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Professionalism, governance and inclusive education – A total population study of Swedish special needs educators

Kerstin Göransson, Gunilla Lindqvist, Nina Klang, Gunnlaugur Magnússon and Lena Almqvist

ABSTRACT

Prior research shows that special needs educators (SNEs) have had problems defining their occupational roles and jurisdiction, particularly regarding inclusive education. There are two occupational groups of SNEs in Sweden, namely special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and special education teachers. In this paper, we use the collective name SNEs to refer to both groups. Here, results from a total population study of Swedish SNEs are presented (N = 3367, response rate 75%). The aim is to explore differences in SNEs’ interpretation of school difficulties and if these differences are influenced by SNEs’ employment in different parts of the school organisation. Statistical cluster-analysis was used to categorise SNEs into five distinct groups based on how they view the problems of pupils in school difficulties and if these differences are influenced by SNEs’ employment in different parts of the school organisation. Findings suggest that SNEs are less unanimous in their views of school problems, than prior research indicates. The variance is partly due to where they work in the school organisation, but we also find indications that different groups of SNEs experience different forms of governance with regard to their professionalism. The results are important due to the scope of the data and method of analysis as well as the illustrated variance of professional values and situations of SNEs and the potential consequences for the development of inclusive education.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

SNEs; inclusive education; special education; professional role; educational organisation

Introduction

The construction of the occupational role of special needs educators (SNEs) is complex and closely related to the discourse of inclusion. On the one hand, SNEs risk upholding a segregated school system by ‘removing’ the problem from mainstream education, e.g. by teaching certain pupils individually or in small groups. On the other hand, SNEs are expected to be central actors in the development of inclusive education, and as such
contribute to the ‘reconstruction of special education’ by adapting the whole school environment to the differences between pupils (cf. Skrtic 1995). Studies from different education systems have illustrated difficulties in establishing an occupational role following a whole-school-approach to special educational support (e.g. Abbott 2007; Cole 2005; Devecchi et al. 2012; Emanuellsen 2001; Forlin 2001; Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Hargreaves et al. 2007; Takala, Pirttimaa, and Tömänen 2009; Travers 2006). The issue has mainly been discussed in terms of setbacks experienced by SNEs attempting to establish an occupational role in line with inclusive practices (Abbott 2007; Cole 2005; Lindqvist 2013a). We propose a complementary way to understand the formation of the occupational role(s) of SNEs by relating it to the perspective of the sociology of professions. This article presumes that the development of SNEs’ occupational role is constructed: a) on the basis of different (re)interpretations of the ‘problem of pupils in school difficulties’ in interaction with other occupational groups, (i.e. within a ‘system of professions’ (Abbott 1988)); and b) within the context of organisations with their own logic of governing (e.g. Evetts 2006, 2013).

The occupational role of SNEs is constructed within education systems that are to a greater or lesser extent governed by the state. SNEs’ possibilities to find occupational control over their work is thus circumscribed by for instance accountability demands and regulations including several – often incompatible – objectives, such as inclusive education and emphasis on efficiency and attainment (e.g. Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Ball 2003; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Clark, Dyson, and Millward 1998; Magnússon 2015; Parding and Liljegren 2017). Several researchers have depicted SNEs’ work arena as a challenging environment (e.g. Hargreaves et al. 2007; Lindqvist 2013a). Their occupational role is constructed in relation to interpretations of ‘school difficulties’ as expressed by other occupational groups, such as regular teachers, school psychologists, school social workers and resource staff, i.e. groups expected to be influential and work with school difficulties (Göransson et al. 2017; Lindqvist 2013b). Previously reported results from a total population study of Swedish SNEs showed that the occupational tasks of SNEs varied depending on their placement in the school organisation. Thus, SNEs in central administrative positions and preschools work more with consultation, counselling and dialogues with teachers and collaboration with external agencies, i.e. in line with a whole-school-approach. SNEs in primary, secondary, upper-secondary and special schools, however, mostly teach children individually or in smaller groups (Göransson et al. 2015; Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015).

This article proposes an alternative and nuanced understanding of the construction of the occupational role(s) of SNEs by: (a) exploring differences in SNEs’ interpretation of the problem of pupils in school difficulties and (b) exploring how employment in different parts of the school organisation affects the interpretation of school difficulties.

