12. The formation of special education professions in time and space

Wieland Wermke and Gunnlaugur Magnússon

Introduction

This volume reports on a research project about special educators (SEs) in two national contexts with a historical perspective from the 1990s until today (2024). The rationale behind this research design has been to gain further understanding of a specific group of educators and their formation in the conditions of modern mass education in various contextual configurations. The interaction of professional tasks, roles, and identity is assumed to show universal traits in support of pupils in need of special education support and the possible impact of specific policies, traditions, and constitutional mindsets. The cases of Sweden and Germany have been purposefully chosen to illuminate these interests.

As regards the organisation and the special education professions, both national cases display significant similarities and differences that can serve as analytical devices to illuminate special education professions and their contextual particularities. The time span in focus has also been carefully chosen to understand the interaction of the most recent dynamics in Western school systems with the support of children at risk in mass education (Wermke, Höstfält & Magnússon, 2024). These are dynamics such as the decentralisation of education decision-making capacity and a marketisation of the education system on several levels. The decentralisation alludes to an ambition to establish school organisations as more autonomous units at the local level where municipalities and even individual schools are assumed to be independent decision-making bodies at the same time as they are made financially accountable for schooling. The marketisation, on the other hand, regards the element of competition between providers of schooling and an increase in private initiatives running schools as well as the introduction of school choice and a discourse of consumerism regarding education as a service and product (Wermke & Forsberg, 2017).

In the Swedish context, we have also seen a for-profit motive introduced, something increasing among private school providers, and simultaneous austerity politics leading to encompassing public sector cutbacks. Both of these issues have affected the provision of special support, the status of the teaching profession and the distribution of pupils in need of educational support among schools (Magnússon, 2015). Another important aspect of this time has been the standardisation of schooling. This has been tightly related to the increasing importance of international comparative pupil performance studies, such as OECD's PISA (Hamre, Moren, Ydesen, 2018). With an emphasis on standards, a particular focus has been directed to those children who are at risk of not reaching or actually cannot reach such standards. Traditionally, children with disabilities and learning disorders have been educated in specialised small group or even individual learning environments and various types of special schools. However, following the political direction of inclusive education (for example, in the spirit of the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) and even more the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD), regular schools have been supposed to create adaptable and individualised learning environments that offer various adaptations for all pupils to be able to reach the educational goal achievements required. Simultaneously, the ambition has been to reduce the number of separate special educational provisions and the number of pupils assigned to such measures. Regular schools are thus supposed to provide any kind of support needed to reach assumed standards (Freier et al., 2023). In this field of tension between the decentralisation and individualisation of education, on one hand, and standardisations on the other, which is the premise of this volume, SEs have undergone several professionalisation dynamics.

As written before, juxtaposing Sweden and Germany can illustrate the universalities and particularities of special education professions through the organisation of special educational provision. Germany is characterised by a sophisticated system of special schools attached to a tracked regular school system (Barow & Östlund, 2020). SEs' knowledge base is organised in terms of various disorders or disability types. In addition, special schools are organised with a focus on particular diagnoses and disabilities. In other words, special education expertise is firmly embedded in a medical and psychological paradigm (ibid.). Compared to this, Sweden has had a comprehensive (non-tracked) school system with a common curriculum since the 1960s, and most

SEs are employed in regular schools (Wermke, Höstfält & Magnússon, 2024). The biggest number of pupils with disabilities is included in regular schools, and although there are special schools for blind pupils, deaf pupils, and pupils with intellectual disabilities, their share in the school system is much smaller than in Germany.[1] This difference displays, consequently, different conditions for SEs, although their function is equivalent: helping pupils at risk of not being able to achieve learning goals. Around this configuration, various themes have emerged in the research project at hand. These themes are presented in the following.

No profession without organisation

The early history of national special education professions, that is, before the scope of our study, shows that SEs' rise in both national contexts is tightly related to the building of special schools for pupils with disabilities, starting with schools for blind and deaf pupils (Chapter 2). The later establishment of schools for 'feeble-minded' children (*Hilfsschulen*, *hjälpskolor*) focused on the group of children who were apparently not able to follow the instructions in regular schools but were still seen as educatable (Richardson & Powell, 2011). With such a higher number of pupils in their special schools, the number of SEs grew. Moreover, their professional associations grew in importance, and their status increased (Ellger-Rüttgers, 2010; Tenorth, 2010, Chapter 2). The profession of SEs was, in both cases, tightly coupled to their clients. From our Mintzberg-inspired theoretical lens, such special schools could be seen as professional bureaucracies situated in the support sphere of the overall school organisation. The professionals at the operational core have had extended power; their leaders have a similar background (Tideman et al., 2021).

In our analyses, we have argued that SEs are ascribed to the organisation of the school, which is why organisational requirements come first and significantly condition any formation of the profession (Chapter 5, Vanderstraeten,

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[1]   There are up to ten different types of special schools connected to disability categorisations, and over 4% of students attend special schools (Freier et al., 2023). In Sweden, approximately 1% of all students attend special schools for pupils with intellectual disabilities (*anpassad grundskola*). A very small number of students attend state-run schools for children who are blind, deaf or have severe speech impairments (Bunar, forthcoming).

2007 in reference to Harries-Jenkins, 1989). Here, it is important to remember that organisation does not mean the individual workplace of a special education, but the organisation of the whole school system, containing many schools in relation to each other, coupled by various administrative means (Wermke et al., 2023). Moreover, the school organisation is also an institution. It must follow public values and expectations. Therefore, we can state that the organisational goals are more important than those of the profession. That is why the role of school profession is vulnerable *per se and forced into never ending development* (Vanderstraeten, 2007).

