



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

This is the published version of a paper presented at *WCSNE, World Congress of Special Needs Education, August 17-20, 2015, Philadelphia*.

Citation for the original published paper:

Roos, H., Fritjof, E., Gadler, U., Sandberg, I., Lundbäck, B. (2015)

If a Sprawling Teacher Education of Special Education Needs (SEN) is the Answer, What is the Question?.

In: C. A. Shoniregun, G.A. Akmayeva (ed.), *WSNE 2015 Proceedings* (pp. 71-75). Philadelphia, USA

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-42382>

If a Sprawling Teacher Education of Special Education Needs (SEN) is the Answer, What is the Question?

Helena Roos, Elisabet Frithiof, Ulla Gadler, Birgitta Lundbäck, Ingmarie Sandberg
Linnaeus University, Sweden

Abstract

Teacher education of SEN looks different over the globe. This paper discusses the notion of SEN in the light of Swedish teacher education of SEN at Linnaeus University. An analysis of institutional documents governing the education has been made. The results show that SEN is expressed in different ways in the documents and is very much connected to needs in the education. It also shows, even though the directions has different target groups, that the notion of SEN has a common basis in facing the needs of all children and students. The differences can be seen in what kind of mission the teacher of SEN has. The results show that the mission of the special pedagogue is more on an overall level and the mission of special teachers is more connected to the learning of the individual child, even though both of the SEN teachers have much the same mission.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to highlight an interpretation of SEN at both national teacher education level and local university teaching level in order to provide more in depth-understanding of the complexity of SEN. There are many differences in the understanding of SEN from one country to another [1]. Transnational understanding of SEN will enhance outcomes for children, young persons and adults with special needs as well as for both teacher education and SEN teachers in their profession.

Sweden has two different education programs for teachers focusing SEN, *The Special Pedagogue Program* and *Special Teacher Program* – the expressions special pedagogue and special teacher are used instead of the expression remedial teacher. These two programs are a further education of 90 credits. The students need to have a prior teaching degree and at least 3 years of teacher practice before entering any of these programs. When the students have finished their program studies they get a *Postgraduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs* alternative *Postgraduate Diploma in Special Needs Training*. Their new profession is *Special pedagogue* alternative *Special teacher*. Many Swedish universities run these two programs or just one of

them. In Sweden Postgraduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs is given after a uniform training but Postgraduate Diploma in Special Needs Training can be given in six different directions: Learning disabilities, Mathematical development, Development of language, writing and reading, Severe speech language impairment, Deafness or hearing impairment and Visual impairment.

Our university, Linnaeus University in the south of Sweden, is a rather new one. Although young, it leans on an over century long seminary and high school tradition of teacher education. Linnaeus University exams three of the mentioned six directions for Post graduate Diploma in Special Needs Training: Learning disabilities, Mathematical development, Development of language, writing and reading. Within both programs SEN is in focus, though from different perspectives depending on program and direction of the education. In order to promote all sorts of both wide and deep SEN understanding and further professional collaboration Linnaeus University organize both separate and common courses for all students on both of the two programs, as well as separate courses for each of our three Special Teacher Program directions.

To understand the complexity of SEN you need to make different interpretations on different levels: the area of knowledge (special pedagogy), the profession (special pedagogue alternative special teacher), and finally, the child's rights to get opportunities for learning. If SEN need a special pedagogy, what is the *special* in special pedagogy? Is the special the same from these different perspectives in the education of special pedagogues and special teachers? These questions have been discussed over decades [2; 3].

Swedish researchers have made interpretations of SEN by discussing the sight on children with special needs in terms of relational pedagogy or categorical pedagogy. Relational pedagogy focus on problematizing the environment and categorical pedagogy focus the individual [4]. An individual perspective is the most durable and established standpoint, typified in definitions and descriptions of disabilities and disorders [5]. Lansheim [6] studied narratives from newly examined special pedagogues and special teachers. According to the results those teachers often used an individual perspective. In

most Swedish research SEN are regarded as a relation between the environment and the child [7].

Many special education studies put stress on normality and deviation in relation to teaching. Problematising SEN Isaksson [8] concluded: A school class often serves as a reference when a teacher decides what are normal needs and special needs. Analyzing the increasing number of pupils in special school for children with learning disability, Swedish National Agency of Education [9] questioned how special you are allowed to be. Radically, Haug [10] questions the role of special education. If education is said to include every single child, why think about and put stress on compensatory solutions? From a relational perspective Persson [4, p.12] has made a definition of the area of special pedagogy *"An area of knowledge within the discipline with the purpose to support pedagogy when the ordinary pedagogy isn't enough to support the variation of students"* (own translation).