The results are unique as they involve a large-scale data collection comprising all SNEs working in the Swedish school system (including preschool and adult education) that received their degree according to the Swedish Examination Acts of 2001, 2007 and 2008, \(N = 3367\). Sweden is an interesting arena for several reasons. Swedish SNEs have an education on a comparatively high level, having first acquired a teaching degree and thereafter a master’s level degree in special education. Therefore, SNEs in Sweden have received higher education than their counterparts in most other national school systems. Additionally, the Swedish school system has been regarded as one of the most
inclusive systems in the world (OECD 2011). This raises the question how an education system, with inclusive ambitions, utilises and promotes the professions working with these particular questions.

**Prior research**

Several scholars have studied how SNEs contribute to schools’ work, in particular how structures and practices that allow schools to respond more fully to all pupils are developed, disassembling the provision of special support as a separate system (e.g. Devecchi et al. 2012; Göransson et al. 2017; Takala, Pirttimaa, and Törmänen 2009). However, studies have also indicated that the occupational tasks of SNEs vary considerably depending on the local school context, as well as where in the school organisation SNEs are located (Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Klang et al. 2017; Magnússon, Göransson, and Nilholm 2017; Tissot 2013). Previous studies also indicate that the role of SNEs is negotiated and shaped in the local school context, formed by the individual SNEs, in accordance to their colleagues’ expectations, and the expectations from school leaders and organisations (Emanuelsson 2001; Klang et al. 2017; Rosen-Webb 2011).

At school level, the SNEs’ tasks are characterised to a great extent by teaching individual pupils, or pupils in smaller groups, often in segregated settings outside regular classrooms, rather than cooperating with and supporting teachers or working with strategic school development (e.g. Abbott 2007; Cole 2005; Emanuelsson 2001; Oldham and Radford 2011; Szwed 2007; Tornberg and Svensson 2012). It has been argued that this way of organising special education might counteract inclusion (Göransson and Nilholm 2014; Lindqvist 2013b).

Additionally, previous studies indicate that primary school special educators express a relational understanding of school difficulties to a higher degree than other occupational groups in the school system. They understand school difficulties as the result of school environment factors rather than properties of the individual pupils, and are thus sceptical of removing pupils from their regular classroom as a means to solve problems (Burton and Goodman 2011; Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Lindqvist et al. 2011). A few studies have been performed on what SNEs view as the main purpose of schooling. Thus, Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm (2015) found that SNEs on primary school level [...] take a rather clear position on what the school should prioritize and what the primary aim of schooling should be. [...] one can argue that special educators represent egalitarian and communitarian perspectives on the mission of education, rather than a libertarian view. (Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015, 299)

By investigating SNEs’ understanding of school difficulties and their beliefs concerning purposes of schooling, and relating it to their position within the school organisation, our intention is to receive a more nuanced picture of different dimensions and patterns of their beliefs.

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of interpretation in this article is based on a combination of Abbott’s (1988) and Evetts’ theories of professions and professionalism (2006, 2013), here applied to the field of special needs education and the occupational role of SNEs.
Before describing the details of this interpretive framework, we will account for some central developments of special educational perspectives.

**Special educational perspectives as professional values**

Regarding the problem of pupils in school difficulties, different occupational groups have attempted to claim the problem as being within their jurisdiction and expertise. Commonly, researchers identify two basic interpretations that construct the problem of pupils in school difficulties. One interpretation defines school difficulties as an individual problem, locating the causes of the difficulties within the child (e.g. Clark, Dyson, and Millward 1998; Vislie 2003). This interpretation has been referred to as the ‘psycho-medical paradigm’ (Clark, Dyson, and Millward 1998), the ‘deficiency perspective’ (Ainscow 1998), or the compensatory perspective (Haug 1998) respectively. Here, school difficulties are seen as arising due to factors inherent to the individual, such as congenital issues, low intellectual ability, or different kinds of neuropsychiatric disorders. This interpretation locates the problem, to a large extent, outside the pedagogical domain and within the potential jurisdiction of, for instance doctors and psychologists, i.e. within the knowledge-systems of medicine, psychology and educational psychology as basis for reasoning about -, classifying -, and treating the problem. Accordingly, the importance of medical or psychological diagnosis and treatment is emphasised.

