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## Perimeters of, and challenges to, the jurisdiction of Swedish special educators: an exploration of free text responses

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### ABSTRACT

Special needs educators (SNEs) have important roles in many education systems. However, their roles are often poorly defined, and differ greatly both between and within education systems. Studies show that SNEs have diverse tasks, have problems defining their jurisdiction, and approach special support with different perspectives than other professions. Here, the aim is to explore what Swedish SNEs express regarding their occupational role and jurisdiction, utilising 676 free text responses to an open question in a total population survey. The results illustrate that SNEs often have to take on tasks they do not view as appropriate and that they often experience misunderstanding from head teachers and colleagues about their roles and tasks, and that they risk being replaced by other professions. Some explanations can be found in vague legal definitions of their jurisdiction and the necessity of adaption to the local school context. The results are interpreted using Abbott's theory of jurisdiction and Evetts' distinctions of professionalisation and professionalism. The study confirms results from prior research to a high degree but adds further nuance and dimensions to them with formulations from active professionals.

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### KEYWORDS

Special needs educators; jurisdiction; occupational roles; special education; professionalism

## Introduction

Special needs educators (SNEs) have important role in schools' work with pupils needing special support and in constructing inclusive education. However, SNEs have had difficulties defining their occupational roles and their legitimacy (e.g. Abbott 2007; Cole 2005; Lindqvist 2013; Lingard 2001; Pearson 2008; Szwed 2007; Takala, Pirttimaa, and Törmänen 2009) and their roles and jurisdiction is often poorly defined (e.g. Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Lindqvist et al. 2011; Magnússon, Göransson, and Nilholm 2017).

In Sweden there are two professions primarily associated with special needs and special support, namely special education coordinators (SENCOs),<sup>1</sup> and special education teachers (SETs). While the research of these groups has grown in the last few years, most of it has presented results from either surveys with standardised responses or small-scale interview

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and observation studies. There is thus a lack of research using qualitative data, where SNEs formulate their understanding of their occupational roles and challenges to them.

The aim of this article is an exploratory one, studying what issues Swedish SNEs express with relevance to the development of their jurisdiction and professionalism, in free text responses to a survey study. The analysis employs directed-qualitative content analysis and theoretical concepts from profession theory (Abbott 1988; Evetts 2003, 2013) and the following research questions:

- What jurisdictional boundaries, in terms of expertise, knowledge and practices, are found in the SNEs' responses?
- What challenges as regards jurisdiction, areas of expertise, knowledge and practices, are expressed in the responses?

This research is important for an international public as it gives an insight into the roles SNEs take on within the reportedly inclusive Swedish education system, and articulations of difficulties in their occupational roles.

## Background

SNEs have widely had difficulties establishing their roles and defining their legitimacy and jurisdiction (Abbott 2007; Cole 2005; Lingard 2001; Pearson 2008; Szwed 2007). Often, SNEs perceive their own status as low, and maintain that their mandates are neither clearly defined nor recognised (Burton and Goodman 2011; Emanuelsson 2001; Lindqvist 2013; Lindqvist et al. 2011; Rosen-Webb 2011). Research shows that SNEs often work with teaching and counselling pupils, individually or in smaller groups, rather than counselling teachers or working with organisational developments (Abbott 2007; Cole 2005; Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Klang et al. 2016; Szwed 2007). This might be due to vague descriptions of their mandates (Emanuelsson 2001; Hargreaves et al. 2007) but researchers disagree whether SNEs would benefit from more centralised definitions of their tasks and mandates (Cole 2005; Mackenzie 2007; Rosen-Webb 2011) or whether adaptation to local school contexts and needs is preferable (Lingard 2001; Szwed 2007).

As mentioned above, there are two professions primarily associated with special needs and special support in Sweden, SENCOs and SETs. Their training is on second-cycle level and requires a teacher-education degree for admission. They have separate training programmes, albeit with commonalities (Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015). SENCOs prepare for organisational development, counselling of teachers, pupils and parents, whereas SETs prepare more for teaching and work with specific medical/psychological diagnoses. These professions are considered important for schools and the quality of special educational work, their training programmes are popular and employers seek after them. However, while SENCOs and SETs are to serve different purposes, they are often viewed as interchangeable. With the exception of the specific degree ordinances (government regulations that describe the goals of the training programmes), no Swedish legislative documents mention nor define the SNEs (Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Göransson et al. 2017; SFS 2010:800; SFS 2011:688). At the time of study, there were governmental reform-plans to fold the SENCO programme into the SET programme. The plans were later aborted with reference to a need for both professions (Magnússon 2015), but the matter remains contested (SOU 2017:51). Their legal legitimacy is therefore relatively weak. Additionally, SNEs were not subject to a reform that included registration and

