

A comparative study of special educator preparation in Norway and Sweden

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The purpose of this study was to explore similarities and differences between special educator preparation in Norway and in Sweden. Graduates of special education programmes at two Norwegian ($n = 320$) and two Swedish universities ($n = 425$) who completed their training between 2001 and 2012 responded to surveys. Findings indicate that both Swedish and Norwegian graduates felt prepared for their current work and that teaching approaches employed in the different programmes were similar. However, there appears to be a stronger focus on pupils' social goals in Sweden, as well as on advising teachers, school development and promoting inclusive environments. In contrast, Norwegian participants reported a greater focus on preparation to work with specific types of learning and behavioural difficulties. Findings are discussed in relation to differing political and social structures, such as national regulations for steering special educator preparation in Sweden, which are absent in the Norwegian context.

Key words: special educator, teacher education, Norway, Sweden

In recent years, political and economic developments, such as the movement towards inclusive education, have had considerable influence on the special education profession in Scandinavia, as well as other regions of the world (Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). At the same time, the countries of Scandinavia have been lauded for their implementation of

inclusive educational policies (for example, OECD, 2011), suggesting that research pertaining to inclusion and special education in this region is likely to be of interest to an international audience. In particular, the countries of Norway and Sweden have many shared historical and political characteristics that may account for similarities in educational approaches, making them well suited for comparison (Cameron et al., 2012).

While many common features can be identified between the educational systems of Norway and Sweden, the nations have taken somewhat different routes with regard to the policies surrounding special education and the role of special educators in schools and preschools. Although limited, previous comparative research provides some insight into the field with respect to special education policy and practice. For example, Cameron and Lindqvist (2014) found that 55% of school district administrators in Sweden and 37% in Norway reported a reduction in special educators' teaching responsibilities in the five-year period prior to that study. In contrast, increases were reported in many other areas of special educators' work, including advising teachers, organisational development and documentation.

Looking towards other Nordic countries, Hausstätter and Takala (2008) compared special teacher education in Finland and Norway, reporting that inclusion is not as central a concern in Finnish education as it is in Norway. In addition, the researchers found that the professional identity and knowledge expectations of special educators in Finland are quite clear, whereas in Norway both the identity of special educators and assumptions about the knowledge they are expected to possess are vague and poorly defined (Hausstätter & Takala, 2008). There are also systemic differences that are likely to influence professional practices. For example, the percentage of children of compulsory school age who receive special support is considerably higher in Sweden (14%) than in Norway (8%) (NDET, 2017; SNAE, 2013). Such large-scale differences may be associated with different objectives regarding special education support and how it is provided, which are likely to influence the preparation of special educators in the two countries.

Special educator preparation in Sweden and Norway

In Sweden, special educators hold a unique position in the education system, the profession having been delineated by state regulation since the early 1990s. The curricular requirements for special educator preparation in Sweden comprise 90 credits (1.5 years of graduate-level studies) and admission to the degree programme is granted only to applicants with a minimum

of three years of teaching experience. Most students of special education pursue the degree over three years of part-time study. Swedish law specifies that the education of special educators should lead to the skills necessary to work on behalf of pupils in need of special support and the knowledge needed to supervise and provide education with the goal of meeting the needs of all children (SFS, 2017). This may involve assisting and supervising teachers, documentation, and designing and evaluating interventions at all levels. In 2007, a new professional role was introduced, 'special teachers' (*speciallärare*, in Swedish), with a similar anchoring in national policy (SFS, 2007). However, the number of graduates from this line of study remains comparatively small and, therefore, they were not included in the current investigation.

In Norway, the preparation of special educators has traditionally been a one-year specialisation, provided in the form of continuing education for qualified teachers. However, in 2002 the first discipline-based special education Master's degree was offered at the University of Oslo and today such programmes can be found at several institutions. In contrast to being directly linked to teacher education, discipline studies recruit students from a diverse range of undergraduate programmes. Most of these programmes require a minimum of one year of coursework in education for admission (for example, educational science, teacher education), and many require more than this. In contrast to Sweden, there are no national guidelines or regulations concerning the competency of special educators in Norway (that is, curricular requirements), and training in the field is not required for individuals or their employers to use the term 'special educator'. In addition, the organisation and content of special education coursework are determined by each university or college, leading to substantial variation in programmes across the country. Thus, the special educator 'profession' is much less clearly defined in Norway than in Sweden.

