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# Power and inclusion. German and Swedish special educators' roles and work in inclusive schools

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparative interview study ( $N = 45$ ) with Swedish and German special educators working in inclusive school settings in order to gain an understanding of how inclusive education is operationalized by the provision of special education needs (SEN) support; and how both aspects are conditioned by nation-specific particularities. Drawing on our interview analyses, we suggest an analytical device for examining and comparing the provision of SEN support in school organizations from a comparative perspective. The device is a 9-dimensional matrix, understanding the phenomenon in terms of three levels (individual, group, organizational) related to three domains (educational, social, administrative). Employing this matrix, we explain national differences in operationalizing inclusive schools. Compared with Germany, in Sweden, special educators have much more power in the inclusive school, and significantly more important decisions regarding SEN are made at an organizational level, and not only regarding individual students in need of special support.

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Inclusion; special educators; power; comparison; professionalism

## Introduction

Including children with special needs in compulsory education is a widely-discussed issue in various national contexts, especially concerning how to guarantee every child a right to education. At a policy level, this issue is a self-evident part of discourses on education and schooling in democratic societies. There remain, however, significant challenges. Tetler (2015) considers that there has been far more focus on the reasons for inclusion than on how inclusion can be implemented. This is also an apt description of the phenomenon in question and the research that has emerged around it. An ideological overload has likely contributed to this situation. It isn't easy to produce research when the solution appears to be known in advance. This might lead to a disconnect between neatly formulated policy documents and 'messy' practices in complex micro-political organizations such as schools.

Research that relies too much on examining policies – and research on inclusion does, unfortunately, exhibit this tendency – may lead to methodological nationalism, meaning that the various levels of public education are placed in the background. Empirical, e.g., national, cases are seen as having a natural unity with no variation and fragmentation evident among policy documents

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and policymakers (Wermke & Proitz, 2019; Ainscow, 2020). When a theoretical perspective on a complex phenomenon such as “doing inclusion” remains one-dimensional, theorization may be restricted to the level of critique rather than explicating practice and why such practice is as it is (Ainscow, 2016). Ainscow (2020) presents the complexity of inclusion due to the necessity of multiple stakeholders and rationales to make a school for all possible. He suggests an ‘ecology of equity’ model to communicate and understand this complexity. The notion of “ecologies” can be used in comparative approaches to display context-specific configurations of a possible school for all.

This is the point from which the article at hand commences. It focuses on operationalizing inclusion in contingent education practices in various national contexts by promoting the scientific value of a comparative methodology. This enables us to illuminate the relation between a particular context, which can change over time, space, or concerning levels within the same system, and a specific professional practice and belief.

*This article will investigate and compare German and Swedish special educators’ (SE) perspectives on working with children with special needs in regular that means inclusive schools. We aim to illuminate different ways of organizing the inclusion work of special educators concerning factors such as the institutionalized role of special educators in two national contexts.*

Due to significant similarities and differences between both school systems, a focus on the national contexts of Sweden and Germany is especially interesting. Both national cases share significant similarities as democratic, Western, and meritocratic school systems, and both aim to fulfil the Salamanca declaration from 1994 as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) from 2006, both having the ambition to achieve a genuinely inclusive school and society for all. Historically, the education systems in Sweden and Germany have similar roots, but they have developed very differently over the last decades (Barow & Östlund, 2020). The Swedish comprehensive school system, long characterized by a decreasing number of special schools, is contrasted by an ability-tracked school with a highly developed special school system in Germany.

## **Research overview: the multiple and ambiguous roles of special educators in inclusive schools from an international perspective**

In the course of the twenty-first century, there has not been an agreement in national and international contexts on the most critical tasks of special education professions in school inclusion (Labhart, 2019; Mathews et al., 2017; Billingsley et al., 2009; Magnússon & Göransson, 2019; Magnússon et al., 2019; Hillenbrand et al., 2013; Szwed, 2007; Wermke et al., *forthcoming*). The work of special educators varies both within and across countries, even historically (Göransson et al., 2015; 2017; Klang et al., 2017). In this brief research review, we focus on the various roles and tasks special educators can have in inclusive schools.

