Another excerpt from the interview refers to the lack of time resources for collegial counselling, or for working as a team and implementing inclusion together:

Then just a lack of resources, so unfortunately there's often just not the opportunity to discuss or reflect with another teacher, um, or to call in other, let's say, educational specialists when you come up against such challenges, so to speak.



The aspect of human resources and the resulting excessive demand for the teaching staff is illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

I mean, it can't be the case that in an inclusive elementary school you have just one special education teacher who has to take care of everything and who's responsible for it.

When discussing the lack of resources, it becomes clear that structural conditions impact the aspects of cooperation, staffing and pedagogical work discussed above, and that a certain amount of structural equipment is needed to implement inclusion.

## **Sweden – Looking towards the organisation**

### **Theme 1: Proximity to and exercise of leadership**

The respondents studying to become SEs raise the importance of the occupational role as an overarching position, 'being the one who acts as an umbrella over the whole school. At least that is how I think'. This implies both a leadership role at the school and cooperation with the leadership. However, it does not mean a responsibility for staff – but rather an ambition to work with pedagogical questions on an overarching level. This also implies a development in the understanding of the role that has grown forth during education and a new understanding of the role of the head teacher to create conducive conditions for special educational work, for instance, through employing several SEs with clear and separate tasks. See, for example, the following quote:

(...) and it is very important for me to have a description of my work, because I will be able to hold on to it.

The respondents also discuss the support that they may have for defining their role and if the definitions can be supported. For instance, references to research can be useful to emphasise the scientific grounding on which they stand. Another supporting factor are governing documents. However, the role of the SEs is not clearly defined in legislation or curricula; rather, it is described in overarching terms in the degree ordinances of the University

Act (SFS 2007:638). These descriptions are not really known by any other occupational groups in the education system, as they function as a governing document for the organisation of the education programmes in the universities rather than as a governing document for schooling. That does not mean that they cannot be useful in the definition of the role – particularly in relation to the school leadership.

The SE is also discussed as a driving force when it comes to keeping the special educational work moving. On the one hand, it can be about alleviating administrative burden from teachers by running things through and with the principal and the pupil health team. On the other hand, it can be about making processes run smoother and more quickly. One of our respondents formulated these combined ambitions as a matter of getting teachers to take necessary steps, despite the steps seeming drastic and engulfing: ‘to summarize, it is about helping teachers to do things faster and actually dare to take that step, that is what I think’. For this work, the SE ‘has a bigger platform and can actually change something, really...’. This can be set in relation to the changing roles of school leadership where principals are increasingly responsible for finances and less engaged in the educational work.

This might just be a coincidence, but in the past seven or eight years, I haven’t worked with a principal who asked questions about the teaching. And as a teacher, you want support, and I think you should get it.

This sentiment is not uncommon in the responses and illustrates that the occupational groups within Swedish schooling are, to a great extent, autonomous in relation to each other, despite wanting more cooperation. We turn to this in the next theme.

## **Theme 2: Cooperation and negotiation with other occupational groups**

The respondents raised different issues regarding the relationship to other occupational groups in the schools, primarily the teachers. One of the respondents mentioned that he believed that teachers wanted SEs available. This is why the need for support among teachers and other school staff is not reduced since ‘the workload for vice-principals and principals is so high that they don’t have time to give it (support, authors’ note)’. Hence, teachers would appreciate having SEs with which to share reflection or lead the work.

Another respondent raises conflicts between the teachers, on the one hand, and SEs on the other and adds the pupil health services as an additional complicating factor. These conflicts can play out in different terms, for instance, the 'belief that SEs are supposed to solve everything' or even 'to come and know everything'. This is formulated in terms of an overreliance, or even too high hopes from the teachers, as regards what the SEs can do and change. On the other hand, the same respondent mentions teachers who refuse to seek assistance from SEs and even the pupil health teams at their schools. Another respondent also mentioned distrust between SEs and other occupational groups in the schools, such as teachers and assistants. 'I think some of them think the SE does nothing. One of my colleagues asked me, 'Does she really do anything?' And I just: believe me, she does a lot! (...) there is so much heavy stuff that they do'. Described as an unfortunate development, the respondents rather wished to emphasise cooperation between the school's professions:

I think I have to take this with me when I start at a new place. To express that it is we together [the staff at the school] that are supposed to do this. We are supposed to help each other out.