Theoretical perspective

The point of departure for this study is a pragmatist approach (Dewey, 1916; Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Dewey viewed theories, as well as everyday knowledge, as having a practical character, being a part of transactions involving subjects and objects, as opposed to a more or less accurate mirroring of an external reality (compare Rorty, 1979). One strength of this approach is that it allows for a middle road between realism and relativism, or rather renders that dichotomy less relevant (see Bernstein, 1983). It connects knowledge-seeking to the need to deepen democratic processes and tries to

bridge the gap between theory and practice. One weakness of pragmatism is that it comes in many variants, and its numerous positions are sometimes seen as incompatible. In the current study, we place emphasis on the position that learning is essentially a social act, and that ideas of knowledge, including teacher or special educator ‘competence’, are constructed by the individual participant through communication in multiple social contexts. It is through the interaction of ideas in these different contexts that ideas become meaningful.

We propose that knowledge about the special education profession may be accessed from the experiences of those working within this field, yet societal reference points must also be taken into consideration in order to make sense of these experiences. For example, Ravneberg (2003) points out that the growth of the special education profession in Norway is closely related to expansion of the welfare state. Moreover, special educators have arguably played a significant role in many aspects of public education and in how ‘special need’ has historically been defined and addressed. From a professions-theoretical perspective, special educators are perceived as contributing to defining their own tasks and societal position, in part via the education they offer to the next generation of special educators. As Abbott (1988) points out, a key mission of professionals in working life is to establish a collective understanding of a problem, reason about how it may be remedied, and take action to do so.

Within this context, a pertinent theoretical framework concerns the consideration of special education preparation in relation to the frequently referenced juxtaposition of categorical and relational perspectives (for example, Persson, 2003; Egelund et al., 2006). This discourse also appears to be a major issue within the programmes at universities and colleges responsible for the preparation of special educators (for example, Rognhaug et al., 2014). Hence, it is of interest to consider how the education of special educators in Norway and Sweden may emphasise or minimise either perspective.

Lastly, we consider the idea that special educator preparation is mediated through social participation. Thus, the education of professionals is seen as a comprehensive process consisting of students becoming active participants in ‘communities of practice’ and constructing identities appropriate to these communities (Wenger, 2003). Students in special education teacher programmes might participate in several such communities; in class at the university, in praxis at schools, and in study groups. These communities

not only shape what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do (Wenger, 2003). For the university responsible for preparing special educators, this has consequences for how the programmes are arranged and may have implications for how learning is facilitated and promoted.

Research question

Although a number of researchers in the Nordic countries have explored the preparation of special educators within their own country, comparative studies are largely absent from the literature. Given this background, the purpose of the current study is to examine the similarities and differences between Norway and Sweden with regard to the education of special educators. To clarify this goal, the study is designed around the following research question: What similarities and differences can be observed between Norway and Sweden with regard to special educators' (a) views of the teaching and working methods used during their education, (b) perceived emphasis of their education, and (c) sense of preparedness as a result of their education?

Methods

Participants

Graduates of special education programmes at two Norwegian ($n = 320$) and two Swedish universities ($n = 425$) who completed their training between 2001 and 2012 responded to parallel surveys in the two countries. With respect to prior education, graduates of preschool teacher preparation programmes comprised a substantial proportion of both the Norwegian (37%) and Swedish (44%) samples. A similarly large portion of participants were trained as primary and lower secondary teachers prior to studying special education (37% and 32% in Norway and Sweden, respectively). Subject area teachers (for example, art, physical education) and related studies comprised the third-largest group of participants (18% and 21% in Norway and Sweden, respectively). Finally, in both Norway (8%) and Sweden (4%) a relatively small number of participants held secondary school teacher qualifications prior to studying special education.