2. Professional special education meet SEN – history and present

Like many other countries, Sweden has an educational tradition in using separate systems for SEN children, as the child so to say was the problem, from a teacher's perspective. A special teacher taught "abnormal" children in "clinics", in a separate room in the school building. This differentiated practice flourished in the 1960s when Sweden had exclusive special education for lots of children. There could be separate classes for children with visual impairment, classes for children with hearing impairment, cerebral palsy, learning disability or behavioral problems. Other examples were named Reading class and Support class or Outdoor and Health class for those who had or have had tuberculosis [11]. Evidently, individual needs tied to individual disorders and diagnoses caused differentiation and specialist teaching.

Coordinating ideas were spread and in the 1970s Coordinated Special Education became a concept and sort of an integration tool. Although the special teacher possessed the expert knowledge of teaching special children, special pedagogy in the 1980s started to concern every teacher thanks to generous government grants. The special teacher Program was closed by the Swedish Government and Department of Education in 1991.

A new profession replaced special teachers, special pedagogues, in order to coordinate support in a new holistic perspective on children and their needs. These efforts were related to the international Salamanca statement [12] of Inclusive Education (IE) and Education For All (EFA). The implementation of this groundbreaking statement

called upon all 92 countries to educate all children in an inclusive classroom beyond disorders, disability, race, linguistic ability, economic status, gender, learning style, ethnicity, cultural and religious background, family structure and sexual orientation [2, p. 13f.]

After 17 years the Special Teacher Program started again in 2008, now with six different directions (as prior mentioned): Learning disabilities, Mathematical development, Development of language, writing and reading, Severe speech language impairment, Deafness or hearing impairment and finally Visual impairment.

Again expert competencies towards different disorders and impairments were requested. Lately the Swedish Ministry of Education suggested an additional special teacher direction towards neuropsychiatric disorders. Several special education researchers strongly opposed this proposal, as it seemed to be a step towards treatment of individuals in the opposite direction of IE. According to new radical steps in Swedish educational politics it has been questioned if the Swedish school system still is an Education For All [4]. Checking the future, Farrell [5] makes an analysis. Estranging IE as an idea is an international trend.

After this short flashback, we want to stress the importance of grasping not only a linear and chronological account but also different models of and perspectives on understanding SEN, which can appear then as well as now [2]. "Historical aspects still resonate and can inform contemporary views and approaches – for example terminology" [5, p.127].

3. Methodology

To be able to track the use of the notion special education in the teacher education of SEN an analysis of institutional documents [13] has been done. In this analysis we have analyzed documents by deconstructing the text, searching for code words pointing at an interpretation of special education. By analyzing texts governing the education for special pedagogues and special teachers, and an official assessment of this education [14], we have tracked how the notion of special education is used both from an ideological perspective and as a tool. This way of analysis gives access to interpretation and use of the notion special education. Even though knowledge about how the notion actually is grasped and about how students perform their special educational work is not reachable by this method, nevertheless it provides a strong indication of how the notion is intended to be grasped and used.

The choice of sampled texts will of course affect the result image of SEN in this empirical study. We use texts from both national and local level. The documents used in the analysis are the Degree

Ordinances [15; 16] (which are decided by the Swedish government, meaning we are bound to follow these decisions), educational plans for the programs at Linnaeus University (which are based on the Degree Ordinance), and a self-evaluation of the programs, which was governed by the Swedish higher education authority [14]. These texts express and declare what we in Sweden on a national and local level express and declare about SEN. As responsible and involved in our two Special Education programs we authors of this text have sort of impact on what special pedagogues and special teacher ought to learn in order to become professional. One of the sampled texts [14] is produced by ourselves - though as a part of an ordered valuation (by the Swedish Higher Education Authority) of 6 of the goals in the two programs of SEN - in order to show what we ourselves highlight as core and quality in these programs.

4. Results and analysis

In the governing documents different words expressing special needs in the education of special pedagogues and special teachers has been identified. Below a presentation of the wording is presented.

