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Experiences of a dual system: motivation for teachers to study special education

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ABSTRACT

Special educators are considered essential in schools, both in the regular system and in the separate special needs system. It is important to understand how special education is envisioned among teachers who choose further study in this field. The aim of this study is to gain more knowledge about what motivates teachers to gain further qualifications to become special educators. The study is based on 158 written self-reports from students studying special education. These reports were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal six themes: 'Thirst for knowledge, tools and science', 'Achieving better results as a teacher', 'Improving career opportunities', 'Getting away: giving up teaching in a classroom setting', 'Influence: helping pupils and teachers' and 'Developing schools: identifying deficits in schools' ways of working with special needs education'. These themes are discussed in relation to special educators' work, their jurisdictional control and how their reasons relate to supporting or dismantling the dual system of special education.

Introduction

Today, perhaps more than ever before, schools are struggling to meet the demands of a changing society (Jahanmahan and Bunar 2018). One important challenge is how the educational system can provide excellent and equal education for all pupils (cf. Sandström, Klang, and Lindqvist 2019; Skrtic 1991). Another challenge concerns schools' difficulties in providing qualified teachers and special educators in order to achieve the overarching goal of educating all pupils within their regular learning environment (SFS 2010, 800). For example, in Sweden there will be a shortage of 45,000 teachers by 2033 (Swedish National Agency for Education 2019), and there is already a shortage of trained special education teachers (Swedish National Agency for Education 2019).

In order to address some of the challenges faced by the school system, the Swedish Government has introduced two occupational groups (Lindqvist 2013): special education teachers ('speciallärare' in Swedish) and special needs coordinators (SENCOs, or 'special-pedagog' in Swedish). The term SENCO is used in this article because it is similar to the British occupational group of SENCOs (Pearson 2010) and to facilitate international

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comparisons (e.g. Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020; Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015). When both groups are referred to together in this article, they are called special educators.

Special educators are often expected to have a significant impact on work with pupils in special needs. They are also considered to have specific knowledge regarding school difficulties and are sometimes even expected to change entire school settings (Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015). Against this background, and considering the challenges mentioned above (i.e. a shortage of regular teachers and difficulties in achieving the goal of meeting *all* pupils' needs), it is important to learn more about the reasons why Swedish teachers undertake further studies to become special educators. Special educators are considered to play an active role in developing schools and supporting inclusive education (Fisher, Frey, and Thousand 2003). In a more traditional organisation, special education is separated from regular education – a system that has previously been criticised (Skrtic 1991). Special educators who work towards a more inclusive environment are an essential part of moving away from having separated school systems, i.e. regular education and special education (Fisher, Frey, and Thousand 2003).

Research on what motivates teachers to undertake further education to qualify for positions as special educators in Sweden is scarce. Our objective is to contribute to the field of special education by addressing this dearth of research and adding knowledge about special educators' motives for undertaking further education and how that illustrates their envisioned practice. This is important in order to understand how special education is perceived among teachers who choose to work as special educators. The aim of the study is to investigate what motivates teachers to gain further qualifications to become special educators. In order to investigate this, the research questions are: (1) what reasons do special educators state for enrolling in a special education training programme? and (2) what do these reasons say about their envisioned practice?

Special educators in Sweden

Special educators' education consists of eighteen months of full-time study. However, most special educators complete their education in three years, studying part-time and working as teachers in parallel. In order to be eligible for the special education training, the applicant must have three years of prior teaching experience.

In contrast to British SENCOs, there are no formulated policy guidelines concerning special educators' work. Special educators are not described in policy documents and are not directly mentioned in the Swedish Education Act or the national curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011; SFS 2010, 800). Instead, it is stipulated that staff with special education knowledge should be a part of the pupil health team which is compulsory in all Swedish schools. Pupil health teams are multidisciplinary teams and typically include professions such as school counsellors, school psychologists, special educators, head teachers and school nurses. For this reason, special educators operate in different ways within different municipalities in Sweden (Göransson et al. 2017).