Such interpretations of the problem have been challenged by advocates of inclusion, who prefer to define the problem of school difficulties as due to the learning environment and/or the school organisation (e.g. Clark, Dyson, and Millward 1998; Haug 1998; Skrtic 1995). This is often referred to as the ‘relational perspective’ as the focus of the perspective is on relations, communication and interaction. This interpretation locates the problem within the domain of pedagogics and the sociology of education, thus placing it more clearly within the jurisdictional realms of pedagogues/teachers and SNEs. Further, advocates of inclusion construct the problem of school difficulties in relation to ideas about what school systems, schools and classrooms should accomplish, i.e. within the domain of educational ideologies (e.g. Florian and Kershner 2009). In the relational perspective the construction of the problem of pupils in school difficulties is linked to an egalitarian view of the purpose and primary goal of schooling, emphasising that the main purpose of education should be attaining a more equitable society, focusing on pupils’ personal development as primary goal of schooling (e.g. Kluth, Straut, and Biklen 2003; Naraian 2011). We will use these perspectives in the categorisation of our results.

**Professionalism and governance**

According to Abbott’s theory of systems of professions, professions are established partly through competition over who shall have the interpretative prerogative of certain problems, in this case the problem of pupils in school difficulties. This interpretation forms the basis for jurisdictional ‘claims to classify a problem, to reason about it, and to take action on it’ (Abbott 1988, 40). Following this line of reasoning, the inclusion discourse offers greater potentials for SNEs to gain jurisdictional control to classify the problem of pupils in school difficulties, to reason about it and to treat it, than the psycho-medical paradigm.
Evetts (2006, 2013), however, argues that this kind of professionalism, characterised by discretion and control of the work, is linked to governing practices of organisations (Evetts 2013). She discerns two ideal types of professionalism: organisational professionalism and occupational professionalism. These ideal types represent two different ways of viewing how professional work should be governed leaving more or less room for the occupation itself to construct the role and practice of the professional.

Governance in organisational professionalism is characterised by hierarchical and bureaucratic controls, a standardisation of work procedures and ‘externalized forms of regulation and accountability measures such as target-setting and performance review’ (Evetts 2013, 787). Occupational professionalism on the other hand, is governed from within the professional group, by collegial authority, and is characterised by the discretion and occupational control over the work as located within the occupation. The Swedish education system, as education systems in many other countries, is increasingly governed by the logic of organisational professionalisation (e.g. Ball 2003; Evetts 2013). The extent of governance by externalised forms of regulation, demands for accountability, goal achievement, target-setting etc. vary, however, between different parts of the education system.

**Aims**

The primary aim of this study is to explore differences in SNEs’ interpretation of the problem of pupils in school difficulties. A second aim is to explore how SNEs’ employment in different parts of the school organisation affects their interpretation of the problem of school difficulties. Research questions that will guide the investigation are:

1. What patterns of interpretations of school difficulties, in terms of locating the causes for the difficulties, can be discerned in a total population of Swedish SNEs with employment within the school organisation?
2. Are SNEs with similar interpretations of causes for school difficulties characterised by shared beliefs about the primary purpose and goal of schooling? How are beliefs about purpose and primary goal of schooling linked to interpretations of causes for school difficulties?
3. Are interpretations of the problem of pupils in school difficulties related to employment within the school organisation? What patterns can be found in these differences?

**Method**

**Participants**

This is a total population study entailing all SNEs in Sweden examined by the examination acts of 2001, 2007, and 2008 and which are employed within the school organisation – from preschool to upper secondary school and adult education \(N = 3367\). The study is part of a larger research project with the overall aim to generate knowledge about how SNEs and support teachers identify and shape their occupational role in Sweden. The SNEs were sent a questionnaire which they answered between March and May 2012. The final response rate was 75% \(n = 2525\). The research project was financed by the
Swedish Research Council (see also Göransson et al. 2015, 2017; Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Klang et al. 2017; Magnússon, Göransson, and Nilholm 2017).