In other words, SEs' existence builds historically on special schools' existence. The historical argument for special education forms goes as follows: Certain pupils have particular individual conditions or disabilities that can only be met in specialised educational and social environments in order to get the best education possible. Disorders and disabilities determine the education provided. Using medical terminology, children unable to attend regular schooling can be 'diagnosed' concerning their particular (biological or socio-biological) weaknesses. Education can be provided together with other 'treatments' (Skrtic, 1995). Consequently, SEs, here and there, built their – very successful – professionalisation on a medical body of knowledge (Tenorth, 2010). This happened not only in terms of diagnoses and treatments but also in a view of learning and development as a very individualised matter, that is, less environment-conditioned matter. The relationship between SEs and their clients has been consistently characterised by benevolence, the idea that a professional can make the best possible decision for the best of the individual, even including forcing the clients to do their best. For example, the organisations of institutionalised special education have been viewed as a sheltered education for pupils with disabilities (Wermke, Höstfält & Magnússon, 2024). The system builds on what Thomas Skrtic delineates as four foundational assumptions of traditional special education:

1. Pupil disability (due to which school problems emerge) is a pathological condition.
2. Differential diagnosis is objective and useful.
3. special education is a rationally conceived and coordinated system of services that benefits diagnosed pupils.

4. Progress in special education is a rational-technical process of incremental improvement in conventional diagnostic and instructional practices (Skrtic, 1995c, p. 211).

To clarify, these are the roots of our special education professions; this history is similar in both countries. Since the 1990s, these foundations have been objects for questioning in the Western world, not the least due to reforms aiming at decentralisation, individualisation, and inclusion, all of which had a strong impact SEs, as they did on the whole school system (Chapter 2, Wermke & Salokangas, 2021; Wermke, Höstfält & Magnússon, 2024). Hence, the existence of special schools was challenged. However, whereas special education provisions changed severely in Sweden, for example, by liquidating the traditional profession of special needs teachers in 1990 and establishing a new one, 'special pedagogues', the German system remained comparatively unchanged despite a changed body of knowledge. Inclusive forms of education have been not the rule here. Rather, special schools persisted, still building on a quite unchanged medically oriented body of knowledge. Interestingly, however, the number of pupils with a formally acknowledged need for special education support has increased significantly since 2006 due to the CRPD, whereas many pupils with special educational needs still attend special school. Consequently, special education in Germany today still occurs both in special and regular school settings (Wermke et al., forthcoming).

Special educators in school organisations

Using the theoretical framework of Henry Mintzberg (1979), we argue that Swedish SEs moved from a support sphere to the operational body within the professional bureaucracy of schools. This points to the advantage of Mintzberg's organisational modelling (1979), which enables us to shift our perspective to dynamics (1) in an organisation (i.e. the 'structuring'). Such a perspective increases our understanding of the dynamics of special education professions in time (since the 1990s) and space (in various contexts, such as Germany and Sweden). Moreover, Mintzberg (1979) also helps us to shift our perspective (2) from the individual school organisation to the organisation of the school system, that is, many schools in relation to each other (see Wermke, Freier & Nordholm, 2023). From this perspective, education

professionals will not only be part of their workplace or their local school, they are also part of a school system, including a school administration, various middle-line levels, and support organisations. From this perspective, the focus is not only on the individual instruction, the encounter between an educator and their pupils, as the main entity for development. The focus is also on the whole school ecology, that is, examining teacher cooperation and instructional leadership (Ainscow, 2020).

In both national contexts, as written earlier, special education professionals were traditionally, in Mintzberg's (1979) terminology, 'support staff'. With the inclusion movement, the support system had to be moved into the professional core of the school system, that is, general schools and classrooms. This shift was processed in Sweden to a large extent, but not in Germany. Practically speaking, this shift is formed in Sweden in the following way. With a certain amount of work experience, regular teachers or other educators can attend special education training (since 2008 at the graduate level). We argue that Swedish SEs have become 'teachers plus', which has contributed to further fragmentation of the Swedish teaching profession. As we have written in our description of the two contexts (Chapter 2), the special education reforms were only one dimension of radical changes in the Swedish system (c.f. Magnússon, 2023; Montelius, Wermke & Höstfält, 2022).

It has been stated that in the process of the tremendous decentralisation and marketisation reforms since the 1990s, the Swedish teaching profession has been de-professionalised, that is, lost power, discretion, and, most importantly, status (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). Decision-making capacity and power has moved since the 2010 to the techno-structure and the middle tears in the school organisation, in Mintzberg's (1979) terms, the administrations in state and municipality authorities. This has, among other examples, been illustrated by tremendously increased documentation forces and monitoring as well as control by bureaucratic means (Montelius et al., 2023). Moreover, principals and heads of local education authorities also gained more power by explicitly separating from the operational core of teachers (Jarl et al., 2012). As we have shown in Chapter 7, SEs advanced in the organisation to the middle line in the most recent years, that is, the level of principals. Two dynamics in Swedish education can explain this shift. Today, various education standards have gained legitimate and legal power (Rüsselbæk Hansen, Heck, Sharpling & McFlynn, 2024). Standards determine not only education goals but also

expectations for the provision of special education support and the proactive work with pupils' well-being and health (Wermke, Höstfält, Magnússon, 2024). In Sweden, all pupils have, as stated in the Education Act of 2010, the right to receive the individual support needed to achieve certain education standards. This does not mean that all pupils must achieve all standards, as long as they receive some sort of support.[2] However, pupils have the right to support, which illustrates an ongoing juridification (*Verrechtlichung*) of the special education realm (c.f. Freier et al., 2023; Novak, 2018). Guardians can, for instance, litigate schools for not providing special support. We argue that due to these juridification dynamics, special education, and SEs, have gained significance in the Swedish school system. In other words, special education is a significant matter in the school organisation, to which head teachers and pupil health services can be held accountable by the guardians.

Dissolving and defending professional boundaries

Importantly, the SEs' significance does not come from the collective effort of the special education profession, it is only related to dynamics in the Swedish school organisation's political and administrative leadership level (what Mintzberg calls the 'strategic apex'). We will argue later on that this foundation of SEs' contemporary status can make the profession very vulnerable in the future. The Swedish story from the beginning of the 1990s should be a warning here. It has shown how fast, by education reform, the whole profession of SEs can be changed and cut in status in the organisation of schools (see Chapter 2).