The degree ordinances for special education teachers and SENCOs include a significant amount of similar content (Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015), but also differences. For example, a SENCO is expected to consult teachers, as well as being responsible for the documentation and organisation of special needs education. In schools, however, SENCOs do much of the same work as special education teachers, which often involves working

with individual pupils. Both groups are educated to lead educational development, including consultation and the evaluation of interventions (Takala et al. 2015).

A limited number of studies have investigated the reasons for applying to start special educator training programme. One previous study in Sweden investigates the reasons why teachers want to pursue a SENCO career in preschools (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020). More than five hundred SENCOs working in preschools filled out a questionnaire. The most common answers to the question about their reasons for educating themselves further were as follows: An opportunity for personal development (67%), a desire to help children with difficulties (61%) and a desire to prevent problems in schools (48%). None of the SENCOs answered that they wanted to teach children in group activities or that they did not enjoy their previous job. However, one should bear in mind that Gäreskog and Lindqvist (2020) conducted a study with SENCOs who worked in preschools, reflecting in retrospect on their decision to begin their special educator training programme. Thus, the current study is important in order to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of why teachers want to become special educators.

Expectations of the role

To understand the role of special educator, it is important to consider how the jurisdiction of this professional group is distinguished it from other groups in schools. It is relevant to consider the competition with other groups in schools in order to define the challenges and which pupils are to receive special education. In the Nordic countries, special educators and their counterparts are expected to play a significant role in dismantling the separated support system (Göransson et al. 2017). When striving to create a school for all pupils, working with the organisation of special education would therefore be a task for special educators. There is a belief among SENCOs that they will be working at an organisational level, and not directly with children (Lindqvist 2013). Conversely, in a study of a municipality in Sweden, Lindqvist et al. (2011) showed that the other professional groups in schools reported that they expected SENCOs to work directly with children's individual education. In contrast, SENCOs themselves stated that they should be working with consultation and their school's organisational development. Similar findings, pointing to SENCOs' difficulties in adopting a leadership role and thus exerting influence concerning school development issues, are highlighted in British research (Layton 2005; Rosen-Webb 2011; Tissot 2013).

Takala et al. (2015) explored how Finnish and Swedish special education students view their future work as special educators. They described these future special educators as traditional, in the sense that they expected to work with pupils, in both segregated and inclusive settings. The results showed that critical aspects of resource allocation and values/attitudes concerning special education were almost non-existent. The future SENCOs in Sweden expected to work with teachers in relation to cooperation and consultation but did not include systematic school development as a primary area of focus in their work. When working with consultation, special educators sometimes take on the role of consultants. When working with consultation, there is a risk of creating resistance to change among the teachers being consulted, due to the different positions of teachers and special educators (Thornberg 2014).

According to the Degree Ordinance (SFS 1993, 100), special educators are expected to work with proactive leadership and strategic school development, but there is no binding jurisdiction in the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010, 800) or the national curriculum that expresses such a task (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011). Lack of binding jurisdiction enables SENCOs to negotiate their own routines, influenced by the professional culture of the school where they work (Klang et al. 2017). Göransson et al. (2017) contrasted special educators with support teachers and found that special educators thought support teachers should work with pupils in small groups or individually outside their regular class. The authors argued that this could hinder the dismantling of a separate support system, which is otherwise often proposed to be the task of special educators (cf. Skrtic 1991).