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed and reviewed by several internal and external researchers as well as by professionals with statistical expertise from Statistics Sweden. Statistics Sweden distributed the questionnaire and collected and compiled the responses. The researchers had no access to the personal information of the responding individuals. The questionnaire consisted of 52 main questions and several sub questions. Two main questions with a total of 13 sub questions were selected for analysis in this article. One of the questions concerns explanations of school difficulties. The participants were asked to rate six statements of explanations of school difficulties on a Likert-scale from 1 to 4, where 1 corresponded to ‘most important’ and 4 corresponded to ‘least important’ (see also Table 1). Three of the statements represent a pedagogical perspective, e.g. dysfunctional classroom or teachers’ deficits, and three represent a perspective where reasons are located outside the pedagogical domain, e.g. the home environment or individual deficits. The second question concerns purposes and primary goal of schooling. The participants were asked to rank seven statements from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important) (see also Table 3). Finally, a question regarding employment in the school organisation was included (see also Table 4).

Data analysis and presentation

As a first step an explorative hierarchical cluster-analysis with Ward’s minimum-variance method was performed (Hair et al. 2014), based on SNEs’ responses to statements about beliefs about school difficulties. A ten-cluster solution was chosen as it was considered to fit the data set best, based on explained variance, homogeneity within each cluster and meaningful distribution of participants into clusters. A descriptive analysis of 20 outliers, which could not fit into any cluster, was conducted. The analysis showed that the outliers did not clearly differ from the rest on any characteristics relevant for the study, such as place of employment, reported work tasks, views of school difficulties or purposes of schooling.

The chosen ten-cluster solution explained approximately 54% (ESS = 54.54) of the variance and encompassed 2505 participants. Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation for each of the ten clusters, as well as the homogeneity coefficient. Due to the reverse scale, a mean of 1 means that the participants consider the reason for school difficulties as very important and a mean of 4 means that the participants consider the reason for school difficulties as very unimportant. As seen in Table 1, the professionals’ views of reasons behind school difficulties vary across clusters.

To explore patterns of interpretations of school difficulties as a basis for jurisdictional claims the ten clusters were further grouped depending on to what extent they defined the problem of school difficulties as located outside the school context or within a pedagogical context. Clusters with mean value from 1 to 1.90 on questions 1–3 were categorised as defining the problem as being outside the pedagogical domain and consequently viewing the problem as not being within the jurisdiction of pedagogical expertise, i.e. 
Table 1. Mean values and standard deviation of the different clusters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster variables</th>
<th>Total sample</th>
<th>C1</th>
<th>C2</th>
<th>C3</th>
<th>C4</th>
<th>C6</th>
<th>C7</th>
<th>C10</th>
<th>C12</th>
<th>C41</th>
<th>C48</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>m (Std)</td>
<td>n 125</td>
<td>n 262</td>
<td>n 136</td>
<td>n 303</td>
<td>n 499</td>
<td>n 263</td>
<td>n 407</td>
<td>n 129</td>
<td>n 162</td>
<td>n 219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homegeneity coefficient</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location outside the pedagogical domain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Goals too hard to accomplish for pupils</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.85)</td>
<td>(.81)</td>
<td>(.51)</td>
<td>(.74)</td>
<td>(.74)</td>
<td>(.74)</td>
<td>(.60)</td>
<td>(.69)</td>
<td>(.77)</td>
<td>(.62)</td>
<td>(.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Individual deficits</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.91)</td>
<td>(.81)</td>
<td>(.63)</td>
<td>(.75)</td>
<td>(.69)</td>
<td>(.75)</td>
<td>(.61)</td>
<td>(.84)</td>
<td>(.84)</td>
<td>(.69)</td>
<td>(.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Problems at home</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.75)</td>
<td>(.60)</td>
<td>(.60)</td>
<td>(.37)</td>
<td>(.45)</td>
<td>(.40)</td>
<td>(.67)</td>
<td>(.57)</td>
<td>(.74)</td>
<td>(.42)</td>
<td>(.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagocial location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Schools not adapted to student diversity</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.53)</td>
<td>(.45)</td>
<td>(.00)</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
<td>(.00)</td>
<td>(.29)</td>
<td>(.00)</td>
<td>(.00)</td>
<td>(.20)</td>
<td>(.00)</td>
<td>(.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Teacher deficits</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.59)</td>
<td>(.15)</td>
<td>(.51)</td>
<td>(.09)</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
<td>(.22)</td>
<td>(.35)</td>
<td>(.00)</td>
<td>(.00)</td>
<td>(.49)</td>
<td>(.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Dysfunctional classrooms/groups</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.68)</td>
<td>(.53)</td>
<td>(.49)</td>
<td>(.53)</td>
<td>(.50)</td>
<td>(.45)</td>
<td>(.45)</td>
<td>(.42)</td>
<td>(.56)</td>
<td>(.50)</td>
<td>(.50)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Groups of patterns among the clusters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster variables</th>
<th>Non-claimers n = 760</th>
<th>Pedagogical blenders n = 565</th>
<th>Partly pedagogical claimers n = 392</th>
<th>Pedagogical claimers n = 381</th>
<th>Interactio-nists n = 407</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location outside the pedagogical domain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals to hard to accomplish</td>
<td>N*</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual deficits</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem at home</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Ne</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School’s not adopted to pupil diversity</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y**</td>
<td>Ne***</td>
<td>Ne</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher deficits</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Ne</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysfunctional classrooms/groups</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Ne</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N = No, mean 2.10–4.