A second dynamic explains the rise of a strong SE profession in the Swedish case. We have presented this in Chapters 7 and 8: a dissolution of boundaries of the profession's tasks and function. From our perspective, SEs in Sweden have paid quite a high price for their new importance today. Not only has their status increased extensively, but so has their workload. The profession does not specialise in certain problems but builds on a particular expertise. They must be generalised to cover all the problems of schooling. Moreover, the above-mentioned juridification of education spheres (Novak, 2018) is

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[2]   The truth is that many students, although receiving extra support, still do not come close to any expected goal achievement, which might challenge either the quality of supports means, or the ambition level of such legal expectations (Magnússon, 2023).

accompanied by several bureaucratic measures, such as the documentation of 'school problems' and frequent meetings with stakeholders, which also must be documented, something we demonstrated in Chapter 9.

Simply said, SEs in Sweden have more importance in the 2020s school than ever before, but they are also responsible for a disproportionate proportion of the important aspects of schooling, for instance, pupils' achievement and attainment, the health of the school climate and improvement of pupils' well-being, the mapping of school problems, establishment and implementation of IEPs, guidance of colleagues, and consultation of guardians. All these tasks aside, SEs are also expected to be in charge of school improvement as well as the traditional function of helping individual pupils at risk.

An autonomy-paradox can arise when the work tasks are too general (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). To reduce the complexity and risks in their work, SEs will, in the end, only concentrate on high-stakes issues in their work portfolio, such as those pupils in great need of special support (their traditional core). Due to a lack of resources, school improvement and education guidance will then be neglected. In other words, due to their working conditions, SEs are forced to emphasise well-known solutions, such as individual learning groups, and abandon complex, inclusive approaches, which might inherit a higher risk of failing concerning aspects measured from outside (Ainscow, 2020).As shown in Chapter 7, the absence of a strong and specialised SE association or union must also be seen as a problem in securing status, role, and discretion in the organisation of schools of SEs. They need a collective voice to defend genuine special education matters and their profession's boundary against all the other stakeholders in a school system (Chapter 7). As we stated earlier, Swedish SE are only 'teachers plus' and, as such, part of a general education union. This is problematic since both teachers and SEs might partly have other ambitions. To name only one example, SEs might want pupils with special educational needs to be in regular classrooms, whereas teachers often want to place those pupils outside of their 'realm'.

The argument regarding the need for collective voices can be understood by contrasting the Swedish case with the German one. Although Germany has fully politically committed to both the Salamanca Declaration and the UN CRPD, the structuring of schooling and the role of special education remained similar. Inclusive means have been implemented much more

sparsely (see above, Freier et al.), although special education organisations in many German states (education is a federal state matter) remained stable in the support sphere. This configuration has been defended by various state actors (ibid.), as well as by the special education profession and its associations (Powell & Pfahl, 2010).

As our results in Chapter 8 show, German SEs working in inclusion settings do not often feel welcome at general schools. They are more or less powerless in the regular practice of schooling. In Freier et al. (2023), we also show that even education standards, laws, and regulations (i.e. those, in terms of Mintzberg (1979), related to the techno-structure of the school organisation) heavily prevent other education support solutions besides special schools (in the support sphere). If all organisational parts, that is, the political and administrative, do not change, the ambition of the strategic apex, i.e. the education leadership level (Mintzberg, 1979) becomes stuck at the level of policy talk.

However, as we have shown earlier, inclusive schooling has also increased in Germany, albeit more slowly and to a lesser degree. Most interestingly, inclusion developed in parallel to the organisation of special schools, which largely remain untouched, and whereas the number of pupils with formal special needs in regular schools has increased significantly, the figures for pupils enrolled in special schools has remained high (see even Freier et al., 2023; Moser, 2023). In other words, the number of pupils with formal special needs have doubled with the introduction of inclusion without having an impact on the organisation and the number of special schools (Dietze, 2019).Moreover, most of the SEs working in inclusive settings still have their organisational affiliations in special institutions (see Chapter 8), such as schools with a special education specialisation or central special education resource centres. In terms of Mintzberg's model (1979), they remain as one of the work core's support spheres. Thus, German SEs and teachers have little professional exchange (Chapter 7). Not surprisingly, in contrast to Sweden, German SEs are not expected to change the traditional school system, via school improvement towards inclusion. There is not any ambition for the special education profession to take on more leadership responsibilities; their role is mainly seen as being specialists in disabilities, which can be contrasted with Sweden, where a generalist perspective is commissioned by the special education profession. The differences in the different work tasks of German and Swedish SEs are well documented in Chapter 6.

Finally, we show in this volume that a rather defensive perspective on inclusion is already fostered in the pupil and SE experiences of SEs in Germany. We show this in Chapters 10 and 11. In comparison with special education students from Sweden, their German counterparts are surprisingly less enthusiastic towards inclusive education, believe in the educational value of heterogeneous pupil groups to a lower extent, and to a higher extent believe in special schools as a necessary shelter for children with disabilities. They also see more practical problems with its implementation already during their teacher training. We have argued that such beliefs may not be surprising if we look at the preconditions of both student groups and the fact that school organisations stabilise themselves through, among other things, the students who decide to enter professional training. Special education students enter academic training through both student and professional experiences.

For the German students, this rationale is easy to explain. Due to the tracked nature of the German school systems, special education students at university have often attended the theoretically directed grammar schools (Gymnasien), which is the mostly chosen school type whose graduation grants university entrance. This school form is characterised by significant homogenisation of students, considering high cognitive learning conditions. Simply put, German students have few experiences of heterogeneity and inclusive education. This group, with its experiences in the school system, apparently reproduces defensive inclusion beliefs even in their professional education.

Their colleagues in Sweden have significantly different experiences when they enter the academic SE training. However, they also stabilise their respective organisations. They have been socialised into a comprehensive school as pupils. However, more importantly, they are experienced teachers when they enter special education training, due to the entrance requirements. In other words, they have had extended experiences with special education and inclusive education.

Special educators' knowledge body and their clients

In the following section, we aim to explain, among other things, the specificity of the special education profession's body of knowledge and expertise, in relation to other stakeholders and interest groups in the school organisation. A professional body of knowledge can be seen as a collection of certain solutions, often grown historically, being a certain hybrid of experiential and

academic textbook knowledge (see Chapter 5). Professional work is thereby an adjustment of problems to existing solutions (Pfadenhauer, 2003). This perspective also provides an explanation for how solutions are reproduced, confirmed, and defended within professional groups, as well as legitimised (or, in the words of Pfadenhauer, 2003, 'staged') for clients and the public.