certification of Swedish teachers (Prop 2010/11:20) defining and restricting where teachers can work within the education system (Solbrekke and Englund 2014), requiring teachers to teach at levels corresponding to their teacher education (SFS 2011:326). As SNEs commonly work at another school level than their teacher education indicates (Magnússon, Göransson, and Nilholm 2017), this became problematic for several SNEs.

The Swedish education system is highly decentralised and much decision-making power is allocated at school level. Head teachers are responsible for evaluating pupils' need for special educational support, as well as to provide resources for it. Therefore, head teachers have a large room for interpretation special support, as well as regarding who is to provide it and how (Giota and Emanuelsson 2011; Göransson, Nilholm, and Karlsson 2011; Lindqvist 2013; Magnússon 2015). Head teachers' views on the SNEs role are important and may influence the success of the schools' organisation of special education (Heimdahl Mattson and Malmgren Hansen 2009; Lindqvist and Nilholm 2013; McLeskey and Waldron 2000) and, there are large differences between schools regarding the employment and occupational situation of SNEs (Göransson et al. 2017; Magnússon, Göransson, and Nilholm 2017; Ramberg 2013). It is even common that other staff, with low or no training in special education, does work associated with SNEs (Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Göransson et al. 2017). Thus, the jurisdiction of SNEs is neither well defined nor protected. Rather it is negotiated at the school level, where individual SNEs both adapt to and influence the organisational traditions and requirements of their superiors and co-workers (cf. Göransson et al. 2018; Klang et al. 2016).

Several studies (e.g. Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Lindqvist, Nilholm, and Almqvist 2013; Lindqvist et al. 2011; Nilholm et al. 2013) have shown that Swedish SNEs tend to hold values and perspectives different to what head teachers and teachers express. SNEs usually tend to view pupils' need for special support problems from a relational perspective (Clark, Dyson, and Millward 1998; Nilholm 2006), seeking explanations for problems in, e.g. the teaching, school organisation, and societal factors. They therefore often advocate teacher consultation or organizational development as interventions. However, teachers, head teachers, and support-teachers, more often explain the need for support from a deficit perspective (e.g. Göransson et al. 2017; Lindqvist, Nilholm, and Almqvist 2013; Lindqvist et al. 2011), i.e. as individual deficiencies, advocating psychiatric and/or medical diagnoses and interventions for the individual pupil, sometimes in separate settings. In the practice of special education, interventions and explanations from both of these perspectives appear side by side (Magnússon 2015) and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. But the consequences are that SNEs perspectives often clash with their colleagues' perspectives and that they work in organisations that expect other activities than what they have been trained for (Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Lindqvist 2013; Magnússon, Göransson, and Nilholm 2017).

## Theoretical framework

Professions can be seen as products of the increased specialisation within social services and, sometimes, governmental prioritisations (Evetts 2003). The state can establish and reform the training and tasks of particular professions, to deal with politically formulated problems – a form of top-down professionalisation. Top-down professionalisation can lead to increased standardisation of practices and external control of tasks, at the cost of tacit knowledge and professional discretion (Evetts 2013). Evetts (2013) differentiates between *organisational professionalism* implemented from above and *occupational professionalism* growing within

the profession. The prior is a discourse '*incorporating hierarchical structures of responsibility and decision-making*' (787), involving standardised procedures and controls by managers, external regulation and control. The latter emphasises collegial authority and trust from employers and clients along with common training and development of professional identities. Professions often embrace professionalism, as it can improve the status of both individual actors and the collective. However, organisational professionalism places control and power with managers (e.g. head teachers) and regulations rather than the professions in question.