Four tasks of special educators in inclusive settings can be identified. First, special educators devote much of their time to *instruction* in various forms. The current role of the special educator has indeed turned away from a knowledge base of highly specialized programs, techniques, as well as strategies and changed to assist many students as well as regular colleagues in the general classroom for some time each day (Chilla, 2012; Grummt, 2019; Klang et al., 2017; Moser, 2014; Paloniemi et al., 2023; Sundqvist & Hannås, 2021; Wermke et al., *forthcoming*). Although research indicates that consultation with mainstream staff, as well as organizational development, is becoming more common in the special education profession, teaching/intensively supporting students, individually or in groups, is still quite common in many countries (See, for example, Dietze et al., 2023; Göransson et al., 2015; Klang et al., 2017; Sundqvist et al., 2021).

The next main task includes *guidance and support* (Klang et al., 2017; Mathews et al., 2017; Cameron et al., 2018). Special educators are increasingly seen as consultants in mainstream schools. According to Klang et al. (2017), this activity requires, among other things, cultivating strong working relationships with various internal and external stakeholders of the school, who now have equal

responsibility for the students and must also work with general classroom teachers. This role also includes collaborating in general education and meeting broader special needs, thereby integrating skills such as differentiated instruction, monitoring student progress, and assessment and communication into the special educator's remit (Klang et al., 2017).

Along with *assessment, diagnostics, and documentation*, there is also another field of responsibility for special educators (Kreis et al., 2014). This includes designing and evaluating interventions at all levels (Cameron et al., 2018), creating support plans (Moser, 2014; Dietze et al., 2023; Klang et al., 2017), specific learning status surveys, and administrative tasks. Interestingly, Cameron and Lindqvist (2014) note the increased influence of special educators in the field of content and resources for children with special needs as a result. This also entails significant concerns about the increasing bureaucratic work for special education teachers in inclusive settings (Wermke et al., *forthcoming*; Magnússon, 2015).

The final and most significant field of work for developing an inclusive school culture is *school improvement*. To achieve this goal, according to Pearson et al. (2015), special educators must move from management responsibilities associated with supervision and coordination to strategic school development, taking an active role in the school leadership team and helping to design and implement goals for change. Given this plethora of responsibilities and competencies under the primacy of the inclusion requirement, driven by various organizational systems and structural conditions, different ways of shaping the special education professional role emerge (Hinz, 2013; Lütje-Klose & Neumann, 2018).

In various configurations, the described tasks can be summarized into various task profiles, providing insight into how the work of special educators is organized in the inclusive school. Lütje-Klose and Neumann (2018), following Hillenbrand et al. (2013) and Heinrich et al. (2014), distinguish between three different task profiles SE can have. The first relates to *personalized additive services*. Here, SEs provide individual and group-related support measures mainly or exclusively in external differentiation. This results in a division of labor, whereby the general teacher is primarily responsible for the students without special needs, and the students with special needs often fall entirely under the responsibility of the special educator (Lütje-Klose & Neumann, 2018). Thus, support for individual students can be assumed to be something 'additional' and, according to Klemm (2020), this leads to a so-called "labeling-resource dilemma." Meaning no adjustments and preventive measures for the whole class are carried out, whereby at the same time, the classification of students needing support increases to secure (personnel) resources. These strongly individualized support measures can be effective when there is a great need. Still, they are only partially effective due to the lack of feedback on the regular lessons and entail the risk of stigmatization (Haas, 2012).

Distinct from the task profile mentioned above are the two configurations that result from *institutionalized system-related services* and which thus shift the focus from remote support. In these contexts, Reiser (1998) distinguishes between SEs working as "co-teachers," whereby special needs education is practiced through double staffing in the classroom. Co-teaching in common lessons is thus done on an equal basis, where the different actors (special educators and general teachers) embody experts in different fields. On the other hand, the special education resource (person) is system-related since they are considered "part of the staff and is not only used for additive support of individual students" (Reiser, 1998). This kind of task profile is eventually one of the most prominent in inclusion work in schools. However, it still happens rarely in the practice of schools in Europe today (see, for example, Dietze et al., 2023; Sundqvist et al., 2021; Johansson et al., 2021).