The prioritised solutions of the German profession are, consequently, specialised solutions tailor-made for special school environments. The Swedish special education profession knowledge base is much more general and related to regular schooling. It ranges from subject-didactic models to consultancy proficiency or school management and budget questions (Chapter 9). They often know how different kinds of school problems can be administered. Regarding all these possible tasks, the traditional core of specialised instruction has since the early 2000s had a significant upswing (Chapters 2 and 7, see also Cameron et al., 2024).The problem with the Swedish situation and its related dissolution of boundaries (see Chapter 9) is, from a knowledge base perspective (see Chapter 5), that one might wonder if SEs can have specialised solutions for all the problems they are intended to solve. Eventually, only they, at best, can know which other professions can have a solution. This would lead to the profession's body of knowledge being rather weak, replaceable and thus potentially threatened by other professions with an interest in the field of schooling. Simply said, it can be asked what would be the exclusive competencies of SEs such that no other professions, such as teachers, psychologists, nurses, etc., possess to the same degree or even more. We argue that the eventual absence of exclusive special expertise also makes the status of the Swedish profession vulnerable. At the very least, much is expected from them as regards making their *special* contribution visible to clients and society.

From the theoretical perspective that professional knowledge must be made visible for clients (Pfadenhauer, 2003), we argue that the more recent focus on and wishes for Swedish special education professions regarding knowledge and solutions connoted with neuro-psychiatric disorders is understandable (see our findings in Chapter 10). The special education professions rose in status along with the special schools in the first half of the last century. They built their success, both in Sweden and Germany, on a very medical-oriented body of knowledge (Chapter 2). The promise to partly solve medical problems with educational solutions was throughout Western

and Northern Europe the 'winning concept' of the SE professions (Tenorth, 2010; Berthén, 2007). When pupils can be categorised regarding disabilities and disorders, the assumption is that special support can be more personalised and successful support better communicated. In addition, with clear cut medical categories, it can be more easily communicated to both society and the profession, whose clients are in focus (ibid.). This knowledge would counteract boundaries' dissolution due to a restricted focus on a particular pupil group, that is, those with neuro-psychiatric diagnoses.

The 'problem child' and what it needs

Let us elaborate more on the (potential) clients of SEs. The expertise of SEs, which is today seen as legitimate by society, is the 'problem child in schools' (Börjesson, 2003) or more positively expressed 'the school function of children' (Granlund, 2017). The more 'problem children' that emerge in the public education system, the more important the special education profession becomes. A more provocative formulation would be that the number of neuro-psychiatric diagnoses such as ADHD or autism correlates positively with the status of SEs. However, this correlation becomes problematic if the profession cannot solve all the problems, i.e. cannot 'heal' 'the problem children', or at least open the best future possible for them. At the moment, it looks like the profession cannot solve all such problems. The number of 'special education clients' in schools is increasing in both our studied contexts. Consequently, other legitimation strategies must be found if the professions want to avoid a paradigm shift (see Chapter 5). A common legitimation or defence strategy for all professions that are active in the organisation is to blame organisational conditions, resource scarcity, and wrong priorities (see Chapter 7). In other words, the organisation has an important function for professions. It can be blamed if something goes wrong in the professional encounter with clients (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). In Germany, the profession remains successful in its special, support-related, non-integrated role in the school organisation (see Chapter 6). Within the support sphere (Mintzberg, 1979), it aligns itself with other support professions, such as psychologists, medical professionals, and social workers. In terms of Skrtic (1991), they all also share a common toolbox, a deficit-oriented, benevolence-directed terminology with diagnosis-related solutions for special education problems. The support staff leaves the structures of the operational

core in the professional bureaucracy unchanged. This may potentially be a negative indication as regards inclusion, but it explains why making an inclusive school system is such a bumpy process. The very organisation of schooling prevents a shift, and the stakeholders in the organisation keep its structure stable (ibid.), at least temporarily (see below).

As written earlier, a growing occupation group of inclusively working SEs has emerged, albeit slowly, in several federal states in Germany, in parallel to the traditional group of SEs employed in special schools. These often have an additive specialist position, but they are established parts of the teaching staff in regular schools and not affiliated with other places (see Chapter 8, and below). However, the SEs association with SEs pushes for a more generalist organisational position for their members today (see Chapter 7). It remains to be seen how these dynamics will develop as it might be that the pendulum will swing further towards a generalist professionalism direction. It also remains to be seen if this development will result in Germany's dissolution of boundaries and the disappearance of the 'special' support core of the professions. Will this generalisation perhaps lead to an increasing status? Perhaps future reforms will remain only on a political 'talk' level, where changes such as increasing the number of inclusive educators will remain symbolic interventions that actually stabilise the system rather than challenge it (Skrtic, 1991).

The existence of a bigger special education profession and a smaller parallel group of inclusive educators would actually open up for such an interpretation. Germany already has a tradition of system stabilising additive education reforms. In the 1970s, in several federal states, actually inspired by the experiences in Sweden (Herrlitz et al., 2003), a comprehensive school (*Gesamtschule*) was implemented as a new school form within the tracked school system, in which the other existing schools remained unchanged.

Interprofessional cooperation of special educators

We must also elaborate on the issue of interprofessional special education work (as discussed in Chapters 7 and 10, that is, the cooperation of SEs with other professions). This is, particularly in Sweden, a very debated and researched phenomenon (Olsson, 2023; Paulsrud, 2024). However, interprofessional cooperation is also the core of special education in Germany. In the latter case, this work is much more bureaucratised (Wermke & Beck, 2025),

with formal decision-making programmes and definite lines of authority and responsibility. This might lead to a particular inflexibility in support solutions, which are significantly more often embedded in the realm of special schools. The organisation of Swedish interprofessional cooperation is intended to allow for more flexibility, with, however, other unintended consequences. For instance, the schools are to either have or have access to pupil health teams, comprising various professions (SEs, school psychologists, school doctors, nurses, and social workers). These groups are responsible for discussing pupil issues and establishing individual education plans (Hjörne 2004; Hjörne & Säljö, 2009). They also have the function to work proactively with questions of pupil health and well-being, for example, through professional development of teachers or particular large-scale interventions (ibid.).