We also use Abbott's (1988) concepts to explore the SNEs' role and jurisdiction within the education system. Here, the formation of a professional role is viewed as the result of struggle and negotiation of different professions striving for jurisdiction over specific work and knowledge. Jurisdiction is defined as tasks professions can claim to have exclusive knowledge of, regarding particular client groups, in particular fields of work (Abbott 1988). The professions seek jurisdictional support within formal and informal arenas. The formal arena includes *legal* claims of jurisdiction. These are the profession's efforts to receive legal protection for conducting specific activities and workplaces. Thus, jurisdictional lines are drawn by means of legislation or regulations. The informal arena constitutes the *workplace*, where negotiations and struggles over jurisdictional tasks happen. SNEs need political recognition of their jurisdiction in legislation or official regulation but they also define and negotiate their jurisdiction with other professions in the school. Often there may be a formal recognition of jurisdictional boundaries as defined in the legal arena, but organisational reality often undermines that recognition. The legal and workplace arenas are used here for the analysis of the responses.

## Method

### *Participants and data collection*

All SNEs in Sweden ( $N = 4252$ , response rate = 75%) graduated according to the degree ordinances of years 2001, 2007 and 2008 were sent a questionnaire in 2012, as a part of a total population survey concerning Swedish SNEs' education and work. Here, responses to an open-ended question in the questionnaire are analysed. The question included a space for handwritten responses and was as follows:

If there is anything more you would like to highlight regarding the special education teacher/special pedagogogue training and the relevance of it for your occupational life, or if you have any other comments, you can write them in the box below.

Overall, 1221 respondents wrote answers, (38%). The responses varied in length and quality, ranging from short remarks to minor essays. After an exploratory analysis of the written responses, 676 were selected for in depth analysis in this article. The premises for the selection of responses are clarified in the next section, data analysis.

The demographic differences between the responding SNEs that wrote replies to the question, and those who did not, are negligible. An overwhelming majority of the total population and our respondents are SENCOS, 95.8 per cent, as the SETs' training was not established until 2007. The typical respondent is a 50-year-old woman with a Swedish background. Men are underrepresented in the responding group (4 per cent compared to 7.6 per cent in the population). Approximately 80 per cent of the respondents work full time,

**Table 1.** Responses regarding the workplace.

Category	Descriptions of mission	Responses about (mis)understanding	Responses about organisational dilemmas
Subcategories:	Practically contextualised	School leadership	Colleagues/leadership expectations
	Idealised	Colleagues	Practical requirements

55 per cent work in primary schools, 12 per cent in preschools, and 10 per cent in upper secondary education. The remaining respondents work in either adult-education, primary- or upper-secondary education for pupils with developmental disabilities, centrally at municipalities, or in other areas.

### Data analysis

The analysis of the responses was conducted using theory-informed, directed-qualitative content analysis (DQCA). DQCA has the development, application, or completion of theory as a point of departure (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

The analysis followed three steps. First, a *preparatory* phase included a quality-check of responses and analyses of how respondents that wrote replies differed from the survey's responding population. Some data-reduction took place here, removing very short and/or irrelevant responses, e.g. contact information or comments on the questionnaire. Thereafter, an *initial exploratory analysis* of the responses followed, grouping responses according to their general topics, identifying 9 themes ranging from views on their education to descriptions of everyday dilemmas.

The third phase consisted of a *selection* of material for further analysis and presentation. The exploratory aim of the paper, seeking responses of relevance for the SNE's jurisdiction and professionalism, and the theoretical framework informed the selection of themes including 676 responses for further analysis. These topics regarded (1) descriptions of practical dilemmas, (2) other professions' (mis)understanding of their competence and role, (3) descriptions and comparisons of the SNEs roles and (4) responses regarding societal issues. Responses regarding, for instance, their training, were excluded from further analysis. Two overarching themes, i.e. Abbott's (1988) legal and workplace arenas of jurisdiction, were used to organise the results, to direct the theoretical analysis (cf. Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

### Results

The results are organised into two overarching themes and presented below. Several categories and subcategories were identified for each theme and quotes from responses illustrate the variation within the themes. More in-depth theoretical analysis is conducted in the discussion.

#### Responses regarding the workplace

Responses regarding the workplace were the most common type of response. Table 1 illustrates three overarching categories. The first includes descriptions of the SNEs roles and mission. The second concerns other professions' (mis)understanding of the SNEs' role, tasks

and competence. The third category regards practical issues that either led the SNEs to tasks they felt not appropriate for their jurisdiction, or other professions being given tasks belonging to the SNEs' jurisdiction.