In the Degree Ordinances [15; 16] decided by the government there are both similarities and differences in the wording regarding the two different programs for teachers of SEN. In the case of special teachers, the word *development* is frequently used. Together with *knowledge* it appears five times (development of knowledge in the different directions). *Children and students in need of support* are mentioned two times. *Learning and development of learning environments* as well as to *eliminate barriers and difficulties in different learning environments* is mentioned. *To support children and students* is mentioned and *individualized approach for children and students* is also mentioned as well as *Human rights and ethical issues*. In the case of special pedagogues the word *development* occurs only once, together with "of the pedagogical work". The most frequently word used in this text is *learning environment*, which occurs two times. Words that occur once is *children and students in need of support*, *prevention*, *eliminate barriers and difficulties in different learning environments*, *face the needs of all children and students*, *analysis of difficulties at organization-, group- and individual level*, *human rights and ethical issues*.

The Educational Plans for the programs of SEN at Linnaeus University are grounded in the Degree Ordinances. Hence the words that signal SEN is the same as described above in both of the different Educational Plans. Furthermore, in the Educational Plan for special pedagogues the words *to meet students in need of support at organization-, group-*

and individual level is mentioned three times and in the Educational Plan for special teachers the same words are mentioned once. Other words used in both of the Education Plans in addition to the wording in the Degree Ordinance are *the integrative relationship between theory and practice* and *gender, social class and ethnicity*.

When analyzing our own written evaluation text [14], many of the words appearing in the governing documents are also visible in these texts such as *Human rights, ethical issues, support children and students, children and students in need of support, prevention, eliminate barriers and difficulties in different learning environments. The integrative relationship between theory and practice*, which is highlighted in the Education Plans, is also visible in the evaluation texts for the programs as well as *gender, social class and ethnicity*.

In the governing texts for both programs the words *to meet students in need of support at organization-, group- and individual level* occurs several times. In the evaluation text the words *organization-, group- and individual level* is occurring, but with a subtle difference in the preceding words. In the evaluation text for the program of special teachers the preceding words are *learning environment* and *analyze, prevent and remedy*. In the program for special pedagogues the preceding words are *qualified conversation partner*.

The notion *development* occurs in both the governing texts and in the evaluation texts for both programs. In the evaluation text for the program of special teachers *development* is mentioned only a few times, and then in the context of the *individual and knowledge*. In the evaluation text for the program of special pedagogues *development* is mentioned more times and then in the context of *learning and socialization, motivation and School development* as well as the *individual*.

To sum up, all these SEN notions and expressions, which we found in the sampled texts, could be colored stones in a larger mosaic. If we put them together one by one, they show a detailed picture of how the empirical body of SEN could be depicted. The analysis is made in a combination of both national teacher education level and local university teaching level. This means a richer picture of this body. Let us take a look at the whole mosaic. How could we interpret and understand this larger picture with all its details? What does SEN means, painted like this?

5. Discussion

Out of this piece of research and its analysis of the governing documents we can establish that the view of SEN in the two educations oriented to SEN at Linnaeus University (special pedagogue and special teacher) signals *needs in the school teaching*

and school education, not needs within the individual child. This can be seen in both the governing documents and in the self-evaluation texts in wording like *human rights, development of learning environments, individualized approach, prevention, eliminate barriers and difficulties in different learning environments and face the needs of all children and students*. All this indicates that the program students at Linnaeus University are taught to problematize the child's or the children's learning environment, according to relational pedagogy [4], although an individual perspective is said to be the most durable and established standpoint when talking about SEN [5]. And these findings may possibly contradict what Lansheim [5] describes: newly examined special pedagogues and special teachers often used an individual perspective. But – and it has to be said in this context – the students at Linnaeus University as well as at all Swedish universities with special teacher education, learn to work in sort of a differentiated practice. We can find at least small pieces of similarity with those differentiated schools flourishing in the 1960s [11]. Obviously we need more and more experts in different disorders and disabilities. And we still have a special school for children with learning disability, one single disability.

Anyway, the writing in the documents also signals that the focus of the education is not on deficits or disorders, but on *development of knowledge*, which is mentioned several times in the governing documents, especially in the governing documents for special teachers. This indicates a desire to strive forward, not focusing flaws, but strengths. Nevertheless, in the self-evaluation text of the special teacher program the word development is not used more than twice. The reason for this can be the interpretation of the word development in the context of the different directions in the program. This can be seen in the use of words, for example instead of “development of reading and writing”, the word “literacy” is used. And instead of “development of mathematical skills” the word “mathematical literacy” is used.