Pupil health teams are to be established at each individual school, or at the very least be available and the teams are supposed to have special education competence, usually through the locally employed SEs' involvement.[3] In some cases, municipalities and independent school organisers may centralise both the teams and SEs, having them serve several schools. Such an organisation can, however, lead to communication gaps between local and central pupil health teams and insecurity among the members of the pupil health teams about their own and the other's responsibilities and expertise. This has been shown to lead to several organisational problems by a plethora of research (see an overview in Olsson et al., 2023; Olsson, 2024). In local teams, for example, the SEs may have a major role, but the final decision-making power belongs to the principals. They latter are also the ones legally accountable for the special educational provision and the work of the pupil health team.

Using our theoretical perspective (Mintzberg, 1979), we are able to illuminate such issues. As described earlier, Mintzberg suggests the possible building of an adhocracy organisation. The core of this configuration is interprofessional or specialist cooperation with little hierarchy and technocratic and leadership interference. All parts of an organisation should serve the 'problem to be solved', that is, the structure is project-focused. Adhocracies

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[3]　It should be added that a government instigated investigation of the organisation of pupil health teams is currently running in Sweden. Among the investigators' directives is the request to review the involvement of SEs in the pupil health teams. The investigation is to report in December of 2025 (Dir. 2024:30).

are, according to Mintzberg (1979), the best organisational alternative in order to encounter complex problems and work with innovation. Such an approach aligned with the management models of the 1990s, emphasising less bureaucracy, decentralised reasoning, lean management and/or agility, which found their way into special education. Another one of the scholars we build on, Thomas Skrtic, proposed adhocracy as the configuration with the highest potential to find the best possible solutions for pupils as risk. He also argued for adhocracy organisations in the form of interprofessional cooperation beyond machine and professional bureaucracies as the only way to innovate traditional segregated schooling into a genuine school for all (cf. Magnússon, 2015). According to Skrtic (1991), machine and professional bureaucracies only offer strategies and technologies that maintain the 'special' part of special education.

Mintzberg (1979) also describes adhocracies very positively, almost as a vision for future professional work in organisations. However, he also raises several warnings, which are very interesting for the understanding of the phenomenon special education 45 years after his book 'Structuring organization'. There, Mintzberg argues that goal ambiguities and unclear power as well as accountability relations are frequent challenges for ad-hoc interprofessional cooperation. He also states that adhocracies work best in small-scale groups and restricted time frames. Such configurations inevitably morph into bureaucracies (machine or professional) as they grow and acquire more responsibilities. Finally, state authority organisations, such as schools, must often avoid adhocracy configuration, because their decisions must be legally transparent and equitable, and characteristic *ad-hoc* decisions lack such preferences.

We argue that all the stated problems of ambiguity, uncertainty, and unclear power relations are, therefore, actually in the DNA of recent pupil health work in Sweden. Although many studies acknowledge the potential and actual necessity of interprofessional case-based work, they point to just such problems (See overview in Olsson et al., 2023). The biggest problem, however, is not the eventual frustration of professionals involved in the process. Ambiguities, confusion, and uncertainty actually lead to more inflexibility and less innovative solutions, that is, the opposite of their expected goals. In the end, solutions with the lowest risk for all involved or the smallest common denominator become the modus operandi: more of the same solutions,

agreement on fuzzy, but less conflict-loaded problem definitions, and putting responsibility on children and guardians. This was demonstrated already 20 years ago in the seminal study by Eva Hjörne (2004).

In such pupil health configuration, complex proactive pupil health work is rather restricted, if not impossible, especially when the interventions of all types are long term and effects are not easily measurable, which is valid for almost all work with school improvement. In addition, pupil health work is today highly bureaucratised in its form. Some would say it is almost a bureaupathology [in Mintzberg's terms (1979)]. It exists as institution, because it must, but it does not work very well or at all. All stakeholders are aware of this. Not surprisingly, the Swedish government, to date, has examined the form of pupil health work in the Swedish school system. It remains to be seen if changes will be made, but this initiative displays the discontent with the current organisation and its effect.

Professional fragmentation

In particular, the Swedish case in our study about special education professions provides interesting material for our theorising. Due to Swedish reform dynamics since the 1990s (see Chapter 2), Swedish SE today is divided into two groups: Special education teachers (*speciallärare*) and special pedagogues (*specialpedagoger*). That these professions are internally differentiated is not problematic. German SE can have various specialisations related to expertise in particular disabilities, and in this, they are similar to medical professions. Complex differentiation can lead to confusion for clients, colleagues and other professionals. This is often about what exact expertise can be expected from which specialisation. Such problems can, however, be handled by the professionals' expectation management.

This issue displayed in the Swedish case is much more curious. Due to several reforms, the two SE groups active in Swedish schools are very similar their mission, but have different names (Wermke, Höstfält & Magnusson, 2024). To make a long history short, concerning the reform intention, special education teachers are supposed to work closely with students in need of special support inside and outside the classroom. Special pedagogues are assumed to work at the organisational level of schools and municipalities, for example, by systematically removing barriers to inclusive education

(ibid.). Unfortunately, since the names and definitions of both groups are so cloudy, practical distinctions for school administration, principals, teachers, pupils and parents in the schools have been difficult (see Chapter 7). Since it has not been clear what exactly to expect from the respective group, the pragmatic name of Swedish SE in practice has in many contexts become special education teacher/special pedagogue. Unfortunately, however, the consequences for Swedish SE are much more serious. Being a profession with an unclear definition and expertise is also likely a significant reason for the earlier-described dissolution of boundaries in the Swedish case. SE have no universally defined mission, so their tasks and functions are defined mostly in the context of the individual schools and municipalities, and not by the SE themselves but by principals and school administrators. This makes the Swedish special education profession very fragmented.