The two groups were also similar with regard to gender differences, with 89% of participants in Norway and 92% of participants in Sweden being female. A considerable difference between Swedish and Norwegian participants was found with regard to age, with participants in Sweden ($M = 49.8$, $SD = 8.1$) being on average 7.6 years older than Norwegian participants

($M = 42.2$; $SD = 10.0$). This difference is probably due to the requirement in Sweden that special educators have worked a minimum of three years before enrolling in a programme. In Norway, 35% of participants had completed one year of advanced studies in special education, whereas 65% held a Master's degree or equivalent in special education (that is, two years at graduate level).

Procedures

Swedish participants were drawn from a larger project in which approximately 4,000 graduates of special education programmes in Sweden from 2001 to 2012 were surveyed about aspects of their work and education (Göransson et al., 2015). That project made use of a national database containing information on all graduates of special education programmes authorised under national regulations. As no such regulations or databases exist in Norway, data collection was limited to a much smaller scale. In Norway, potential participants were identified by reviewing university records for each year of interest, and these were cross-referenced with a general public registry to obtain the graduates' mailing addresses. Given the substantial disparity between the size of the two samples, we chose to investigate responses from participants at only two universities in Sweden and two universities in Norway in order to create a more balanced design. The selected Swedish institutions were matched to the Norwegian universities on the basis of size, regional similarities (for example, population density) and similarity of educational programmes (for example, recognised teacher education profiles).

The survey, originally developed for the larger Swedish project, was translated and adapted for use in Norway. The questionnaire included 52 overarching questions, many containing multiple response items. The majority of the questions employed a four-point Likert-type scale (1 = very important, 2 = rather important, 3 = not very important and 4 = not at all important), and some questions asked participants to write in their response (for example, age) whereas others involved choosing among multiple categories of responses. As pointed out by Adelson and McCoach (2010), the issue of whether a scale should consist of an even or odd number of choices has been debated for decades. Proponents of omitting a neutral point argue that this forces the respondents to be more thoughtful and precise in their answers, while others argue that this might force the respondents to a standpoint that they do not actually have, which might affect the validity or reliability

of the results. Considering that several questions required participants to recall previous experiences, in some cases from many years prior, we were concerned that there would be a tendency to drift towards neutral responses. Avoiding a 'neutral point' ensured that previous students were forced to form an opinion about, among other issues, the quality and relevance of their education.

The questions were organised around several broad themes, including: (a) attitudes towards special education and inclusion, (b) current working conditions, and (c) participants' perceptions of their educational preparation. In both countries, surveys were sent by mail to the graduate's home address along with instructions for completion and a postage-paid return envelope. The Norwegian sample was also given the option to complete an internet-based survey. Data collection involved three separate mailings in both Sweden (response rate = 75%) and Norway (response rate = 55%).