The second task profile, also related to the institutionalized system-related service, deals with special educational diagnostics, support planning, and consultation. Here, SEs no longer work specifically close to children but rather for the children (Kearns, 2005). As a result, direct guidance in the classroom recedes into the background. Instead, the special education teacher tries to activate the knowledge of internal or external stakeholders (Reiser, 1998). On the one hand, this type of SEN support reduces the possible stigmatization due to a diagnosis. On the other hand, it also prevents

the often desired ‘direct’ intervention or helps from regular teachers (Lütje-Klose & Neumann, 2018).

In conclusion, we can see in this brief research review that special educator work is a rich and highly complex field. Emphasizing various profiles shows how SEN support can be organized in different ways, i.e., the inclusive school appears to be contingent, depending on at least spatial factors. This is the argument of the article at hand. Various nation-specific particularities relate to different power relations in the inclusive schools related to possible inclusive tasks and task profiles.

### **Inclusion in context: Germany and Sweden**

To understand the contingency of practice concerning its contextual framing in the inclusive school, we will describe the most significant features of the German and Swedish public school systems. Germany presents an ability-tracked school with an extensive system of special schools for various special educational needs. There are up to 10 different types of special schools connected to disability. German school systems can be characterized as centralized at a federated state level (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). School supervision is carried out by the authorities of the state school administration. The centralized nature of Germany’s states is also mirrored in education finance: 80% of education spending is generally financed by the Länder and 15% by the municipalities. As such, a distinction is made between internal and external school responsibilities. The state governments are responsible for internal school matters, such as salaries and supplies for teaching staff and matters relating to the curriculum. In contrast, the municipalities or school boards are responsible for external school matters, such as the maintenance and construction of the school, the provision of sufficient schooling, and the salaries of non-teaching staff. A significant feature of the German system is its sophisticated centralized, and hierarchical bureaucracy, which builds on many formal lines of authority and decision-making processes (Wermke & Proitz, 2021).

In the German case, over 4% of the overall student population attends special schools (Barow & Östlund, 2020). Moreover, special schools have a strong position secured by a historically influential SE profession. A critical factor in the continued growth of special education is the profession’s authority concerning “learning disability” and the discourse that continues to legitimately classify pupils as “learning disabled.” Parents are hardly involved in SEN assessment, and intelligence tests play a significant role (Barow & Östlund, 2019). The task profile of special educators in inclusive settings represented in Germany is very complex. According to Moser (2014), this includes “activities in the following order: in-school collaboration (90%), individual support, classroom teaching, and counseling. [Followed by] diagnostics, external collaboration, and administrative tasks” (Moser, 2014, p. 102; also Lütje-Klose & Neumann, 2015, 2018).

Sweden presents a comprehensive school system, educating its children from K-12 in a single comprehensive school type. National responsibility for the education system lies with the Swedish parliament and government. However, today, the Swedish school system presents a decentralized governance regime. From the 1990s onward, a series of reforms were enacted that profoundly changed the educational landscape in Sweden. The far-reaching decentralization reforms that shaped the Swedish education system in the 1980s and 1990s led to a highly marketized system. The resulting competition between schools, including the established “education vouchers” provided to each student to finance their schooling, encouraged parents to make individual school choices and ultimately led to the additional expansion of private schools. Since the middle of the 2000s, we have seen in Sweden an ongoing re-centralization wave (Wermke & Forsberg, 2017). Consequently, several re-centralization and re-regulation programs have been launched and implemented since the early 2000s. For instance, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI), which regularly inspects and controls public and private school actors, was founded in 2008, providing increased opportunities for state injunctions and imposition of fines at the local municipal level (Rönneberg, 2011). The SSI monitors strictly, if and how the needs of students in need of special support are followed up. The education act of Sweden from 2011 has seven more strengthened the rights of students to

get special support. Moreover, each regular school is supposed to have access to appropriate special education and student health competences.