One respondent also emphasises humility as an important tool in this cooperation. 'There may be SEs who think they are better or they know best'. To counter this, the respondent emphasises that 'you have to be very clear on what I am not good at. You are the expert on this, and you know that, while I have this knowledge and we can put those things together'.

This type of humility is also expressed as a tool for negotiation. All our respondents discussed the role of the SE as a matter of negotiation to some degree, but also as a matter of context. In the specific cases, the principal would have more or less to say about the role and the task, whereas in other cases they would be less hands-on. This could also vary in line with the experience of the people involved; but also here, the experience could be a matter of ambivalence. A specific example regarded a principal who was also an educated SE and who had held that position at the school before. In that case, the respondent pondered, the principal and the pupil health team would be likely to delegate tasks more specifically between different occupational groups as opposed to the SE having a higher autonomy. Specifically mentioned were psychologists, student guidance counsellors and curators.

While hoping for dialogue in this regard, the respondent did, however, not necessarily view this as negative, arguing that, in the end, the consequences of the work should be beneficial for the pupils.

At the same time, the respondents also had clear ideas about things that do not belong to their role – this can be interpreted as matters that are not up for negotiation. An example includes having too much administrative work, which might risk them losing the contact with the pupils.

...teaching is not a part of the role in my opinion [...] as a special education teacher. On the other hand, you could have a split position [i.e., as a special education pedagogue and as a special education teacher] and teach as a part of one's work.

Well, I don't think it is possible to have them [note: limits to the role]. I would prefer to have contact with pupils. I would find it pretty boring to just do administrative work and consulting [...], but you have to be comfortable and tell the principal that this is what I am good at. This is what the special needs teacher is good at.

In the end, these issues are things that are worked out in negotiations and dialogue with the school leaders, based upon the competencies of the individual practitioner and compromises around what is needed and who is best suited to provide those services.

### **Theme 3 – The missing aspect in the interviews**

Interestingly, the topic of inclusion was not discussed in the Swedish interviews. This is particularly conspicuous as inclusion is a central topic in their education, not only as a single course with a focus on inclusion but also as a running theme throughout the programmes. However, the respondents discussed different perspectives on the rising need for special support to some degree and how support should be provided. This is also something that they see as defining the role in contrast to the actions and practices of many other staff members. For instance, the quote below:

All pupil's needs and rights are supposed to be accommodated. It's not to just remove someone who needs to do extra work because they have dyscalculia and difficulties or a newly arrived pupil who needs help outside of the classroom.

This response echoes with an inclusive ambition, although it is not expressed in words. Given the context it was embedded in, it is also a point of view set

in contrast to what other professions within the school might wish for, that is, for the SEs to remove problems from the classroom and deal with them separately rather than giving support within the classroom.

Another, less subtle description of this sort of pathos comes from another respondent:

It has made a difference in comparison to how some others who work with the kids have had other results. It is a lot of kids acting out who have gotten a 'stop-hand'. Then, I have gone the other way and just showered them with love.

Here again, the respondent is setting her actions in contrast to the practices of other colleagues. Rather than setting strict boundaries, she views her role and work as an act of care and love. In another example, the same respondent discusses this contrast more clearly, mentioning colleagues who have a more sanctioning approach to the pupils. Discussing a pupil who had a high level of absence from school, a student counsellor suggested threatening her monthly allowance from the state.<sup>1</sup> The respondent in question stated: 'And, there I felt – this maybe isn't the thing (...) sure, it might scare her a little, but everything else said in that meeting, I just felt: No!'. In opposition, the respondent found a school psychologist to have acted more reasonably: 'he managed to change her attitude, and it took maybe ten minutes until the tears came (...) and she changed into a different person that even I could demand more from her because she didn't see it the same way but in this new way for her own sake'.