The explanation for this awkward situation is simple. The quest for two different groups, with the formally stated focus, did not come from the practical level of schools but was only political. It relates to policy shifts towards inclusive education in the 1990s and education standards in the later 2000s. Thus, the Swedish SEs perfectly illustrate the tension stated in the title of this volume. The curious thing about this situation is that, although all stakeholders in the school system have agreed on the problematic configuration, nothing has, at present, changed. One explanation for this might be that due to a severe shortage of SEs in the country, all existing SE programmes remain untouched. Another reason, as we argue, is that a fragmentation of professions enables a better fit into decentralised systems. SE, without a professional group loyalty or union backup (see Chapter 7), can easily adjust to local conditions and needs. They can also be adjusted according to changing policy needs. Simply put, SE professions can very easily be steered.

Special education professions and the operationalisation of inclusive and exclusive education in various contexts

An important aspect of our study, as reported in this volume, has been the operationalisation of inclusion by SEs. By employing various methodological approaches, our comparison of Germany and Sweden reveals several theoretical assumptions about the dynamic nature of the peculiar relationship between inclusion and SEs, which will be elaborated on in this section.

First, we can state that inclusion in both national contexts is today mostly operationalised by the co-education of pupils with and without special educational needs in the same schools and classrooms. 'Inclusion', as an educational philosophy and vision, is a theoretically and politically very broad phenomenon. It is partly about fairness and equity independent from individual conditions and more concretely about the question how we can make a school for all possible (Magnússon, 2015, Ainscow et al., 2019). However, in the practice of mass education, it has been condensed to a question of placement and goal achievement (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; see also Chapters 2 and 7).

If we follow this reduced understanding of inclusive education, then the opposite of inclusion becomes excluding students with special educational needs through placement in special classes and/or schools. Inclusion operationalised in mainstream or general schools puts forward issues of interprofessional relations, which must be defined and can lead to conflicts and friction (see Chapters 7 and 10). In Figures 12.1. and 12.2., we present two analytical models containing various configurations, which might support the understanding and explanation of the realities of inclusion in various contexts.
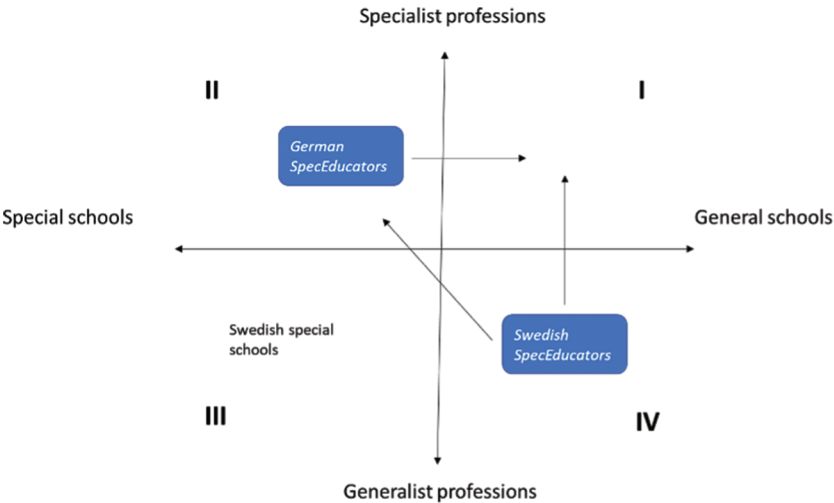
Figure 12.1: Inclusive education between special(ist) and general(ist) education and professional and organisational logic

Figure 12.1 relates our professional and organisational dimensions to each other in a particular way. The first dimension refers to the organisational dimensions by contrasting as poles on a continuum the schooling of pupils with special educational needs in special schools with the schooling of all children in general schools. Due to a continuum's analytical nature, several alternatives are possible between the two poles. For example, special and general schools can be under the same roof but be organisationally separated. Moreover, general schools can have separate learning groups for pupils with special educational needs. The continuum also enables us to compare our nation-specific special education profession with others. It expresses that one profession's work shifts comparatively more towards the one pole, for example, working in general schools rather than other professions.

The second dimension in our model, presented in Figure 12.1, displays a continuum of special education professionalism. The poles describe special education professionals as either generalists or specialists. Historically, in Sweden and still today in Germany, special education professions have been assumed to have a specialist body of knowledge. This body is mostly of a medical or psychiatric nature and focuses on a restricted area of disability, its possible impact on learning and potential treatments. As described earlier in this chapter, Swedish SEs have a rather generalist body of knowledge, comprising general but not special competencies on many types of school problems. On the other hand, we see (see Chapter 6) that this generalist approach is a more desired development for German SEs to use in coping with the challenges in inclusive schools. However, this desire does not necessarily reflect the overall situation. It rather is a careful start for future development. In contrast, the special education dynamic in Sweden is going in a more specialist direction. SEs are assumed to specialise increasingly, and the described re-establishment of special teachers provides evidence for this development.

We have described two such pole oscillations or pendulums in special education elsewhere (Wermke, Magnússon, Höstfält, 2024), and polemic oscillation is a common way to describe education reforms (c.f. sociologist theorists, such as Nicklas Luhmann (2002), or comparative educationalist scholars, such as Patricia Broadfoot (1996) or Richard Ingersoll (2003). Such poles can, for instance, be the decentralised or centralised governance of education systems or organisations. There can also be a choice between specialist

and generalist orientations concerning education knowledge in curriculum, professional knowledge or organisational structures. Due to this tendency, continuum models can be a fertile contribution to theorising on education.

Putting our two continua together, a four-field model emerges, displaying four configuration types (by its four quadrants). *Type IV* presents generalist special education professions operationalising inclusive education in general schools. It is fair to say that the Swedish special education system formally comes close to this type. However, as we have shown in Chapters 2 and 7, there has been a shift in the Swedish case, towards *type I*, the establishment of more specialist professions in the general schools. These are the special education teachers (*speciallärare*). Moreover, the professional body of knowledge in this context is shifting to more psychiatric disability focused competencies (see Chapter 7). Moreover, there has also been a movement in the special education system towards *type II* as there is a growing number of special schools of different types in which more specialist professions are active. Indeed, in *type II* special educational needs are 'coped with' in special schools by specialist professionals. This type operationalises inclusion by exclusion, to paraphrase Hjörne's famous book title (2004). We could even refer to the sociologist Rudolf Stichweh (2016) here who argues that in modern societies, exclusion from one configuration always leads to inclusion in other configurations. In other words, students excluded from schooling in regular schools will be included (placed) in special schools.