According to the Swedish Education Act, special education support should be provided in regular schools (Barow & Östlund, 2020). In Sweden, approximately 1% of all students attend special schools for pupils with intellectual disabilities (*särskola*). A little more than another 1% receive support in special classes (*särskild undervisningsgrupp*). A few students attend state-run schools for children who are blind, deaf, or have severe speech impediments. According to the Swedish Education Act, special education support should be provided in regular schools (*ibid.*). Consequently, most Swedish SEs work in inclusive settings, in regular schools. Regarding research, Swedish special educators often provide individualized support, mainly in the form of small groups (Jortveit et al., 2020; Göransson et al., 2017; Klang et al., 2017; Magnússon & Göransson, 2019), although in recent years the focus has increasingly moved toward advisory work, school development, and promoting inclusive learning environments (Cameron et al., 2018; Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014; Cameron et al., 2012).

## Methodology

In our study, we employ a comparative methodology that will enable us to illuminate the relation of practices in inclusive schools and various context-specific particularities. The latter can change over time and differ across locations. As with all practices in the social world, we assume the practice of inclusion is highly contingent (Wermke et al., 2020), meaning that there are differing perspectives on the phenomenon and its implementation, which cannot be easily categorized as right or wrong. A common-sense definition is that something could have happened differently or be otherwise (Luhmann, 2002). However, contingency means not simply infinite possibilities but a specified infinity in which something is neither necessary nor impossible but is a natural alternative (Makropoulos, 2004). Consequently, contingency is about understanding available alternatives, facilitating understanding of the complex possibility structures, and the fluid construction of this reasoning (Kauko & Wermke, 2018).

Simply put, such a “contingency” perspective, put forward by a comparative approach, might help us detach the issue of inclusion from those mentioned above ideological and normative overload. The ambition or philosophical inclination towards fairness and equity for all children is not open to any doubt—the *why* of inclusion is quite clear. However, the path to inclusion might differ, depending on *whom* you ask and *where*. Knowledge about the nation, municipality, school, or profession-specific ambitions and beliefs can increase the understanding of all inclusion dilemmas. A contingency perspective might also ease the pressure on the professionals working toward inclusion. As with doing education in general, inclusion requires a certain amount of discretion to adjust to the particular contexts and their natures (Wermke et al., 2020).

For the work presented in this article, we interviewed 20 Swedish SEs<sup>1</sup> and 25 German SEs, all working in inclusive school settings. All interviewees were experienced and fully educated special educators. All had deep experience working in inclusive school settings. Since this article only pays attention to the aggregated perspective of SE in both countries, variables other than country are not reported. The duration of the interviews varied between 40 and 80 min. All interviews

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<sup>1</sup>In Sweden, there are actually two occupational groups with SEN responsibility. These groups have, in the inclusive school, similar or equivalent tasks (Göransson et al., 2015). Since we do not separate these groups, we will provide a distinction of their background. For the sake of clarification, one is for SEN teachers (*speciallärare*), and the other is for Special educators (*specialpedagoger*). The education of both is to some extent very similar, as they are both three-term postgraduate education programs (90 credits), and both require previous training as a preschool teacher or a regular teacher. Furthermore, both take place at specific universities in Sweden that have been authorised by the government to issue those degrees (Göransson et al., 2015; Göransson et al., 2016). Both educational paths also show a big overlap regarding their content, even though they also differ. In a nutshell, the education of Special educators focuses more on the organisation of schooling and learning environment which enables them to work for the students. The education of SEN teachers, in contrast, focuses more on individual-centred learning goals which enables them to work with the students (Göransson et al., 2015).

were conducted via the communication program Zoom. Our interview questions, related to (1) the most common work tasks and roles of SE in inclusive schools (e.g., *What are the main tasks of special educators in your school?*); (2) practices of special educational need assessment and provision (e.g., *What happens, when it is observed that a particular student is at risk? What determines SEN provision in your school?*); (3) relation of SE to others in the inclusive school, such as teachers and members of the school management (e.g., *Can you describe your relation to regular classroom teachers? How does the school management support your work?*).