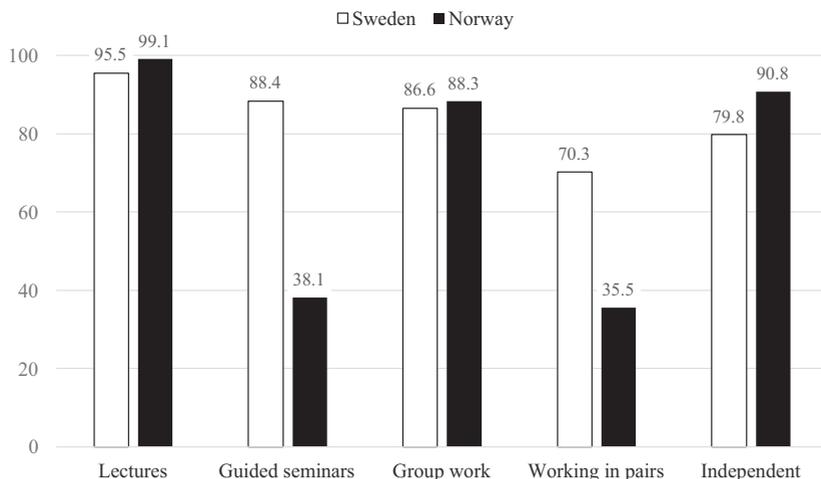
Ethics

For the larger Swedish project, Statistics Sweden (a government agency that produces official statistics) was given the tasks of survey distribution and data collection. This agency was also responsible for developing and providing the researchers with an anonymous database of registered responses. Thus, at no point did the researchers have access to the personal information of the responding individuals. In the Norwegian portion of the study, participating universities provided a registry of previous students from the relevant programmes, who were then sent surveys directly from the researchers. The registry was stored on a password-protected digital network, separate from an anonymous database of survey responses. In both countries, an information letter was attached to the survey explaining the purpose of the study, how results were to be used, how anonymity was protected, and that participation in the study was voluntary. These procedures were registered with the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), the national agency responsible for overseeing social science research.

Analysis

All survey items included in the current study had closed-response alternatives in which participants were asked to respond using a four-point rating scale. The combined analysis of clusters of two to three thematically related questions are together intended to provide the basis for answering

Figure 1: Percentage of participants indicating ‘common’ teaching and working methods during the course of their special education preparation (1–2 on 4-point scale)



each of the study’s three research questions. To simplify the analysis, responses were dichotomised (that is, ratings of 1 and 2 on the scale were combined, as were ratings of 3 and 4). ‘Percent agreement’, or the percentage of participants from each country who viewed a particular item as ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ common, important and so on (that is, 1 or 2 on the rating scale) is presented in tables. We then conducted chi-square tests of homogeneity with α level set at 0.01 due to the high number of comparisons and potential risk of Type I error. The chi-square test is a nonparametric statistic used to evaluate the equality of two populations of categorical data. In other words, we were interested in testing whether the two samples were homogeneous with respect to the distribution of dichotomised responses (for example, important/not important). The reported percentages are based on valid responses rather than the total number of participants from each country. The percentage of missing responses did not exceed 10% on any of the items examined.

Results

Teaching and working methods

Three questions addressed the topic of teaching and working methods at participating universities: (a) ‘How common were the following approaches in your special education studies?’; (b) ‘Was there a praxis period in your

Table 1: Chi-square test results and % of participants indicating that degree of expertise and programme emphasis is greater than neutral (1–2 on 4-point scale)

	Norway (n = 320)	Sweden (n = 425)	Difference	χ^2
<i>Faculty expertise</i>				
Theory related to special education	97.4%	93.8%	3.6%	5.04
Preschools in practice	56.0%	51.5%	4.5%	1.19
Schools in practice	75.1%	76.4%	1.3%	0.15
Adult education in practice	27.0%	35.7%	8.7%	3.86
<i>Emphasis on assessment competency</i>				
Academic goals for individual	44.3%	53.9%	9.6%	6.46
Social goals for individual	44.6%	60.5%	15.9%	17.84*
Individual's participation in group	40.2%	74.9%	34.7%	88.59*
Academic goals for class	37.3%	35.8%	1.5%	0.16
Social goals for class	40.7%	41.3%	0.6%	0.02
Classroom learning environment	55.6%	57.0%	1.4%	0.14

Notes: * $p < 0.01$, $df = 1$. Percentage of higher ratings are presented in italics where differences were found to be significant.

studies?'; and (c) 'How important was your praxis experience for your professional career?' Participants were asked to rate five items in response to the first of these questions (Figure 1). With regard to the second question, two-thirds (66%) of Norwegian and 61% of Swedish participants indicated that they had some form of praxis during their education. Within this subgroup, 57.9% of Norwegian and 62.1% of Swedish responses reported that the experience was 'important' for their careers (1 or 2 on the four-point scale). No significant differences were found between the Norwegian and Swedish groups with regard to this variable. However, chi-square tests were significant for comparisons of four of the five teaching and working methods presented in Figure 1: lectures ($\chi^2(1) = 8.13$, $p = 0.004$), seminars ($\chi^2(1) = 201.16$, $p = 0.000$), working in pairs ($\chi^2(1) = 85.02$, $p = 0.000$) and independent work ($\chi^2(1) = 16.72$, $p = 0.000$). Results indicate that lectures and independent work were more common in Norway, whereas participants reported more frequently working in pairs and seminars in Sweden. As shown in Figure 1, lectures were the most common form of teaching in both

countries, followed by independent and group work in Norway, and seminars and group work in Sweden. Only 'group work' did not significantly differ between the two countries.