This little anecdote reappears in the respondents' reflections as an example that can illustrate how putting the pupil rather than the routines and regulations into the centre to help them reach their full potential, something the SEs (and in this case, the school psychologist) see as being beyond the here and now. Viewing the difficulties as contextual and a matter of understanding and self-image helped this particular student from alternately viewing them as inherent to her and an example of bad behaviour or laziness. As such, these examples illustrate what is never explicitly mentioned in the Swedish interviews: an inclusive ambition. One hypothesis would be that the Swedish

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<sup>1</sup> Upper Secondary school students in Sweden can receive a small monthly subsidy from the state, around 100 Euro. This may be withdrawn, however, if their attendance is not sufficient.

respondents take inclusion for granted, despite several signals to the contrary (Magnússon, 2022).

## Conclusion

A direct comparison with the state of research for Germany confirms many of the findings: When special education students talk about their future work in inclusive education, it is clear that they generally have a positive, albeit critical, attitude towards inclusion as a concept when it comes to the implementation in practice (Bengel, 2021; Lorenz et al., 2020; Feyerer, 2014). They see challenges they also regard as conditions for successful inclusive teaching, namely differentiation (of teaching materials), cooperation and general resources.

The studies cited, on the other hand, suggest that special education teachers tend to criticise their new role and the new tasks associated with inclusion (Ludwig et al., 2023). Interestingly, the students see differentiating measures or working with differentiated teaching materials as central to future teaching practice, especially as this category tends to play a secondary role in the studies cited. On the other hand, the question of multi-professional cooperation and the question of general resources appear to be cross-cutting issues that arise in many studies (e.g., Wolf et al., 2022; Melzer et al., 2015). Above all, the asymmetrical role relationship between mainstream school teachers and special needs teachers, which has already been highlighted in many research studies (e.g., Bengel & Ludwig, 2024; Kuhl et al., 2022), seems to be a core experience even during the study programme, as cooperation with mainstream school teachers is anticipated as quite problematic by the special education students.

The Swedish results do confirm previous results to a high degree. The students are much more confident that they will be closer to leadership and view it as self-evident that they will be working on an organisational level, even to the degree that they worry about losing direct contact with the pupils. They also have a different approach to cooperation – or are rather aware in a different way of how their role may be a matter of negotiation with other professions within the schools where they will work. They especially expect

the principals to have a say in this matter. Our third theme from the Swedish results is a little bit peculiar as it engages in what was left unsaid rather than what was explicitly discussed. Here, the topic inclusion was notable through its absence, and we drew the conclusion that it was more of a silent agreement in the responses that it was simply a matter of fact – something they took for granted as a part of their future tasks.

If we compare the results between the countries, it becomes clear that the implementation of inclusion in Germany is primarily oriented towards teaching practice, while in Sweden it is discussed more on an organisational level. One central topic in both countries is cooperation. In the German example, cooperation between special and mainstream school teachers is both discussed as a prerequisite for implementing inclusion and categorised as a major challenge. In the Swedish case, cooperation with various stakeholders and negotiations with other professional groups are described. Both countries emphasise the need for cooperation between different professions to implement inclusion. At the same time, the challenge of actual cooperation and the uncertainty regarding expertise, responsibility and the need to clarify roles becomes apparent.

One difference that becomes apparent in the Swedish-German comparison is the implicit or explicit discussion of inclusion. Theme 3 of the Swedish data shows how inclusion is not explicitly mentioned but is discussed in terms of content. In the German interviews, conditions for implementing inclusion were almost universally set. One conclusion from the different perspectives could be that in the German case – despite school law requirements – special needs education students see inclusion as an option rather than the norm. In Sweden, on the other hand, the students see inclusion as a set programme.

This study is a small comparative study of interview data, and therefore, the results are not to be generalised. However, to the degree our results correspond with previous research, analytical conclusions can be drawn that are relevant for future studies and the professional groups in question. Not least regarding their place in the complex educational organisations they work within, the role of political ideals affecting these organisations and the position they have within them. To that end, the comparative aspect of this study has been quite illuminating.

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