### *Descriptions of the mission*

The first category of responses gathers responses describing the SNEs' mission and tasks. Some respondents described the SNEs' mission in idealised terms, for instance: '*SENCOs are important as a bridge between different school-cultures in the one and same school ...*'. Another example emphasises the role of SNEs as pedagogical leaders, particularly when head teachers increasingly engage with organizational and economic questions. Idealised responses often use metaphors, such as 'spider in the web' or 'attorneys' that protect and monitor the rights of pupils and parents. In those cases, the respondents seem to advocate pupil rights against the school, describing the school as having a narrow view of difference. '*I often think of the SENCO as the "pupils" union – we fight for their sake in a school where everyone is supposed to be identical.*'

More practically contextualised descriptions often emphasise particular tasks, such as counselling and early interventions, or flexibility and support:

Flexibility is important. Must be competent in several instances, consultation, teaching, pupil conversations, conversations with grown-ups [...] support teachers in difficult situations.

As there are fewer SNEs than needed in the school system, some principal organisers employ SNEs centrally and dispatch them to schools in accordance to need:

I am a centrally placed SENCO in a school administration services. My role coming from the outside with a specialist competence, is contributing to raising difficult and complicated questions [...] Coming from the outside, the situation is not as charged as for someone from within the organisation.

However, some other respondents view such solutions with scepticism:

I think the SENCO or SET who works with documentation and consultation should meet the pupils and teachers often. Preferably, be responsible for teaching and evaluation. That someone external writes intervention plans and gives teachers tips, works poorly in my experience. The advice and intervention plans are rarely followed due to lack of support/funding for support.

The tasks such as consultation and documentation are described as central to the role of the SNEs. Some responses warn about consequences of ignoring school problems, as the pupils in question '*risk criminality, unemployment and poor health*'. More solution-oriented comments suggest that increased teacher–pupil ratio may solve many of the school problems, by increasing assistance to pupils and decreasing workload for teachers, who otherwise 'risk burnout'. However, neither of these types of comments mention the SNEs as necessary. Rather they talk about general issues and, in some cases, even describe their own roles as problematic:

For me it is important, as a SENCO, to aim at working so that I'm not needed any more. In other words to contribute to the organisation in a way that the pedagogues will develop an attitude and a pedagogy that encompasses all children regardless of disability.

### *Responses about (mis)understanding*

The second category describes perceived understanding and misunderstandings among teachers and school leadership regarding the SNEs' training and role. Also, that the understanding of the difference between SETs and SENCOs, or between traditional roles of SNEs

and modern day SNEs, is limited. Responses that are more thorough explain that other professions require SETs to do traditional type of special educational interventions (following a deficit perspective), for instance, removing 'difficult' pupils from the classrooms for individual or small group teaching, rather than advising teachers or developing the organisation.

... the schools aren't aware of the SENCO's assignment. Teachers/pedagogues still believe that they should send the pupil away to receive assistance 'correcting' the pupil. They want a clinic where 'certain' difficult pupils can go to so that they themselves can take better care of the 'regular' pupils and so that they can be released from the responsibility of lacking goal fulfilment. We need stricter guidelines in the schools to be able to work as intended [original emphasis]

The words emphasised above beg the questions what 'work as intended' might be, and what the clash between 'the intended' work and the schools demands might be. Some responses describe that work as counselling and organisational development. However:

The goals for the SENCO program, the vision of the education, corresponds poorly with the expectations head teachers have for SENCOs. It can best be described as the SENCO should have just a few more teaching tricks than other teachers have. To get involved in organization and overarching questions is not requested.

The importance of leadership for what the SNEs feel to be their jurisdiction is clear. *'I was perceived almost exclusively as a SET in the beginning of my SENCO career. Since 1 ½ years we have school leadership that supports me in the SENCO role'*. Other remarks question the jurisdictional boundaries of SNEs. Such remarks are of two different types. First, there is the claim that special education is *'the education for all'*, i.e. if other school professions would have the same understanding as SNEs, many problems would never arise or be fixed by the regular teachers.

I think all teachers should get education or knowledge about children in need of support. (...) There are still several teachers that think there is only one way to learn and that those that are outside the normal should go somewhere else.

The second type is more critical of the role of the SNEs:

What I wonder now as a working SENCO is: is my occupation really relevant? [...] Aren't we the SENCOs a waste of resources? It is a complex mission where you really are the 'spider in a delicate network'. What's the use? It requires so much energy to fulfil the expectations from adult colleagues – expectations that one should be the one that 'fixes' everything.

This last comment brings us to the third category of responses, the practical issues and dilemmas that affect the role and jurisdiction of the SNEs.