Theoretical approaches

The theoretical approach of this study is based on critical pragmatism related to the work of Skrtic (1991). Skrtic's (1991) theory of special education and general education as two different systems is helpful for understanding the underpinnings and organisational ideas associated with special education, even though the general idea of democratic education in an inclusive setting is closely connected to public schooling. Skrtic (1991) discusses the machine bureaucracy as a factor that creates a need for special education. In the process, old ideas and organisations are retained when meeting pupils who are difficult to teach, instead of using what Skrtic (1991) describes as a proposed adhocracy organisation. The process of machine bureaucracy is grounded in ideas of functionalism, that perceive 'social problems as pathological' (Skrtic 1991, 152). Another process identified by Skrtic (1991) that hinders democratic schooling is professional bureaucracy. In the micro-political landscape of schools, the socialisation of teachers into autonomous work creates weak interdependence among them. There are standardised procedures in a teacher's daily work, but there is also a limited repertoire that is not challenged. In other words, when pupils' needs do not match the teacher's repertoire, problems occur. Each teacher's repertoire is part of the education they have undertaken. The participants' specific teacher education contributes to the repertoire of each teacher category (subject teacher, preschool teacher, special educational needs teacher, etc.). Skrtic (1991) refers to this as a 'pigeon-holing process', where the process of creating a separated educational system is due to pupils challenging the teacher's repertoire. Each teacher is an expert in their own field, and as such the expertise of a specific area is used to distinguish one group from another. For example, teachers represent one area of expertise and special educators represent another. Therefore, it is partly the professional bureaucracy that creates the need for special education. The results are also understood and discussed in the light of Abbott's (1988) reasoning about the division of expert labour and jurisdictional control.

Methodology

To explore the reasons for enrolling on a special education training programme, self-reports were collected and analysed using thematic analysis.

Participants

In this study, written reports were collected from 158 participants who were studying for a special educator degree in Sweden. The students were in their first and second of six terms at the time of the data collection and represented three different enrolments in the programme: (1) SENCOs, (2) special education teachers specialising in mathematics or reading and writing, and (3) special education teachers specialising in intellectual disabilities. The participants were studying at one university in Sweden and were recruited during a visit to one of their courses, when they were given reports to fill out. The participants all had a previous degree in teaching and the groups were dominated by women. In general, more than 90% of the students on these courses are female, they are generally middle aged and have worked in schools for 5–20 years. When studying to become a special education teacher or a SENCO, it is common for the two professional groups to attend joint courses, and the data was collected from a course including both groups. In the results section, each excerpt from the written accounts is from an individual person. This means that all excerpts are from separate, individual written reports. To further reduce the possibility of connecting the quotes to specific participants, no numbers or names are used.

Data collection

The written reports were collected at a seminar, and the students were given the choice of writing down their answers right away and handing them in or handing them in on another occasion. The reports were distributed on a single sheet of lined paper and were written by hand. None of the reports were difficult to read. The 158 reports were collected over a period of three years. Seventy-three reports were handed in from the first cohort, 54 from the second cohort and 31 from the final year's cohort. The length of the reports ranged from 11 to 339 words ($M = 83.25$, $SD = 47.27$).

Ethical considerations

The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights as participants before data collection. This information included how the data was to be used within the project, that their participation was voluntary, and that confidentiality would be guaranteed. The participants were asked to give their consent to use their text for research by checking off a box on the sheet of paper used to collect their replies. The participants were anonymous, and no connection could be made between the written report and a single individual since no personal information was explicitly stated in the report. In this way, the participants were guaranteed confidentiality.

Data analysis

The thematic analysis enabled the finding of 'repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 86). We deployed the phases of analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) when carrying out thematic analyses. The six phases were: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) initial coding where segments of data were given a working name, (3) searching

Table 1. Examples of initial codes.

Code	Initial codes (limited for space)
Thirst for knowledge, tools and science	Interest, best methods, wider repertoire of tools
Achieving better results as a teacher	Content with teacher role, better teacher, making use of knowledge
Improving career opportunities	Career path, new responsibility, study for master's degree, get qualification, formal competence,
Getting away: give up teaching in a classroom setting	Personal sickness, get past classroom, work situation, change workload
Influence: helping pupils and teachers	Have a voice, help pupils, legitimacy for help, develop teachers
Developing schools: identifying deficits in schools'	School criticism, create school
ways of working with special needs education	for all, lack of competence in schools, dismantle exclusion

for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes and (6) writing up the results. The relationships between the initial codes and the themes are presented in Table 1.