The formal logic is that more specialist expertise is needed for the best of pupils who need special education support since support can be tailor-made. Moreover, special schools offer shelter from the cruel world of general schools and the pupils without disabilities there. Informally, type II's logic is to relieve the general system from the burden of heterogeneity of pupils' needs, which must be met in the organisation (Skrtic, 1991, Wermke et al., 2024). This this the traditional German way of coping with special needs. Today, however, due to much higher expectations about making the school system more inclusive, even the SEs in the German case experience a significant shift towards *type I* specialist special education professions in general schools. Left in our model then is *type III*, generalist professions working in special schools. This type looks like an analytical left-over, but it is not. It describes the historical reality of special schools in Sweden. Here, most professionals working are not certified SEs but regular teachers or preschool teachers (Berthén, 2007, Wermke

et al., 2024). This has to do with a system that, in the 1990s, moved towards an inclusive school system at scale but still left a smaller special school sector untouched, as we have shown elsewhere (Wermke et al., 2024). Rather than disappearing, the number of special schools and classes has started growing in number in recent years (Giota et al., 2022). For a long time, this development has not been correlated with (for this type of school) specialised SE training. Therefore, the special school system became and still is a labour market for general teachers. Moreover, this configuration has been the focus of severe political critique, and reform endeavours have been made to significantly increase the number of SEs in special schools (ibid.). Consequently, this also manifests the described shift by Swedish SEs towards *type II*.

The relation of special and general teachers in general schools

Since inclusion in our two contexts is often handled by placement and more or less operationalised by more or less specialist SEs in general schools, then issues of interprofessional cooperation evolves – especially regarding general teachers. We aim to theorise on this phenomenon through Figure 12.2.

In this model, four types of SE–general educator relations can be seen. As before, the model combines two continua. The first continuum describes the nature of the work of SEs with pupils in need of special education support in general schools. This continuum has the poles of *additive special education services*. This means when SEs fly in or fly out, regular classrooms support individual pupils in need or take those pupils out for a restricted time to provide individual instruction. The other pole is the integrated approach, in which SEs' and general teachers' work is integrated. This can occur in various forms, such as co-teaching, SEs holding general classes, or consulting with one another for the work with general classes. Simply said, the integrated approach is about the co-education of pupils with and without special educational needs, as we developed in Chapter 6.

The other continuum in this model evolves between two poles that describe the power relation between teachers and SEs in inclusive settings, that is, schools and classrooms. This relation can be hierarchical. This means that one profession can be superior to the other. The other pole is a cooperative relation, in which both professions have equal decision-making capacity to organise inclusive settings. Again, various alternatives are possible between the poles. For example, in certain situations, the relationship

between the two professions can be cooperative while simultaneously not so in other situations.
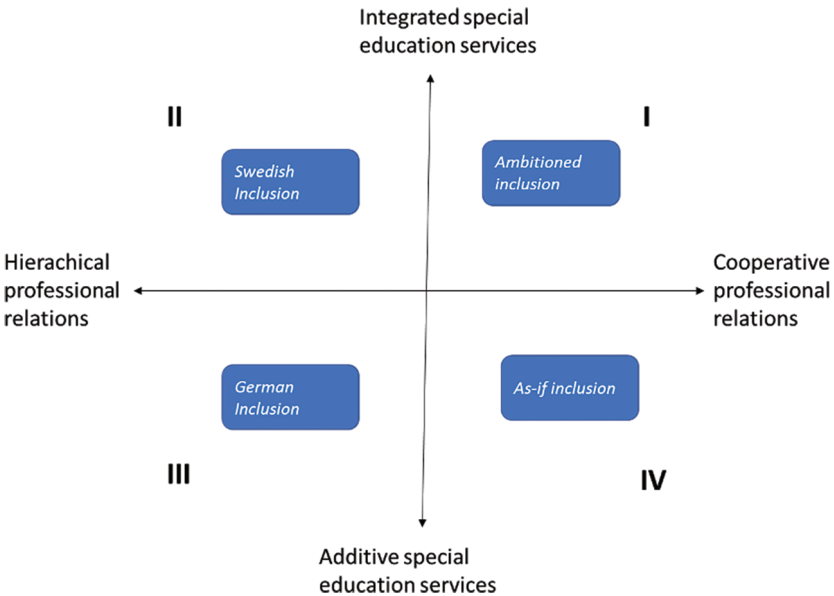
Figure 12.2: Various operationalisations of inclusion

Type IV in our model combines additive services in cooperative professional settings. This configuration is surely as-if inclusion, but eventually triggers the least conflicts in the organisation of the general school. Therefore, it is probably a common version of inclusive education in reality. SEs and general teachers organise their 'inclusive' work cooperatively as a division of labour, where the general teachers concentrate on the pupils without the need for special education support and the SEs concentrate on the pupils with special educational needs and educate them separately from the others. *Type I* presents the configuration when SEs work in general schools. Here, general and special education are integrated to provide the best possible support for all pupils. SEs and teachers plan cooperatively together and have the same decision-making capacity. No profession is subordinate to

the other. In theory, general and special education focus complement each other. However, *type I* is apparently rather seldomly found in the practice of German or Swedish inclusion. This, as we could see in Chapter 7, is our consideration of interprofessional cooperation in this chapter, and as it has also been shown elsewhere (Olson, 2024), often due to conflicts in interprofessional cooperation.

Type II and *type III* build on hierarchical relations between the two professions. As shown in Chapter 8, these are quite typical in both of our contexts. Sweden, however, is an example of *type II*. Here, the SEs are superior to the general teachers, which means that the first has more power to formally decide on the organisation of special education support, and this will often happen in general classrooms and force teachers to adapt education activities for particular pupils. The group stays intact, and SEs are supposed to consult such processes. However, as shown earlier, it is not clear how this approach works in the reality of Swedish schools.