The interviews were conducted by the authors of this paper and two students in the special educators' native languages (Swedish and German), then transcribed and translated into Swedish (the common language of the project group). Afterward, the interview transcripts were analyzed following a deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic areas or patterns were identified that underlie this qualitative data. This form of qualitative analysis is not bound to any specific theory. Furthermore, this procedure allowed patterns to be traced across the complete data set, and the interviews could be analyzed deductively and inductively. The program Nvivo 12 was used then used to organize technically and the transcripts. To increase the reliability of our results, at least two members of our group performed the inductive coding work in varying combinations. With such means, we aimed to increase the study's trustworthiness. However, we want to emphasize that the article's first and foremost aim is the illustration of how special educator interrelation with contextual conditions *can* be. The study at hand is qualitative with the ambition to make analytical generalizations on the nature of special educator professions from a comparative perspective, with this making conceptual contributions that could be validated in further empirical studies at scale. The thematic pattern we have found is presented in the result section as an analytical matrix. Our quality measures are trustworthiness and coherence (Erickson, 1986) because other interpretations of the data are possible. Relating similar citations from our material to our matrix and our analyses in the text body aims to produce coherence in our presentation and, thereby, the trustworthiness of our reasoning.

This article builds on adult persons' information that do not cover sensitive dimensions such as ethnic background, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, union membership, health, sex life or orientation, or biometric information. We have not collected pictures or videos of persons. Moreover, there was no economic ambition in collecting background information regarding participants' professional lives. For these reasons, there was no ethical vetting necessary for the data collection in relation to the studies underlying this paper. For the German data, however, the data collection builds on a permit of the department of cultural affairs in the German federal state of Baden-Württemberg. All empirical studies in schools in Germany require official approval. Moreover, data from this paper is archived according to archival legislation on research data. Thus, we follow the European data security law (GDPR) manifested in the data management plan of our university.

## **Working with inclusion from German and Swedish Special educators' perspective**

Understanding and describing the multidimensionality in working with inclusion.

From our special educators' perspectives, inclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon. Based on our dataset, we argue for understanding the operationalization of inclusion alongside different levels and domains. This section presents a multidimensional matrix building on our thematic analyses.

The multidimensionality of inclusion enables the interviewed special educators to move or act simultaneously at either one or even at several levels. —the individual (student), group (classroom/lesson), and school level. At the individual level, all aspects relevant to inclusion associated with the individual are discussed. The group level, however, deals with aspects of inclusion in the classroom or immediate lessons, whereas the school level represents the individual school as an arena. Furthermore, special educators act in different domains or areas dealing with inclusive

practices. These are the educational, social, and administrative domains. In the educational domain, special educators deal with activities and responsibilities associated with teaching and learning. The social domain claims all interactions with the teaching staff, parents, or students. Lastly, the administrative domain handles administrative activities. Figure 1 summarizes and illustrates the multidimensionality of inclusion work of special educators.

Inclusion can be understood and explained in relation to various dimensions related to each other, in the levels as well as domains. The interviews revealed a large intersection of significant factors for shaping inclusive practices and largely determined them.

As for the pedagogical domain, on an individual level, the special educators, for instance, remarked that this was “*adjusting worksheets or examinations for my children*” (German SE) or “*supporting and working with students during lessons either inside or outside the classroom*” (Swedish SE). Considering the group level, comments such as “*with one colleague I am trying to team-teach, the other ones either want me to stay in the classroom supporting him/her or take my student out and do separate schooling*” (German SE) emerged. A characteristic remark from the administrative domain at the school level might be, “*every school is obligated by law to have the SE competence available. However, it is up to the principal to decide if you work as a special teacher or a special pedagogue. Resulting in different tasks – do I have to train teachers or not.*” (Swedish SE). In the German context, it might be, “*I have many meetings with different colleagues discussing how to implement inclusion in his/her class. With everyone, it is different since inclusion is not clearly defined.*” (German SE). This last statement can be assigned to the social domain at the classroom level.