The first author led the analysis and the second and third authors reviewed the phases of the analysis. Together the authors developed the final six themes presented in the findings of this paper.

Findings

As shown in Table 1, the themes were: 'Thirst for knowledge, tools and science', 'Achieving better results as a teacher', 'Improving career opportunities', 'Getting away: giving up teaching in a classroom setting', 'Influence: helping pupils and teachers' and 'Developing schools: identifying deficits in schools' ways of working with special needs education'. An overview of the distribution of themes is presented in Table 2. All six themes were consistently found in all three cohorts of students. The teachers' different motives ranged from altruistic motives in terms of trying to achieve better teaching, better schools and better opportunities for pupils (social equality, inclusive education, and helping and supporting 'at risk' pupils), to more intrinsic or extrinsic motives in terms of trying to boost their careers or getting away from the classroom setting. (For a discussion on altruistic, intrinsic and extrinsic motives for becoming a teacher, see Jungert, Alm, and Thornberg 2014.) The current findings contribute to our understanding of why teachers decide to become special educators and why they decide to leave the teaching profession.

Table 2. Distribution of themes.

Code	Number of reports
Thirst for knowledge, tools and science	32
Achieving better results as a teacher	16
Improving career opportunities	29
Getting away: giving up teaching in a classroom setting	25
Influence: helping pupils and teachers	28
Developing schools: identifying deficits in schools' ways of working with special needs education	28
Total	158

Thirst for knowledge, tools and science

The students frequently reported a desire to learn. Participants described a lack of knowledge and a lack of adequate strategies, despite the fact that many of them had been working as teachers for 15–20 years.

> My first and foremost reason was that I had insufficient knowledge about pupils in need of special support. During my work as a teacher, different questions arose about how to adjust the teaching for that group of pupils.

Having knowledge was discussed in terms of having either specific tools, as below, or research-based knowledge regarding how to work with special needs. The tools were thought of as being used to better meet individual pupils' need for support, or to develop a school's way of working with special needs.

> I have worked for 15 years as a teacher and wanted to have more knowledge about how you can support and deal with pupils who have difficulties in mathematics.

> To be able to further develop my pedagogical thoughts/thoughts on teaching/methods. Tools for increased responsibility for special needs education at my school.

Sometimes the thirst for knowledge and competence were related to a specific area, working with pupils with a specific diagnosis or need for language acquisition.

> I also chose to study to be a special education teacher because of the lack of competence regarding Swedish as a second language and newly arrived pupils. Because of this, I wanted to be more certain about this aspect.

After having acquired new knowledge, the students intended to put their new knowledge, methods, tools and research-based positions to work within a school. One participant reported: 'I wanted knowledge and more authority in discussions and when working with children with special needs' (cf. Abbott 1988). This theme could be seen as a critical reflection on the problem with general education. Slee and Allan (2001) suggest that general schooling is not for everyone, and that placing more children in general education would just mean more pupils failing. This implies that better meeting the needs of pupils in special education is not merely a technical endeavour, but what are useful tools and knowledge regarding the dual system? In some ways, methods and knowledge enforce the dual system. Slee and Allan (2001) propose that a deconstruction of inclusion would be necessary in order to envision how to embrace pupils' differences. In contrast, some students discussed their motives for studying in terms of changing their own teaching by using the knowledge, methods and tools they had acquired on their courses.

Achieving better results as a teacher

A specific group that related directly to a thirst for knowledge consisted of the participants who were studying in order to become better classroom teachers. The goal was to use the acquired research-based knowledge as guidance and tools in their teaching and classroom practice. Ability-related beliefs, social utility and intrinsic values are commonly depicted as motivations for teaching (Nesje, Brandmo, and Berger 2018; Topkaya and Uztosun 2012).

> Another reason is that I don't feel competent enough when it comes to helping my pupils who need special support, and the educational programme helps me to become a better teacher.