Emphasis of the programmes

Two survey questions dealt with the emphasis of special educators' training. First, participants were asked to rate the degree to which the teachers within their programme had knowledge of, or familiarity with: (a) scientific theory related to special education, (b) how preschools function in practice, (c) how schools function in practice, and (d) how adult education functions. Results of chi-square tests indicate that participants' ratings did not differ significantly from what would be expected by chance. As shown in Table 1, responses from both countries show substantially higher ratings for (a), scientific theory related to special education, than the other three items.

Secondly, participants were asked to rate the degree to which their education emphasised the evaluation and assessment of six goals or objectives related to individual children and the classroom or group as a whole. Chi-square test results and the percentage of participants indicating that 'faculty expertise' and 'programme emphasis' was greater than neutral (1–2 on the four-point scale) are presented in Table 1. Significant differences were found for ratings of the emphasis placed on 'social goals for individual pupils' and 'the individual pupil's participation in the class or group'. In both instances, the proportion of positive responses from the Swedish group was significantly higher than for their Norwegian counterparts.

Sense of preparedness

Three questions and 20 items were used to measure participants' perceptions of their sense of preparedness after completing their studies in special education. First, participants were asked to rate the degree to which their education provided them with: (a) a scientific foundation for future work, (b) knowledge to address pupil differences, and (c) knowledge about how to increase the influence of pupils and parents/guardians. First, a clear majority of participants in both countries reported that their education has given them the scientific foundation for their current work (89.3% and 89.6% for Norway and Sweden, respectively). Second, participants in both Norway (86.1%) and Sweden (88.2%) were largely positive (1–2 on the four-point scale) regarding the degree to which their education provided them with

Table 2: Chi-square test results and % of participants indicating that they were prepared to work in different areas (1–2 on 4-point scale)

	Norway (n = 320)	Sweden (n = 425)	Difference	χ^2
<i>Specific areas of difficulty</i>				
Motor impairments	12.7%	13.2%	0.5%	0.04
Concentration problems	75.2%	72.0%	3.2%	0.97
Hearing impairments	16.8%	7.5%	9.3%	15.38*
Visual impairments	14.0%	7.1%	6.9%	9.62*
Social/emotional problems	89.9%	70.8%	19.1%	39.57*
Speech and language difficulties	65.5%	39.6%	25.9%	48.53*
Developmental disabilities	61.6%	27.0%	34.6%	89.08*
Reading/writing difficulties	78.8%	50.8%	28%	60.68*
Mathematics difficulties	43.6%	25.5%	18.1%	26.82*
<i>General areas of work</i>				
Individually with children with special needs	69.4%	73.8%	4.4%	1.74
In groups that include children with special needs	69.1%	74.8%	5.7%	2.91
Adapting the learning environment	75.7%	76.5%	0.8%	0.07
Advising teachers	50.9%	76.6%	25.7%	52.24*
Documentation and assessment	46.2%	57.6%	11.4%	9.42*
School/preschool development	43.2%	68.6%	25.4%	47.91*
Preventive efforts to develop inclusive environments	64.4%	75.5%	11.1%	10.88*
Collaborating with colleagues, parents and others	83.3%	88.9%	5.6%	4.74

Notes: * $p < 0.01$, $df = 1$. Percentage of higher ratings are presented in italics where differences were found to be significant.

the knowledge to address differences among pupils. Finally, participants tended to agree that they were provided with sufficient knowledge about how to increase the influence of pupils and parents (70.9% in Norway and 71.7% in Sweden). No significant differences were found between the two groups on chi-square tests for the three items.