**Y = Yes, mean 1–1.90.

***Ne = Neutral, mean 1.91–2.09.
SNEs. Mean values from 1.91 to 2.09 were categorised as a neutral position concerning the location of the problem. Mean values from 2.10 to 4 were categorised as a negative claim, i.e. explicitly claiming that the problem of school difficulties is not a question of e.g. the home environment or the goals of the national curriculum.

Similarly, clusters with mean values 1–1.90 on questions 4–6 were categorised as locating the problem within in the pedagogical domain and consequently within the jurisdictional field of SNEs, while mean values from 1.91 to 2.09 were categorised as a neutral position concerning the location of the problem. Mean values from 2.10 to 4 were categorised as a negative claim, i.e. locating the problem outside the pedagogical domain. For each group percentage of respondents that ranked each of the seven statements about purpose and primary goal of schooling as most important was calculated. Finally, percentage of different groups in different parts of the school organisation was calculated.

Table 3. Purpose and goal of schooling, share of respondents ranking the statements as ‘most important’ in each group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose schooling</th>
<th>Non-claimers n = 760</th>
<th>Pedagogical blenders n = 565</th>
<th>Partly pedagogical claimers n = 392</th>
<th>Pedagogical claimers n = 381</th>
<th>Overall claimers cluster 10 n = 407</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equal and equitable society</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>60.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased educational level in society</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmission of culture and continuity in society</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competetive society, minimal regulation from government, individual freedom and responsibility</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total % purpose of schooling*</td>
<td>100.4</td>
<td>101.2</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>107.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary goal of schooling</th>
<th>Non-claimers n = 760</th>
<th>Pedagogical blenders n = 565</th>
<th>Partly pedagogical claimers n = 392</th>
<th>Pedagogical claimers n = 381</th>
<th>Overall claimers cluster 10 n = 407</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupil’s personal development</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge goals and responsibility for one’s own learning</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group membership, safety and security</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>35.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total % primary goal of schooling</td>
<td>99.4</td>
<td>102.5</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>98.7</td>
<td>106.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The reason that the percentage adds up to more than 100 is that some overall claimers graded two alternatives as ‘most important’.

Table 4. Share of SNEs employed in different parts of the school organisation in each group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part of the school organisation</th>
<th>Non-claimers n = 760</th>
<th>Pedagogical blenders n = 565</th>
<th>Partly pedagogical claimers n = 392</th>
<th>Pedagogical claimers n = 381</th>
<th>Overall claimers cluster 10 n = 407</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary school</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School for pupils with intellectual disability</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central position in municipality</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult education</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Interpretations of school difficulties and purposes of schooling

Table 2 shows the five groups of clusters that were identified: non-claimers, pedagogical blenders, partly pedagogical claimers, pedagogical claimers and overall claimers. Each group represents different patterns of interpretations regarding the location of the problem of ‘pupils in school difficulties’. Table 3 shows percentage of respondents within each of the five groups that ranked the statements about purpose and primary goal of schooling as ‘most important’.

As can be seen in Table 3 the overall pattern regarding interpretations of purpose and primary goal of schooling is similar in the different groups. A majority of SNEs in each group believe that the main purpose of schooling is to contribute to an equal and equitable society, while a considerably smaller group share the belief that the main purpose is to contribute to the transmission of culture and continuity of a competitive society with minimal regulation from the government with regard to individual freedom. However, there are differences between the groups regarding how obvious this general pattern is. Below follows a description of the five groups.