For the participants, the goal of acquiring research-based knowledge about special education was to move from working as a general teacher to focusing on dealing with students in need of support. Areas discussed included grading or achieving established goals.

> My motivation is not to start working alone with children, like the special education needs teacher at our school does to a large extent. I want to continue to have a class, and through my increased knowledge I want to become better able to meet the needs of the pupils in my classroom.

The participants were experienced teachers; however, experience alone does not seem to be enough. The participants frequently stated a need to acquire more theoretical and research-based knowledge. When we critically scrutinising the theme, the theme reflects a way of contending the dual nature of education. This could lead to negotiations about jurisdictional control (Abbott 1988) with special educators who envision maintaining the dual system of education.

Increased career opportunities

In contrast to using further education to become better in their current position, a common objective was to change career path. In the school system, having a special education degree typically creates new opportunities. Improved career opportunities included changing to other professions, as exemplified below.

> I applied for a position as a SENCO last summer and got it. I did this to be able to apply for a position as a head teacher in the future. Because I want to work as a head teacher in the future, I applied for the special education needs coordinator programme.

Sometimes, participants stated that they already had a position related to special needs education at one school, having studied courses, but that they lacked formal qualifications. This made applying for jobs outside their own municipality complicated. In order to be formally qualified in general, a degree was necessary (cf. Abbott 1988).

> I'm still at a lower secondary school. I'm now a well-established cog in our teaching team. But I lack the qualifications to be able to apply for other jobs if I wanted to in special education.

In addition, further qualifications in special needs education were seen as important for future work as a head teacher, but also offered opportunities to work with care in other welfare institutions, or in a private corporation with inspirational education and lectures: 'Becoming a SENCO also opens new doors outside the world of school.' Formal qualifications were described as a sort of 'receipt' that can be shown in relation to competence. When critically reviewing this theme, it is apparent that inclusive ideals are not seen as a reason for studying special education. If increased career opportunities were the motive of the formal qualification, inclusive education was not envisioned. Haug (2017) proposes that inclusive education has not been adopted in any country, despite ambitions to do so. In general, formal qualifications depend on maintaining a dual system, and might create

the opposite of the formal ambition to work against inclusive ideals stipulated by Fisher, Frey, and Thousand (2003).

Getting away: giving up teaching in a classroom setting

Students frequently described using the educational programme to change what they do in order to get away from a situation that caused them stress. For example, working with adults seemed to be considered less stressful than working in school classrooms. This anticipation reflects the concept of what special educators are envisioned to work with.

> I want to work in consultation with adults and not be in the stressful situation – which, unfortunately, is today's reality – of our occupation. If I am to manage until retirement, I have to change my occupation and improve.

The negative environment and stress of being a teacher were commonly depicted as things to avoid. Working as a special education teacher was expected to be less stressful:

> The reason I want to work as a special educational needs teacher is because, after having suffered from burnout, I can no longer manage to teach all day, because it requires divided focus for much of the day.
>
> To move from working as a classroom teacher (which I think is the hardest job in a school).

Some of the reports discussed getting away from the hard work of being a classroom teacher, while others described avoiding tasks or reducing their workload. Sometimes, specific work tasks were the focus, as exemplified below in terms of contact with parents. Some of the participants described being a special educator as less demanding and with fewer tasks to be carried out, compared to being a teacher:

> I want to get away from some of the work tasks I have today.
>
> I hope to have a different workload that will mean less contact with parents, for example. (This can be a strenuous task as a classroom teacher.)

In addition, some reports stated that change was necessary to be able to continue working in a school. Some participants described having worked for a long time in schools, and said that they needed to get away from the classroom in order to continue doing so. Participants anticipated having more success and a reduced workload within the special education school system.

> Another reason is my age, I'm 50 and I think I will work for another 20 years. I imagine it to be less hard than working as a classroom teacher when I get older.