Since special educators work at the different levels and domains in which inclusion is practiced, their profession is necessarily affected. We develop this further below.

### Special educators’ roles and power in the inclusive school

It becomes apparent that this multiplicity of roles is very much related to the work of German special educators only at the classroom level. A German special education teacher emphasizes this:

Domain	Educational Domain	Social Domain	Administrative Domain
Level			
Individual level (student)	<p>“Depending on how much time I get for the student I adapt his/her material for other classes as well. But mostly I do not have the time.” (German SE)</p> <p>“Some of my students can work mostly with the class and I am just there to support, the others need more one-on-one during lessons.” (Swedish SE)</p>	<p>“Some teachers find my student disruptive, that’s why I take them outside.” (German SE)</p> <p>“Some students feel overwhelmed in the whole class and therefore cannot concentrate. That’s why I take them outside.” (Swedish SE)</p>	<p>“Some schools manage to group students so I can bundle my weekly hours and the students get more time overall. However sometimes they are spread out in three or four class levels from which I have to collect them first.” (German SE)</p> <p>“If a student reaches the third level, the action plan (IEP) comes to into play.” (Swedish SE)</p>
Group level (classroom/lesson)	<p>“With one teacher I team-teach, the other I support in the classroom, and with some teachers I take my child out of the class. [...] Some teachers want my advice on lesson material and even prepare some for my students but some only depend on my material for those students and will not give me a heads up on what they are about to teach.” (German SE)</p> <p>“If I have a student in class who is currently having a rough time concentrating/learning etc. – no matter what reason – I take him/her with me as well.” (Swedish SE)</p>	<p>“Sometimes you get invited to a parental interview, sometimes not.” (German SE)</p> <p>“With some colleagues who are in challenging situations with students, I get together in addition to the weekly meetings.” (Swedish SE)</p>	<p>“It is very rare that my colleagues (regular teachers) want to go on a voluntary training with me. Probably because they would need a substitute teacher and because they see no point in it. Either way the school doesn’t oblige them even though it is so useful.” (German SE)</p> <p>“As a special teacher you always do the grading together with the regular teacher since both parties are equally involved.” (Swedish SE)</p>
School level	<p>“We have to do quite a lot of weekly plan work with our assigned students. So the children are relatively free with what and how they want to work.” (German SE)</p> <p>“As a special pedagogue you mostly train the teachers and work with school development” (Swedish SE)</p>	<p>“We have found a good solution for communication in my school. When someone needs me he/she puts a bracket on the desired period on my timetable.” (German SE)</p> <p>“We also have our daily get together with the entire staff to plan things out. All teachers and SEs.” (Swedish SE)</p>	<p>“Sometimes I have to switch my disability focus i.e. I do support children with needs I have no education for” (German SE)</p> <p>“It is crazy even though I haven’t studied English as a subject, I now have to teach English to my assigned children in some classes. How? I am not good at it.” (Swedish SE)</p>

Figure 1. The multidimensionality of inclusion operationalization.

Inclusion is currently taking place without anything having been defined. There is nothing concrete yet, and nothing has been created. Each school can do that for itself. But also, within the school, there are too many different visions. We need a unified concept after everyone has to implement inclusion. (German SE)

This is because in Germany, funding for inclusion is distributed on a person-by-person basis, which ties the German special educator to a specific individual. This individual is again tied to most (subject) teachers who often share a different vision of inclusion and its practice. Due to the need for a systematic approach, there needs to be a uniform or structured use of special education competence for inclusion in Germany. German special educators in this study mainly not working in an “expert” or “specialist” “role” (Kearns, 2005). Our study shows that this specific role is mainly taken because of the limited time available – “[...] I have a certain number of hours, and it's not set very high [...]; sitting in class with every child [would not be beneficial]” (German SE).