### *Organisational issues and dilemmas*

Two types of responses fell under this category. First, regarding how perceived misunderstanding among colleagues and school leaders led to expectations that forced the SNEs to do tasks they do not view as within their jurisdiction. The other type describes practical dilemmas that arise within the organisation rather than as consequences of other professions' expectations or demands.

The first type of comments regards the head teachers' control over the tasks SNEs is given: *'the head teacher controls our work assignments to a high degree. It can be a lot of assignments and new constantly appear'*. Here the jurisdictional issue in question regards boundaries, i.e. that the SNEs are assigned tasks that they do not feel belong to their jurisdiction, for instance

**Table 2.** Responses regarding the legal arena.

Category:	Political responses	The SNEs' training programmes	Official recognition of competence/jurisdiction
Subcategories:	Political critique	Both programmes are needed More differentiation within the programmes is needed Only one programme is needed	The necessity of certification The revoking of competence

serving 'as "running-substitute" in different classrooms when the teacher was absent', tasks taking up time and resources that could be used more efficiently. For instance:

[...] my position was used to fill in applications for special funding, which takes a lot of time. We rarely receive money for support interventions, such as pupil assistants, despite existing pedagogical, psychological, social and medical reasons [...] I love my work and my pupils, but it doesn't feel like the politicians want to invest in the pupils, only set higher demands on the schools. Less money and time along with more responsibilities and demands do not add up.

Scarcity of resources is often mentioned, for instance, '*Few schools have the possibility to employ both SENCO and SET*'. That is likely to add to the necessity of taking on tasks that the schools want/need done, rather than SNEs having clearly defined roles.

Another result of lacking resources is that other professions tread into the jurisdiction of SNEs, despite lacking the expertise SNEs view as necessary. '*My experience was that the employer felt SENCOS were little too expensive [...] and employed preschool teachers with some experience of special education instead*'.

These issues lead to the question as to whether the SNE training prepares them for the work required. Some respondents believe that is not the case, and suggest redefining the professional groups with the tasks as a starting point.

I believe that the training led to an occupational role that does not exist in practice. The teachers want us to work as SETs. There should be SETs, perhaps titled SENCO that could work more on individual level. [...] should be a new profession called 'development pedagogues'. They should work in teams, close to the school leadership, with school development, including special education.

### Responses regarding the legal arena

Several responses fell under the legal arena. As Table 2 illustrates, these comments belonged to three categories, one containing political responses, one category regarding SENCO and SET training, and one containing responses about the recognition of competence – or the lack thereof.

#### Political responses

Most of the political comments are critical towards the political discourse on education or recent reforms and thus not necessarily about the profession per se. Some regard macro-political organisation of the education system, for instance: '*the state should take over the primary education to secure equity*'. Other comments aim at the principal organisers, describing a de-prioritisation of the ideal of providing all pupils according to need while '*the municipality just chases its budget*'.

A different critique concerns the tasks of SETs and SENCOS. These responses partially explain the confusion of their roles with the reforms of SNE training programmes as well as

micro-political demands that have driven the development of the teacher role towards new tasks: *'That the different (education) programmes have repeatedly been replaced with the other adds to [...] a weaker occupational role'*. The political critique also regards discursive issues. For instance,

The SENCO role in the system is unclear. It assumes a rhetoric that the school is a reflecting system that works as a goal- and result-oriented steering system, which I don't feel the school is. Evaluations and analyses are very shallow, goals are imprecise.

Some of the political responses are general, claiming for instance that the authorities have started SNE training that fits poorly with how schooling is organised and conceptualised. Such critique observes a gap between legislative intentions expressed in policy and the realities of practice.

Other respondents emphasise organisational dilemmas of education as results of political decisions and criticise over-reliance on reforms as solutions to educational problems.

There is no demand on the political level for educated SENCOs that work for preschools. Therefore, there are no positions that can be offered within a reasonable budget-basis for head teachers/preschool leaders that realise the importance of our competence and the blaring need within the preschool. [...] someone must do something else than just rewrite the curriculum.

### *The SNEs training programmes*

At the time of data gathering, the government planned to discontinue SENCO training programmes and create a new track within the SET training that would focus on organisational development. These plans are mentioned in responses of three types. First, there are comments that argue for the continued coexistence of the two programmes based on the needs in the schools. For instance: *'I think it is very important that the SENCO education survives. Both SENCOs and SETs are needed'*.

Second, their arguments for – and against – differentiated jurisdiction based on prior education. The problem regards the quality of advice and work the individual practitioners can give if their prior education was for a different level of schooling.