Haug (2017) concludes that there is a lack of consensus about inclusion. This needs to be considered when people opt out of the dual system because general education with inclusive ambition is discussed as being too stressful (cf. Slee and Allan 2001). In contrast to the negative change involved in avoiding or getting away from aspects of teaching, motivations for further education included trying to influence teachers and develop schools.

Influence: helping pupils and teachers

Another reason for studying involved enforcing direct change in relation to pupils and colleagues in order to better meet pupils' needs. This was commonly described as being the same thing, with helping teachers having an indirect influence on pupils.

There were motivations to influence pupils' future opportunities, as well as their direct learning in classrooms. One report stated: 'It is interesting to figure out individual solutions for each pupil', illustrating the individual impact through influencing one child at a time. The idea of influencing colleagues seldom focused on one particular teacher, instead encompassing teachers as a whole, or groups of colleagues.

> I experience SENCOs as having a varied job where you get to be a consultant for adults who have got stuck in their teaching and help them to see possibilities and not only obstacles.

One motive for further studies was to influence colleagues, and when trying to do so the students described having formal education as a credibility issue.

> Because I work with a lot of colleagues without pedagogical education, I want to further increase my influence and credibility.

In their reports, participants seemed to have received insufficient training during their teacher education and to perceive a lack of pedagogical tools, together with a sense of how schools in general, and teachers in particular, were failing some pupils. The teachers were 'lost' and could do better:

> One of the reasons is because I encounter colleagues in my daily work who are "lost" and who want to do more and could do more with a special type of consultation. I encounter children and families who need large or small amounts of support to succeed.

In order to influence pupils' opportunities, both direct and indirect methods through influencing teachers were thought of as important aspects. Here, the ideal ambition might be critically viewed as an individual solution to a collective problem. Another way of describing efforts to influence teachers and pupils was to focus on school development.

Developing schools: identifying deficits in schools' ways of working with special needs education

Further education was seen as involving new tasks at work, as exemplified above. One specific task that motivated participants to undertake further education was involvement in school development. This motivation was, in turn, linked to a general criticism made by the participants of how schools worked and were organised:

> My criticism of schools. I have always questioned schools' organisation and purpose. Both as a pupil and when working as a teacher. By the schools' organisation I mean a compulsory activity with many of the same demands for all the different individuals. And the fact that individuals are to be assessed according to these demands is something I am also critical of.

The goal lay beyond helping and supporting particular pupils and their teachers. The ambition of engaging in school development involved working with organising and coordinating support.

> I have always been interested in children/young people in need of special support and how you coordinate and organise [that support].

> I have often reflected on how the environment the school offers for learning does not suit many pupils.

The ambition, or the motivation, moved away from direct schooling, and considered the consequences for many pupils, from a wider perspective than their immediate schooling.

> I have often thought that their lives could have been different/better if they had received help earlier during their schooling. Now I work in a secondary school and the intention is to try to reach these individuals before they have to "repair" their school failure in adult education or even end up in jail.

The students had a 'vision' in terms of being on a mission to help marginalised pupils at a school that they considered to be deficient in relation to pupils in need of special support, even though this inclusive ideal was not critically scrutinised.

> I have hopes that efforts will be made to use mentoring and coaching for teachers in their work assignments, where my vision is to combat the marginalisation of students in need of special support and that we should view differences as an asset.

There were examples of using ideas about inclusive education as a way of supporting marginalised pupils and families when working with school development. In line with Abbott's (1988) use of jurisdictional control, participants described this distinction in order to gain control and power at the school, and to present themselves as the professional group that understands the Swedish Education Act. Ultimately, pupils were considered not to be receiving adequate support.

> But also, being able to work more with and for leadership and stimulation in all classrooms, not just my own, has been a reason. The Education Act is clear that support should be given to all pupils who need it, and I don't want to be a part of not enforcing the Education Act, because pupils who need support don't get it.

The participants described their motivation to undertake further education as a desire to be invited to influence their school's development. They wanted to be active participants and contribute to overall change.