Non-claimers (clusters 1, 3 and 6; n = 760). SNEs in this group are characterised by making very few positive jurisdictional claims on the definition of the problem. However, they do claim that the problem is not located outside the pedagogical domain. On the other hand, they do not clearly claim the problem as a pedagogical problem either, although they tend to be a little more neutral in their views on the pedagogical nature of school difficulties. This group has the smallest share of SNEs who believe that the main purpose of schooling is to contribute to an equal and equitable society (54.6%) and the largest group share the belief that school’s main purpose is to contribute to an increased educational level in society (31.7%). Further, they tend not to be as categorically negative as in their denial of locating the problem outside the pedagogical field. It is also within this group one is most likely to find SNEs who believe that the main priority of schooling should be knowledge goals and responsibility for one’s individual learning (29.3%).

Pedagogical blenders (clusters 2 and 4; n = 565). SNEs in this group make quite a strong claim on school difficulties being a pedagogical problem in terms of dysfunctional classrooms or groups and poor adoption of schools to pupil diversity. They do, however, open up for other interpretations of school problems, both regarding pedagogical aspects and the origin of the problems outside the pedagogical domain. This group is characterised by having the largest share of SNEs believing that the main priority of schooling should be group membership, safety and security (36.8%).

Partly pedagogical claimers (clusters 7 and 12; n = 392). SNEs in this group make it quite clear that they define the problem of school difficulties as primarily a pedagogical problem and not a problem located outside the pedagogical domain. However, as in the case of the pedagogical blenders, the pedagogical claims they make are somewhat limited. This group, has the second highest share of SNEs expressing the belief that the main purpose of schooling is to contribute to an equal and equitable society (61.5%) and the smallest proportion of SNEs that believe the main purpose to be the transmission of culture and continuity in society, or a competitive society with minimal regulation from the government stressing individual freedom (4.4%).
Pedagogical claimers (clusters 41 and 48; \(n = 381\)). SNEs in this group are the ones who most clearly claim that the problem of school difficulties is a problem of a pedagogical nature and not a problem located outside the pedagogical domain. It is in this group one finds the largest share of SNEs expressing the belief that the main purpose of schooling is to contribute to an equal and equitable society (62.2%). Like the partly pedagogical claimers, only a very small share of SNEs here express the belief that the main purpose of schooling is to contribute to the transmission of culture and continuity in society, or a competitive society with minimal regulation from the government stressing individual freedom (4.8%).

Overall claimers (cluster 10; \(n = 407\)). This group consists of just one cluster. We call the SNEs in this group overall claimers because they relate the problem as much to pedagogics as to other domains. As can be seen by the mean values in Table 1, they are quite unanimous concerning their claim that the problem is a pedagogical problem. At the same time, they also locate the problem outside the field of their jurisdiction, opening up for a division of jurisdiction and consequently for interaction with other experts. It is within this group one finds the largest share of SNEs who believe the main purpose to be to contribute to the transmission of culture and continuity in society (9.8%) and a competitive society with minimal regulation from the government stressing individual freedom (9.3%). SNEs within this group are also more likely to believe that the main priority of schooling should be the pupil’s personal development (47.2%) and they are also less likely to stress the importance of knowledge goals and responsibility for one’s own learning (24.1%) than SNEs in the other groups.

Interpretations of school difficulties in different parts of the school organisation

The share of SNEs employed in different parts of the school organisation in each group is illustrated in Table 4. Results show that over half of the SNEs working in primary school (54.3%), upper secondary school (52.4%), school for pupils with intellectual disability, (SID), (53.3%) and in adult education (59.5%) are non-claimers or pedagogical blenders. The share of non-claimers is highest among SNEs working in primary school (31.5%), and the share of pedagogical blenders is highest among SNEs working in adult education (33.3%). It is also in primary school and adult education that one finds the lowest share of SNEs who claim that the problem of school difficulties is mainly a pedagogical problem not located outside the pedagogical domain (pedagogical claimers 15.7% and 9.5% respectively).

SNEs working in preschools show a pattern that is slightly different. It is among this group that one finds the highest share of SNEs that relate the problem as much to pedagogics as to other domains compared to the other employment groups (22.6%), i.e. the overall claimers. Together with SNEs working in central positions in municipalities, they have the smallest share of non-claimers (22.9%).