The SET/SENCO-degree should only allow work within the primary school if the former education is for primary school. Different universities/colleges have expressed this differently which means that the municipalities don't understand the difference and view a SENCO as a SENCO even if the prior education was to be a leisure-pedagogue or preschool teacher.

Third, there are comments that claim and argue that only one profession is needed. These two latter forms of responses express an internal struggle for jurisdiction – or a jurisdictional cannibalism. These are sometimes quite explicit, mentioning one profession as more important. Other responses are more practically oriented suggesting that as *'the schools usually can't afford both a SET and a SENCO, the programmes should be "kneaded together" into one'*.

There were also more comprehensive responses, giving arguments for the differences and appropriate roles of the different professions. Here are two examples, the first response arguing for a stronger SET role in school development:

The SET term should be substituted. The school development-part is not utilised. The head teachers have no knowledge about the SETs' competence. They still live in the old SET role. They still believe, for instance, that only SENCOs have knowledge about school development.

The latter type of response argues against SETs in the preschools as they are too oriented to individual children and school topics, and here, emphasises SENCO knowledge about school development.

I think the SENCO role is extremely important both in preschool and in schools. In the preschool there is NO place for SETs as we do not work individually with the child but it is pedagogues that need guidance/counselling to learn more about treatment, theories on learning, educational strategies, modern child psychology etc.

The conflicting images here concern jurisdiction in terms of roles and tasks. In the prior case, the SETs want school development competence recognised whereas the latter emphasises the same competences as specific for SENCOs.

### *Responses about official recognition of competence*

As mentioned above, a certification reform, including a delimitation of where teachers work in the system, was implemented shortly before the survey was sent out. Several respondents were positive towards certification:

The certification of teachers is a great improvement. Uneducated have sat on important posts for much too long, to the children's disadvantage naturally. The children and parents should be guaranteed that they receive teaching from competent and educated pedagogues.

However, critical comments discuss the practical implications of the certification for SNEs' future careers. In particular, respondents expressed concerns that the certification process would revoke their rights and competences, making them undesirable to employers and opening the SNEs' jurisdiction to other professions.

In the future, I will not get to teach in the primary school because I am not a primary school teacher, despite having worked for several years and taken a lot of further training within special education. On the other hand, a newly graduated primary school teacher can work with special education, which I feel is wrong.

Some of the respondents suggested that the problems could be fixed by getting *'the universities to make a mark in "our" favour towards to the current education politics and regarding the certification'*. Another suggestion was that when the political currents called for different competences, additional courses and programmes could be offered to those that had read older programmes, an approach that would recognise their previous competences. The government, in addition to some alleviations in the legislative demands for appropriate backgrounds for SNEs, later implemented a variant of this last suggestion.

## **Discussion**

This article explores what issues special needs educators express regarding their jurisdiction and professionalism in free text responses to a questionnaire. The theoretical concepts were derived from Abbott's (1988) concept of jurisdiction, Evetts (2013) notions of professionalism, and special educational perspectives. We will now shortly discuss our results in relation to prior research and the theoretical framework and draw some conclusions. Finally, some reflections around the limitations of the study and future recommendations follow.

Metaphors such as the 'attorney' or 'a spider in the web' often appear in our data to describe the SNE role. The metaphors express that SNEs should encompass several different tasks, and protect the interests of the pupils. They often mention counselling of teachers and organisational development as appropriate tasks. Less appropriate tasks are also

mentioned, for instance substituting for teachers, excessive administrative work, or being a 'fixer' of any arising problems. This is in line with previous research (e.g. Abbott 2007; Cole 2005; Klang et al. 2016; Pearson 2008). Some of the responses argue that SNEs are redundant and argue for aiming to dismantle the need for their services, for instance by increasing teacher and head teacher knowledge of special education. Such low confidence of the profession resonates with results from prior research (Burton and Goodman 2011; Rosen-Webb 2011).

The challenges the SNEs express regarding their occupational roles and jurisdiction are on several levels. Descriptions of clashes with colleagues regard the tasks SNEs do, often due to different understandings of the nature of the need of special support and the interventions considered appropriate (c.f. Nilholm 2006). Prior research (e.g. Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Lindqvist 2013) shows that SNEs generally express similar views and values when explaining of need for special support interventions, usually focusing on organisation and teaching and recommending interventions on those levels – in line with the relational perspective. However, these views often clash with the views of other professions within the schools (Lindqvist et al. 2011; Magnússon, Göransson, and Nilholm 2017), who often view the pupils as problematic – in line with the deficit perspective (cf. Abbott 2007; Cole 2005).