However, even the Swedish SEs take on this role quite frequently since Sweden's SEs traditionally work under the exceptional educational understanding of “personalized additive service provision” and are thus considered “specialists” or “experts.”

However as described above, internationally, recent studies have identified a shift toward the consultant task profile and away from the specialist one. This change cannot be noted clearly in the German case, even though some tasks such as adaptation, assessment of learning, and bureaucratic work can be identified in all interviews. This shift became apparent in the Swedish data since a group of special educators is trained for such organizational and school improvement tasks and for consulting internal and external stakeholders (Magnússon & Göransson, 2019).

Tasks related to co-teaching appear in Germany since joint-teaching with the entire class is the goal all parties involved strive for. Nevertheless, the coexistence of different forms of the term co-teaching illustrates that different concepts could fall under the same name. As such, when German special educators refer to working next to the class teacher, they often do not teach in teams but attend the lesson without participating directly in the teaching and are assigned to support “his/her” student if necessary. According to the interviews on the part of the Swedish SE, this role is practiced only in very exceptional cases by the special teachers, mainly if the students to be assisted attend lower grades. In previous studies, this task profile has rarely appeared or not. The same applies to tasks related to school improvement for German special educators. Such are present in previous studies or, indeed, in this study. In Sweden, however, such tasks can be formally realized by the special educator specializing in organizational development.

Our study identified another task profile role based on comparing the two countries. It is identifiable within the Swedish data but utterly absent in German. Swedish special educators have an undisputed leadership role in inclusive schools. This is evident from the way they speak. German special educators communicate in a much more defensive way, referring to themselves as “*the teacher sitting near the radiator waiting*.” In contrast, Swedish special educators refer to themselves as the “*boss*.” Consequently, the Swedish special educator has more discretion in deciding how to work or not work than in Germany, where their role is more dependent on the regular teachers and the special educator's hourly workload. This is not surprising since the Swedish special educators are firmly anchored within the individual school, at the school level, and are certainly more present. German special educators, often with the status of “*traveling special educators*,” are often absent, giving them less responsibility.

This relates to the context-specific meaning of factors that describe the role of special educators in inclusive schools. We present the differences in [Figure 2](#), showing the level and domain at which special educators situate the factors, cooperation, resources, flexibility, and attitude. To clarify, [Figure 2](#) shows which level and domain German and Swedish special educators believe are the most important arenas for the work with inclusion. It does *not* show where they are active, even if overlaps might exist.

As we have tried to portray by the use of two different colors, Swedish SEs see inclusion and its related aspects situated in the organization of the school, while their German colleagues relate their

Domain	Educational Domain	Social Domain	Administrative Domain
Level			
Individual level (student)			
Group level (classroom/lesson)			
School level			

**Figure 2.** Dimensions of the most essential inclusive activities and special education scopes of action for special educators in inclusion, regarding Swedish (light grey) and German (dark grey) special educators.

special education work merely to the individual classroom or even the individual student in need of special support. At least from the perspective of SE, inclusion must encapsulate the whole school, and is best characterized by an inclusive attitude and trans-professional cooperation.

## Discussion

In this article, we have examined German and Swedish special educators' considerations about the operationalization of inclusion of students in need of special education support in regular schools. Both school systems differ significantly in their structures and therefore in their nation-specific prerequisites for making a genuine school for all. Germany is characterized by an ability tracked, highly centralized and bureaucratic system, while Sweden presents a comprehensive school system with much autonomy at the local level.