The Swedish school law [16] highlights the rights of equal education for all students. This is visualized in the education for teacher of SEN in Sweden by the notions *face the needs of all children and students, ethical issues and human rights*. These notions, which are highlighted in both of the programs at Linnaeus University, are a common basis for teachers of SEN at Linnaeus University. Based on this common basis there are some differences in the use of SEN. These differences depend on the wording in the Degree Ordinances [15; 16] and interpretations of these words. In the special pedagogue program focus is on *learning environments and development of the pedagogical practice*. In the special teacher program focus is on

development of knowledge in the context of the direction.

So, if a sprawling teacher education of SEN with many different directions is the answer, what can be the question? And, is SEN different things within the different directions in the education? The answer to this question also posed in the title depends on how we interpret SEN at national teacher education level and local university teaching level. In summary the results show that at Linnaeus University we do not have a sprawling view on SEN, even though there are two different programs and three different directions in the teacher education of SEN. The common basis is the same, a relational perspective [4] with focus on full participation for all students in the education. We fight against the international trend, which Farrell [5] identified when checking the future. We do not want to abandon IE, neither as an idea, nor as an educational or social reality.

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, we have identified a need in the education to provide with SEN-knowledge from both an ideological and practical perspective. There is also a need to provide with SEN-knowledge within many *different* approaches, such as learning disabilities, mathematical development and development of language, writing and reading. This is difficult to accommodate within one individual's competence, hence there is a need of both special pedagogues and special teachers with different competences in the field of SEN. This need also put demands at the organizational level, requiring knowledge of how to organize the competences in schools. Based on this, we can now provide with a question to the answer posed in the title “a sprawling teacher education of special education needs (SEN)”. The question is: “How can we identify and meet all special educational needs and educational needs in school?” And, as individual researchers and local university teachers we prefer the notion Inclusive Education (IE) instead of Special Education. This in order to point out, declare and provide complete and full participation for all learning children and young people in educational settings where everybody is accepted and supported in a professional, respectful and sensitive way (cf. [18]).

7. References

- [1] Vogel, S. A. (2000). The challenges of international research in Learning Disabilities. In: William M. Cruickshank (2000). *Research and global Perspectives in Learning Disabilities*. (pp 329-336) New York: Routledge.
- [2] Rotatori, A. F., Obiakor, Festus E., Bakken, Jeffrey P. (2011). *History of Special Education*. Bingley: Emerald.

- [3] Atterström, H., Persson, S. R. (2000). *Brister eller olikheter? Specialpedagogik på alternativa grundvalar*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- [4] Persson, B. (2013). *Elevers olikheter och specialpedagogisk kunskap*. Stockholm: Liber.
- [5] Farrell, M. (2014). *Looking into Special Education. A synthesis of key themes and concepts*. London: Routledge.
- [6] Lansheim, B. (2010). *Förståelse av uppdraget specialpedagog. Blivande och nyblivna specialpedagogers yrkeslivsberättelser*. Malmö: Malmö högskola.
- [7] Nilholm, C., Björck – Åkesson, E. (red.) (2007) *Reflektioner kring specialpedagogik. Sex professorer om forskningsområdet och forskningsfronterna*. Stockholm: Vetenskapsrådet.
- [8] Isaksson, J. (2000). *Spänningen mellan normalitet och avvikelse. Om skolans insatser för elever i behov av särskilt stöd*. Umeå: Institutionen för socialt arbete.
- [9] Swedish National Agency of Education (2000). *Hur särskild får man vara? En analys av elevökningen i särskolan*. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- [10] Haug, P. (2003). *Brister eller olikheter? Specialpedagogik på alternativa grundvalar*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- [11] SFS 1962: 319 *Skollag*.
- [12] Unesco (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*.
- [13] Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research an evaluation methods* (3rd ed.) London: Sage.
- [14] Universitetskanslerämbetet (2014). *Universitetskanslerämbetets kvalitetsutvärderingar. Linnéuniversitetets specialpedagog- och speciallärarexamen*. Utvärderingsärende 411-621-13.
- [15] SFS 2007:638 *Examensordning, Specialpedagogexamen*
- [16] SFS 2011:186 *Examensordning speciallärarexamen*
- [17] SFS 2010:800 *Skollag*
- [18] Stainback, S. & Stainback, W. (1990). *Support network for inclusive schooling*. Baltimore: Brookes.