The variation of the tasks mentioned in our responses implies that SNEs fulfil a broad range of requirements within the school system and that the requirements are highly contextualised and negotiated (Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Göransson et al. 2018; Klang et al. 2016). It is clearly a problem for the professional status of the SNEs that they perform tasks they view as inappropriate, and that they risk other professions taking over their jurisdiction (Göransson et al. 2017).

Head teachers are legally responsible for provision of special support, and decisions on how to administer resources and delegate tasks. Our respondents emphasise the importance of head teachers' understanding and support (cf. Heimdahl Mattson and Malmgren Hansen 2009; Lindqvist and Nilholm 2013; McLeskey and Waldron 2000). However, Göransson et al. (2017) assert that few head teachers are aware of the existence or contents of the SNEs' degree ordinances. As head teachers are the 'managers' of the schools, we can also understand this problem as the product of a clash between organisational and occupational professionalism (Evetts 2013). The schools' hierarchical organisation of authority places the decision-making above the professions. The SNEs responses can be seen as expressing values more in line with occupational professionalism where the profession has autonomy and control.

The lack of legal definitions and support of SNE jurisdiction is an additional problem. Our results indicate that, while many SNEs welcome the certification of teachers, complications regarding the certification of SNEs may have contributed to an indirect de-legitimisation. When confronted with the informal arena of workplace, the SNEs' roles are often adapted to the organisation's needs and requirements. These requirements are often based upon the deficit perspective (cf. Lindqvist et al. 2011) and/or, according to our results, outdated or misinformed ideas about the SNE training. That SNEs still carry out these tasks is perhaps due to that SNEs have a weak position to negotiate their jurisdiction, and as they are in some cases viewed as expensive resources (Magnússon, Göransson, and Nilholm 2017; Ramberg 2013), they can be replaced with cheaper staff without formal training (Göransson et al. 2017). Thus, SNEs may have difficulties in workplace negotiations.

The Swedish SNEs were established to mend politically defined problems, rather than from within a profession or organisations in which they work (Evetts 2013). The state formally constructs the training programmes, defines the objectives in policy, and controls both the means and ends of the professionals' work. In that sense, the SNEs have an additional weakness in their position within their organisations, as the state's definition of their jurisdiction and legitimacy is vague and often unknown (Göransson et al. 2017; Lindqvist 2013). Again, the challenges are partly due to a professionalisation from above meeting an organisational discourse of professionalism (Evetts 2013). As the SNEs have neither autonomy nor control of their tasks, the lack of external regulation, which is important in organisational professionalism, adds to their exposure.

Viewing schools as systems of professions (Abbott 1988) allows for an understanding of the SNE jurisdiction as results of negotiations and struggle with other professions. This organisational fluidity leads to a systemic adaptation of the professionals' roles and tasks. Additionally, the absence of legal jurisdiction, both in terms of legal regulation and the absence of SNE certification, creates problems. Although problematic (Solbrekke and Englund 2014), the certification gave teachers more clearly defined jurisdiction. Some certification might provide SNEs tools to protect their jurisdiction, at least within the logic of organisational professionalism of the schools (Evetts 2013). However, the fluidity of these professions might also be their strength. Adapting to the needs addressed might allow the individual professionals more power to define the problems at hand, whereas a particular definition risks reducing their mobility and increasing standardisation and external control at the expense of tacit knowledge and autonomy.

This is an explorative study of large data material. While we have a large scope of qualitative responses, utilising data from a total population survey with high response rates, we make no claims of generalisation to the total population of SNEs or their working situations. However, the results can help nuance to our understanding of the jurisdictional challenges facing SNEs in general and Swedish SNEs in particular. Our results, in combination with previous research, serve to illustrate variations of experiences and challenges that SNEs face, the complexity of practical manifestations of jurisdiction and professionalism. Future research should attend to these variations of practice and experience to both illustrate the complexity of schooling, often forgotten in debates about education, and to find positive examples of good practice.

## Note

1. The term in Swedish translates to 'special pedagogue'. However, the British term SENCO allows comparisons of training; roles and work in an international context (see also Abbott 2007; Cole 2005; Lindqvist 2013; Szwed 2007).

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