As we have shown in the same study (see Chapter 8), in Germany, hierarchical relations are the other way around in inclusive classrooms. Here, we see *type III* in our model, an additive special service, embedded in hierarchical relations. That means that SEs fly in and out of the classroom and provide special education support for a limited time. Most of the time, SEs in this configuration are subordinated to the general classroom teachers. The latter often want to be relieved from responsibility for the pupils needing special support and are rather seldom interested in co-teaching or co-planning. SEs must therefore follow their wishes. We argue that in this situation, SEs can be unwilling for work in inclusive settings. As one of our informants said (see Chapter 8), many SEs avoid working in inclusive schools since, in such settings, they must subordinate themselves. Consequently, when possible, they rather want to work in special schools.

In summary, our models illustrate several ways in which inclusion and the relationship between SEs and other education professionals such as teachers can take form. Which of our types, in the end, describes the situation in the best possible way is contingent on nation-specific, regional, and historical particularities. Moreover, our models show that there can be dynamics in the operationalisation of inclusion. Our aim is thus to invite other scholars for more well-needed comparative studies.

Conclusion: Special education professions between Inclusion and education standards?

We finish this chapter by coming back to the title of this volume, addressing the tension between inclusion and education standards as driving trends in international school systems today, and the dynamics in the form of SE professions in various contexts. Without any doubt, the story of the professionalisation of SEs since the 1990s is a very specific one and not only a continuation of what started for SEs 150 years ago. With changes in society, also the society's schools change as do the professions in it. Moreover, the professionalisation of education professions is too tightly related to state governance and education reform. This does not mean that SEs, as a collective group, can be a powerful stakeholder in school reforms. In Germany, special education associations have been this (Dietze, 2019). In Sweden, there is no specialised association for this group today, which results in a particular vulnerability of the group's impact, autonomy, and status (see Chapter 7).

The terms *'Inclusion'* and *'education standards'* symbolise two conflicting trends for SEs (Paulsrud, 2024). On the one hand, there is a school for all in the spirit of the CRPD, which embraces the value of difference and the right of all individuals to participate in all relevant parts of society, regardless of their individual circumstances and conditions. On the other hand, there is a need for standards in schooling for the sake of comparisons and monitoring of schooling practices. It also symbolises an emphasis on academic performance over the social values of schooling (Ingersoll, 2003).

The Salamanca Declaration and its promotion of inclusion had a very ambivalent message (Magnússon, 2019), not the least for the SE profession. It focused on all pupils' right to education and the utter importance of SEs' complex work. However, in its ambitions for a genuine school for all, it also challenged the existence of special solutions to keep the traditional exclusive schooling alive. A school for all adopts the needs of pupils and, therefore, would reject special solutions. Medical labelling would not be necessary because the difference is the thriving value of an inclusive school. Even if Sweden definitely could be called an early adopter of inclusive education as a guiding principle, the UN CRPD from 2006 was first to give the inclusive movement momentum at scale in the Western world, and in particular in our other case, Germany (Chapter 7).

Another education megatrend evident since the end of the twentieth century has been decentralisation reforms in public education internationally. In Sweden, radical shifts from input to output governance happened in the early 1990s, again 10 years earlier than in our German case. Education standards are necessary to organise decentralisation in a school system. The PISA studies were indeed an accelerator in this matter. What this shift towards standard measurement has brought, at least to our two contexts, is that education effects can be measured (Hopmann, 2008). It also means that the right to special education can be operationalised by measuring the achievement of pupils' goals (Magnússon, 2015). The idea goes that pupils at risk of missing particular goals will achieve the expected goals by being supported in the right way. This rationale makes it possible to relate various factors of schooling, such as pupil health and well-being, and goal achievement. It can be measured if professional work with such factors leads to better goal achievement. It is probably no coincidence that the last bigger special education reform in Sweden happened in the aftermath of a PISA shock (2006), which showed poor results for youngsters in mathematics, reading, and writing. With the 2007 reform, special education teachers (*speciallärare*) returned to the school system, and the biggest groups of them has been those specialising in pupil problems in mathematics and language learning (Chapter 7). With a focus on such 'problems', the group of potential clients grew, and those pupils were at risk of not reaching the standards, with the side effect of a growing dissolution of boundaries for the profession (Chapters 6 and 7).

Still, for the Swedish case, the standard movement has increased the importance and status of SEs in the Swedish school. Their special body of knowledge focuses on work with pupils who are at risk of not achieving the standards. All pupils receiving at least the chance for standard achievement is very important; therefore, such 'special' education knowledge is also very important. Moreover, in recent years, knowledge of diagnoses of psychiatric and psychological disabilities and disorders has shown its value in explaining variances in education measurement (Hopmann, 2008). They are seen as a fertile starting point for the construction of tailor-made and general intervention or prevention programmes; such dynamics are welcome for even Swedish SEs (Chapter 11).

In Germany, in contrast, standardised education measurement and special education are still more loosely coupled. This might be related to a deep belief

in homogenous learning groups as an overall positive factor for learning. The tracked school system builds on this differentiation rationale. Moreover, there is a benevolent belief in special schools being a necessary shelter for pupils in need of special support (Chapter 11). A standard focus has led to a stabilising of the traditional German system which has been challenged by the inclusion movements (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). Not even the CRPD could significantly change the role and identity of special education in Germany (Chapter 7).

In conclusion, we argue that in the tension field between inclusion and education standards, SEs in both contexts were challenged. In Sweden, SE were destabilised by policy reforms pushing inclusive education. Due to the waves of PISA and the focus on education standards, a stabilisation of their profession can be observed, unfortunately by means of medicalisation and educational segregation. Even in Germany, 'inclusion' is still only a matter of lip service. The number of students with a formally acknowledged special educational need attending general schools has grown significantly. However, the number of special schools is still stable, and a much bigger group of SE work in special schools. Inclusive education structures have therefore only added to the system, stabilising it (Freier et al., 2024) rather than leading to a significant change. The education standard focus has potentially even led to a further stabilising of the special systems, since the belief in homogeneous learning groups for the sake of pupil performance remains untouched in a highly segregating tracked school system, run by specialised schools and education professionals. Thus, unfortunately, Salamanca and the CRPD might soon be mere memories.

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