In addition, we asked participants to indicate the degree to which their education prepared them to work with nine areas of learning or behavioural

difficulty (Table 2). Chi-square tests revealed significant differences between the two countries with respect to all but two areas: 'concentration problems' and 'motor impairments'. In the remaining seven areas, graduates of Norwegian programmes rated themselves as significantly more prepared than did Swedish participants. Chi-square values and the percentage of responses higher than the theoretical neutral (1–2 on the four-point scale) are presented in Table 2.

The final question concerned more general, work-related activities: 'After completing your education, how prepared were you to: (a) work individually with children with special needs, (b) work in classes or groups that include children with special needs, (c) adapt the learning environment, (d) advise teachers, (e) work with documentation and assessment, (f) work with school/preschool development, (g) engage in preventive efforts to develop inclusive environments, and (h) work collaboratively with colleagues, parents, or others'? In contrast to ratings of specific difficulty areas, ratings from the Swedish participants were significantly higher on four out of eight of these items (Table 2). In comparison to the Norwegian group, analyses revealed that a significantly higher percentage of Swedish participants felt prepared to advise teachers, work with documentation and assessment, engage in school/preschool development, and work preventatively to develop inclusive environments.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine similarities and differences between Norway and Sweden with regard to the preparation of special educators. The research question sought to address three areas: (a) teaching and working methods, (b) emphasis of programmes, and (c) perceived level of preparedness. Findings indicate striking similarities between the two countries, with graduates in both Sweden and Norway reporting that they felt well prepared for their current work. Whereas the content and teaching approaches employed in these programmes were largely similar, several differences were also evident. In particular, there appears to be a stronger focus on social goals in Sweden, as well as preparation for activities such as advising teachers, whole-school development, and promoting inclusive learning environments. In contrast, Norwegian participants reported a greater degree of preparedness with regard to working with specific disabilities and learning or behavioural difficulties.

Similarities

Despite different national policies and formal requirements regarding the preparation of special educators, there are many factors that probably account for similarities between the two countries. Not least of these is the ideological foundation upon which the field of special education is built. In a review of international literature, Margalit (2000) found that special education researchers across the globe hold a shared philosophy and set of goals. These include protecting the right to education for all children, promoting dignity, and an emphasis on specialised pedagogical approaches for children who experience barriers to learning. In addition, these programmes are also part of larger educational systems stretching from early childhood into adulthood, which reflect policy goals and other characteristics consistent with the 'Nordic model' of education (Imsen et al., 2017; Telhaug et al., 2004). Thus, to some degree, shared experiences are to be expected.

A positive finding of the current study is that both groups generally felt that their education prepared them for their current work. In addition, over half of participants in both countries reported that their education prepared them to work with children experiencing concentration problems, social-emotional problems, developmental disabilities and reading/writing difficulties. Given that these are the primary areas in which children receive special support in both Sweden (Isaksson et al., 2007) and Norway (Bachmann et al., 2016), the programmes appear to be directed towards achieving coverage of the issues that practitioners are most likely to meet upon entering the field. Far less common were ratings of preparedness with respect to mathematical difficulties, as well as motor, hearing and visual impairments. Although prevalence rates indicate that special educators may meet these challenges less often, it is certainly a concern that students do not feel sufficiently prepared to work with these difficulties. In Norway alone, estimates suggest that up to 5% of pupils have hearing and vision problems that impede learning, and that learning difficulties in mathematics occur at three times that rate (Bachmann et al., 2016). Clearly, special educators also require expertise to address these concerns.

With regard to approaches and the emphasis of education in the two countries, findings indicate a strong reliance on 'traditional' teaching such as lectures and independent work. Furthermore, participants reported that teaching staff, though well-grounded in special education theory, lacked awareness about how different levels of education function in practice. We

speculate that this finding may be due in part to a process of ‘academicisation’ that reflects the manner in which the field of special education has developed in Scandinavia.