The group of SNEs working in central positions in the municipality is characterised by having the largest share of SNEs who claim that the problem of school difficulties is a problem of a pedagogical nature and not a problem outside the pedagogical domain (pedagogical claimers = 23.8% and partly pedagogical claimers = 20.7%) and the lowest share of non-claimers (21.2%) (Table 5).
Table 5. Summary of SNEs’ beliefs about purpose and goal of schooling and place of employment in the different groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose schooling</th>
<th>Non-claimers n = 760</th>
<th>Pedagogical blenders n = 565</th>
<th>Partly pedagogical claimers n = 392</th>
<th>Pedagogical claimers n = 381</th>
<th>Overall claimers cluster 10 n = 407</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equal and equitable society</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased educational level in society</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmission of culture and continuity in society</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive society, minimal regulation from government, individual freedom and responsibility</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Primary goal of schooling

- Pupil’s personal development: +
- Knowledge goals and responsibility for one’s own learning: +
- Group membership, safety and security: +

Part of the school organisation

- Preschool: −
- Primary school: +
- Upper secondary school: +
- School for pupils with intellectual disability: +
- Central position in municipality: −
- Adult education: +

Summary

As suggested by theoretical considerations, empirical findings confirm that Swedish SNEs employed in the school organisation do, to various degrees, define the problem of pupils in school difficulties as a primarily pedagogical problem. Five different groups of patterns were discerned: non-claimers, pedagogical blenders, partly pedagogical claimers, pedagogical claimers and overall claimers. The results further indicate that definitions of school difficulties are tied to certain beliefs about purposes and primary goals of schooling. Pedagogical claimers have, for instance, the largest share of SNEs who believe that schools’ main purpose is to contribute to an equal and equitable society, while non-claimers have the smallest share who believe that. The results also show that different parts of the school organisation are characterised by having different shares of SNEs from the five groups. Preschools have, for example, the largest share of the overall claimers, while the primary schools have the largest share of the non-claimers compared to other parts of the school organisation. SNEs employed in central positions in the municipality have the largest share of pedagogical claimers and partly pedagogical claimers.

Discussion

In the following, we will discuss how the discerned differences between Swedish SNEs can be understood. We will then continue to discuss consequences of the differences in relation to SNEs’ professionalisation and the development of an occupational role in line with inclusive practices.

The two ideal types of professionalism, i.e. organisational professionalism and occupational professionalism, formulated by Evetts (2006, 2013) can help us understand the
beliefs that were expressed by the SNEs. Arguably, the discerned patterns can be seen as an expression of a different balance between these two governance ideals in different parts of the school organisation. Organisational professionalism is governed by externalised forms of regulation and gives smaller room for the occupation itself to develop its professionalism. In that sense, one might argue that this kind of governance gives rise to a deprofessionalisation. Demands for accountability, goal achievement, target-setting and other externalised forms of regulation are, however, more prominent in primary schools, SIDs, and upper secondary schools, than in preschools or in central educational support organisations in municipalities. As the results show, it is among SNEs employed in primary and upper secondary schools that one finds the largest share of non-claimers and pedagogical blenders, while preschools and central educational support organisations in municipalities have the largest share of pedagogical claimers and overall claimers.

Following Abbott’s line of reasoning that professions are constructed in interaction with other occupational groups, that is within a ‘system of professions’ (Abbott 1988), it is possible that the differences between different parts of the school organisation, at micro-level, give rise to different occupational socialisation processes. This might complicate the development of a shared occupational identity (cf. Klang et al. 2017).

It is among SNEs employed in central educational support organisations that one finds the largest share of pedagogical claimers and partly pedagogical claimers. As mentioned previously, these are the two groups that most strongly oppose a traditional definition of the problem of school difficulties, in line with a ‘psycho-medical paradigm’, and most strongly favour a definition within the pedagogical domain, in line with a relational perspective (see Clark, Dyson, and Millward 1998; Haug 1998; Skrtic 1995). It is also among these two groups that one finds the largest share of SNEs who believe schools’ main purpose is to contribute to an equitable society, i.e. with an egalitarian view on schooling. This is quite contradictory to the current education agenda, with its focus on excellence, where further demand is made upon schools and teachers for increased goal attainment and accountability (e.g. Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Göransson, Malmqvist, and Nilholm 2013).