Our analyses show that German and Swedish special educators speak about the work with inclusion in similar terms. In relation to this several dimensions of this process become visible in their reasoning. Doing inclusion is a multi-dimensional endeavor. Firstly, it relates to different schooling domains. Our analyses suggest that inclusion must be or can be approached *educationally*, *socially*, or *administratively*. Moreover, inclusion is obviously handled and negotiated at various levels: at an individual level concerning the *individual* student in need of special support, at a *group* level concerning the inclusive classroom, and an *organizational* level concerning the inclusive school. In particular, such levels have also been presented in international research and are part of the sphere of professional knowledge of special educators (overview in Nilholm, 2012). More novel for research on inclusion is the conceptualization of the domain-specific dimensions. Figure 1 presented an analytical matrix we developed based on our comparative data. This matrix might be helpful for further studies, on inclusion. In our comparative data material, the work inclusion relates significantly to which power is attributed to special educators in the inclusive school.

Our comparative analyses show that Swedish and German special educators differ in their legitimacy among regular teachers and regarding a powerful mandate handed down by state policy and school leaders. Consequently, inclusive schools appears to be a more welcoming place for SEs in Sweden than in Germany. In the former context, they possess much more power to organize the work of doing and nurturing inclusion. From the perspective of our SE from Germany and Sweden, we can confirm the strong statements of scholars such as Mel Ainscow (2020). A paradigm shift

towards a genuine school for all will only evolve through ecological strategies considering the whole school organization. For this eventually strong special educators working inclusion are needed. The case of Sweden might a fertile example how such profession of inclusion can be formed.

To qualify this, in Sweden, as shown in our context description, SEs are solely employed in their schools and today have, in many cases, leadership and school development roles. The appropriate work with students needing special support is highly prioritized by the Swedish school inspection today. This also relates to the fact that the operationalization of inclusion is connected to achieving learning outcomes. The provision of SEN support draws on the individual right of a student to get the support needed to achieve curriculum goals (Magnússon, 2015).

Moreover, school systems have a rapidly growing focus on standards and standardized testing in the aftermath of OECD PISA (Hamre et al., 2018). This has resulted in increasing challenges for public education, where standards and standardization have shifted school systems towards a strong emphasis on “goal achievement for *all*.” We argue that such a close relationship between inclusion and assessment has at least resulted in prioritizing students’ special needs in education governance. By the same token, this has resulted in a high status of special educators in the Swedish school system. In addition, SEs in Sweden have often been experienced teachers who have undergone a graduate education in Special education. This supports the high status of SEs in inclusive schools concerning the regular teachers and the school management. This is not the case for special educators working in inclusive schools in Germany.

Another difference in the power of special educators relates to the nature of the school system as such. In Sweden, it is comprehensive, drawing on an ideology of *one* school for all children (Wermke et al., 2020). The tracked school system in Germany, building on the educational idea that learner groups must be as homogeneous as possible, pursues the idea of a suitable school for all. This might also be a powerful, even purposeful, hindrance to inclusion. Furthermore, in Germany, as Pfahl and Powell (2011) have shown, SEs relate their professional status to a highly complex system of special schools and their sophisticated specialist training concerning various special educative categories. The regular school as a foundation for inclusion might as well be another world for German Special Educators – following rules, having another language, or, as a German SE colleague expresses it in our data, “My colleagues from the Special School do not want work in inclusive settings. In inclusive settings you must subordinate yourself”.

With this paper, we have contributed to research on special educator professions with an empirically grounded analytical model that helps us to deconstruct roles and relations in inclusive schools. Indeed, analytical models like ours are limited since social reality goes rather not alongside neat matrix lines. Our Swedish-German comparison has shown that with analytical deconstruction, we can see patterns in inclusive schools, such as power relations, which positively or negatively impact inclusion in schools. Moreover, various roles and tasks of special educators must emerge in relation to specific levels and domains to make inclusion possible.

Moreover, the research presented is still exploratory. As a research team, we present a plausible and trustworthy interpretation of social reality. This interpretation is challengeable, in particular, since the apparent universality of our device in comparative research settings only builds on two contexts, both from the Global North. However, since our reasoning is convergent with international research of special educators’ work, we hope our findings can be a fertile vantage point for other studies, eventually having also a comparative perspective.

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