As Slagstad (2010) points out, special educators are one of the welfare state’s occupations, having obtained academic legitimacy through the field’s successful campaign for university status. It has been argued that this process occurred in conjunction with the movement towards inclusion and the official closure of special schools (for example, Froestad & Ravneberg, 2006). Thus, although much of the history of special education is tied to a paradigm of care and remedial teaching, there has been a movement towards bolstering its theoretical basis in recent decades. Doctoral degrees were first offered in the 1980s, and more theoretically oriented discipline studies have grown dramatically (Malmqvist, 2015; NSD, 2016). This process may reflect a less practical orientation with regard to the everyday work of schools and a greater willingness to emphasise the theoretical discourses of the field. Moreover, the tendency to recruit the most ‘academically-oriented’ students may result in hiring young researchers into teaching positions who have little or no previous experience working with children.

In conjunction with these findings, it is somewhat surprising that approximately one-third of graduates from programmes in both countries perceive their praxis experience to be ‘somewhat unimportant’, and more than 15% indicated that it was ‘not at all important’. It is a widely held assumption that practical experience is vital to preparing educational professionals for their future work (Pearson, 2009). Indeed, research suggests that student-practical experience is linked to both higher levels of self-efficacy (Cameron, 2017; Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014) and expansion of pedagogical knowledge (Lawson et al., 2013). While there is no evidence from the current study to explain why students were not more positive about praxis, one possible explanation is the limited intensity of exposure that tends to be offered. The length of the experience may be too brief or too far removed from their current work to be seen as having had a significant impact. An interesting caveat to this finding is that while three years of previous work experience are required for students in the Swedish programmes, this is not the case in Norway. Thus, previous experience does not alone appear to be a determining factor for the perception that praxis is less than relevant for many preservice special educators. Clearly, this is an area that requires further exploration.

Differences

We also observed several differences in survey responses from the two countries. A notable difference is that the Swedish programmes appear to emphasise more dynamic teaching forms, such as seminars and working in pairs. From a social learning perspective, learning is best promoted by encouraging students' active engagement in interconnected 'communities of practice', which also contribute to upholding the organisation as a whole (Wenger, 2003). In Sweden, most students studying to become special educators complete their education on a part-time basis and remain tied to their workplaces during the course of their studies. In addition, the requirement of previous work experience in Sweden is also likely to place students in a different mental setting with respect to both competency and confidence. In this manner, Swedish programmes might achieve a greater level of integration between the field of practice and the university setting. Lecturers and staff at the universities are likely to value students' own practical knowledge, leading them to facilitate student activities that promote sharing of the professional experience that they have already gained. In Norway, it can be argued that there are fewer opportunities to construct strong connections to the field of practice, leading to a more 'traditional' approach to classroom instruction.

However, the most noticeable difference between the two countries is that participants' sense of preparedness to work with specific areas of learning and/or behavioural difficulty appears to be significantly higher in Norway. In contrast, responses from Swedish participants stand out as particularly higher than Norwegian special educators within four areas: (a) advising teachers, (b) school and preschool development, (c) preventive efforts to develop inclusive environments, and (d) documentation and assessment. In general, these areas are easily interpreted as being more closely tied to relational, as opposed to categorical, approaches to providing special support (Egelund et al., 2006; Persson, 2003). In contrast, special educators in the Norwegian comparison group focused largely on an individual perspective (areas of special need), and to a greater degree emphasised competency tied to a categorical perspective.

In a similar comparative study involving school district administrators, Cameron et al. (2012) found that the categorical perspective was more prominent with respect to school practices in Norway than in Sweden. The authors argued that this difference is probably due to the smaller percentage of pupils who receive special education in Norway, whereby children's more

extensive needs necessitate more frequent use of categorical approaches (Cameron et al., 2012). The current study seems to suggest that this difference may rather, or perhaps in addition, be engrained in special educator preparation. To take this analysis a step farther, we suggest that this finding may be linked to differences with respect to societal developments within the two countries. Through numerous phases of educational development, it has been argued that the impetus for change in Norway has been found in Sweden (Telhaug et al., 2004). Thus, results from Sweden may suggest a possible direction for the development of special educator preparation in Norway, in which relational perspectives are emphasised to a greater degree than these programmes appear to suggest. This observation is also consistent with the global movement towards more inclusive practices.