Contrary to SNEs working in primary schools, upper secondary schools and SIDs, the closest working environment of SNEs employed in central educational support organisations, is not the everyday practice of a school, where they have to make meaning of and incorporate multiple more or less compatible values into their ‘culture’. In primary schools, upper secondary schools and SIDs, a majority of the SNEs are non-claimers or pedagogical blenders. These two groups are characterised by having the largest share of SNEs who believe that schools’ main purpose is to contribute to an increased educational level in society, and they represent the smallest share of SNEs who believe that schools’ main purpose is to contribute to an equitable society.

Also, in contrast to the SNEs working in central educational support organisations, these SNEs have to construct their occupational role in relation to daily encounters with other occupational groups, for instance teachers, school psychologists, school social workers and resource staff who also claim jurisdiction concerning problems of school difficulties (Göransson et al. 2017; Lindqvist 2013b). Similarly, overall claimers, who have the largest share of SNEs who believe that schools’ primary goal is to enhance pupils’ personal development, are most common among SNEs working in preschool. Preschool in Sweden was at the time of the study characterised by very different
governing documents, with for example no individual knowledge goals and where the role of SNEs is not burdened by an image of a ‘traditional special teacher’ in the same way as in primary schools, upper secondary schools and SIDs (Lindqvist and Nilholm 2013).

Returning to SNEs’ positioning in relation to the development of inclusive practices, this study indicates that there are different discourses regarding the interpretation of the problem of pupils in school difficulties as well as purpose of schooling in different parts of the school organisation that are more or less compatible with the development of inclusive education. The results show that this tension between different ways of constructing the problem of school difficulties is a factor that has to be considered in relation to SNEs’ occupational roles and in the development of inclusive education. We further argue that another factor that has to be considered is prevailing governance practices in different parts of the school organisation. Governance by hierarchical and bureaucratic controls seems to foster a deprofessionalisation of the occupational role of SNEs, which risks being incompatible with the development of inclusive practices. Governance practices that leave more room for the professional group itself to have occupational control over the work seem to foster a discourse more in line with inclusive practices.

Finally, as mentioned in the introduction, previously reported results from this total population study (Göransson et al. 2015; Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015) on tasks SNEs consider characteristic of their work, corroborate differences between SNEs employed in different parts of the school organisation. Work tasks of SNEs employed in central positions in municipalities and in preschools were more in line with inclusive practices than tasks of SNEs employed in primary schools and upper secondary schools. Thus, the additional results from the study reported in this current article confirm previous results, namely that the views and tasks of SNEs are divergent and complex. This, in turn, makes it possible to question the rather one-sided picture of SNEs as an occupational group with the one-track goal of enforcing inclusion. It also opens up for alternative understandings of difficulties for SNEs, as a united occupational group, to fulfil this goal (cf. Abbott 2007; Cole 2005; Devecchi et al. 2012; Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015).

In conclusion, this study highlights that SNEs views of school problems, and what professional domains they belong to, are less unanimous than prior research indicates. The group of Swedish SNEs does not seem to be as homogeneous as it appeared in previous studies. The various contexts within which the SNEs work seem to play a significant role in shaping their views, but we also find indications that different groups of SNEs experience different forms of governance with regard to their professionalism.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Kerstin Göransson is a professor of special needs education at Karlstad University. Her research interests include inclusive education in relation to sociology of professions and curriculum theory.

Gunilla Lindqvist is an associate professor in education at Uppsala University and Dalarna University. Her research focus is especially directed towards occupational groups’ views on special needs, mostly related to the concept of inclusion.

Nina Klang is a researcher in special needs education at the Department of Education at Uppsala university. Her interests center on instruction and curriculum for pupils in need of special support.

Gunnlaugur Magnússon is a research fellow in didactics at Mälardalen University and senior lecturer in education and special education at Uppsala University. His research interests regard educational ideologies, marketization and inclusive education in particular.

Lena Almqvist is an associate professor in psychology at Mälardalen University. Her research concerns children’s participation and mental health in preschool, with special interest in children in difficult situations.

ORCID

Nina Klang http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0027-084X

References