Limitations

A number of limitations to the current study are worthy of note. For example, participants comprised a large number of early childhood educators, potentially limiting the generalisation of findings. This issue was taken into account with the selection of Swedish universities that matched the profile of the Norwegian sample as closely as possible. Nonetheless, it is possible that special educators who work with older age groups may hold perceptions of their educational experiences that differ from those of participants in the current study. A similar threat to external validity concerns the relatively low response rate in Norway (55%) as compared to Sweden (75%). It is possible that those who chose to respond to the survey may have been more inclined to do so because they held stronger feelings about their educational experiences or a stronger sense of professional affiliation. We have attempted to take this issue into consideration in our interpretation of findings, first and foremost by framing our conclusions against the backdrop of previous research. Previous investigations have, indeed, found similar trends (for example, Cameron et al., 2012), suggesting that our interpretations are likely to be valid. Regarding the survey itself, the use of a four-point scale prevented participants from indicating a neutral standpoint and may have contributed to lowering response rates. However, we argue that the approach allowed us to gather deeper insights concerning the opinions of participants, for example, on items in which social desirability is likely to influence responses (for example, perceptions of inclusive practices). Given the difficulty that lies in attempting to capture culturally imbedded traditions and practices, international comparative studies are dilemmatic at the outset. Studies of this kind, while perhaps ambitious, are nonetheless important for the purpose of 'learning from the experience of others'

and ultimately improving the quality of educational provision ‘at home’ (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2008).

Conclusion

Several studies have found that special educators increasingly function as expert advisors or consultants to teachers and parents, and spend less time working with individual pupils with special needs (Billingsley, 2007; Cole, 2005; Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014). Yet different countries obviously vary a great deal with regard to these changes and the approaches they apply to professional training. For example, in a study comparing the professional consultation roles of special educators in Sweden and Finland, Sundqvist et al. (2014) conclude that Finnish programmes concentrate heavily on basic skills, such as reading, writing, language, mathematics and behavioural issues, and place little emphasis on collaboration and consultation with other professionals. Consistent with the current study, the authors describe an expansion of the consultancy role for special educators in Sweden since the 1990s, and an emphasis on organisational work and ‘more inclusive ways of handling learning problems’ (Sundqvist et al., 2014). Similarly, Hausstätter and Takala (2008) found that Finnish special educator preparation placed less emphasis on inclusion than was the case in Norway. However, in a study of teacher attitudes towards inclusion, Saloviita and Schaffus (2016) found that Finnish teachers were far more positive towards inclusion than were teachers in a select region of Germany, who were particularly concerned with the greater workload associated with the placement of children with special needs in regular education settings. Further afield, the special education profession is undergoing drastic changes, or indeed just emerging. A recent overview of special educator preparation in China (Wang & Mu, 2014) describes a dramatic increase between 2000 and 2011 in the number of special educators with formal training, from approximately 8% to 50%. The ‘traditional’ or categorical route, which in the current study appears to be more prevalent in Norway than in Sweden, is clearly evident in China, where different sub-majors are offered based on disability area (for example, visual impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual disability) (Wang & Mu, 2014).

One of the long-standing criticisms of special education as a field has been that it can never be abandoned because of the entrenchment of the professionals working within it (for example, Tomlinson, 2017). As Abbott (1988) argues, professions are largely responsible for defining the problem that they are required to solve. Interestingly, findings from this comparative study

suggest that a more clearly defined professional role may, in fact, guide the profession towards change, as is reflected by the apparently greater emphasis on inclusive education in Sweden. On the other hand, the system in Norway appears to be more dependent on its historical traditions, where programmes are designed and led by experienced special educators and/or researchers in the field, who also choose the content and teaching methods to be emphasised. Although these choices are affected by societal developments and the manner in which special support is provided in schools, they also impact on the development of the profession itself. Thus, it is important to explore the preparation of special educators from both regional and international perspectives in order to gain a better understanding of the structures and contexts in which this preparation takes place. The current study represents a small step in that direction.

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