> Where I work, I have identified a real need to reform the pupil health team. I want competence and a qualification within special needs to be better able to actively participate in this development.

The participants with motivations relating to school development often reported their own ideas and experiences of a failed system. Experiences of encountering pupils or teachers in need of support created the need for school development.

Discussion

This study focuses on why teachers want to study to become special educators. The study adds to knowledge about the underlying motivations given by future special educators and their expectations. This is important in order to understand how special education is organised, given that special educators also influence the schools where

they work. In general, however, the present findings (consisting of the themes *Thirst for knowledge, tools and science, Achieving better results as a teacher, Improving career opportunitie*s, *Influence: helping pupils and teachers* and *Developing schools: identifying deficits in schools' ways of working with special needs education*) confirm previous studies concerning Swedish special educators' ideas of what their work should be about: working with pupils, cooperation and consultation (Takala et al. 2015) and conducting school development (Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015; Lindqvist 2013).

There are both similarities and differences between the current findings and previous research. In Gäreskog and Lindqvist's (2020) study, for example, many SENCOs claimed that they started their education because they wanted an opportunity for personal development or out of a desire to help children who experience difficulties and a desire to prevent school problems. These statements are in line with the reasoning of many students in this study. However, none of the 523 SENCOs in Gäreskog and Lindqvist's study reported that the reason was poor job satisfaction leading to the intention of leaving the teaching profession, while *Getting away* and giving up teaching was a theme in the present study.

The participants' ideas about helping teachers can be understood as a claim for an area of jurisdiction by the special educators (*Influence: helping pupils and teachers*). In the discussion about helping teachers, it seems as though this would be unproblematic, but when working with consultation there is a risk of creating resistance to change among the teachers being consulted (Thornberg 2014). The participants had altruistic motives in terms of trying to achieve better teaching, better schools and better opportunities for pupils (social equality, inclusive education, and helping and supporting 'at risk' pupils), or more intrinsic or extrinsic motives in terms of trying to boost their careers or getting away from the classroom setting (cf. Jungert, Alm, and Thornberg 2014). The prevalence of the different themes (see Table 2) indicates altruistic, extrinsic and intrinsic motives to be evenly distributed among the cohort of participants. The motivations also give an indication of how special education is envisioned.

There is a shortage of general teachers and special educators in Sweden (Swedish National Agency for Education 2019). Educating students in special needs education in order for them to be able to continue teaching in regular classes could be an innovative solution to the double-edged problem of having neither enough regular teachers nor enough special educators in the school system. To our knowledge, this way of using the competence of special educators in the general school system has not been explored in previous studies. The thirst for knowledge and wanting to have better skills to meet different needs in the classroom, as portrayed in the theme *Achieving better results as a teacher*, introduced a new way of viewing professional development. In this theme, remaining as a teacher but having more knowledge and skills focuses solely on the general education system. This theme represents a way to construct a more varied repertoire, and as such avoids pigeon-holing (Skrtic 1991) pupils into a separate system because the teacher's repertoire is challenged.

The underlying intention that could be interpreted from the themes in the current findings involves this duality: the participants want to both dismantle and maintain the system, despite the intention of using special educators in Sweden to contest the separated system (cf. Göransson et al. 2017). For example, when critically scrutinising the themes

Getting away and *Improving career opportunities*, it is apparent that their motives do not include an intention to challenge the dual educational system. Instead, both themes rely on the system remaining intact and unchallenged. When the general education system generates too much stress, as indicated in the theme *Getting away*, the special education system can be an opportunity for continuing to work in schools. Here, machine bureaucracy (Skrtic 1991) offers a solution to the problem of experiencing stress and hardships as a teacher.

Practical implications

The various reasons for studying the programme will probably influence the jurisdictional control of special educators. If the profession is envisioned as accommodating the disparate reasons of *Getting away* or dismantling the dual school system (*Developing schools: identifying deficits in schools' ways of working with special needs education*), there is reason to believe that special educators operate locally, with a locally constructed role, within different municipalities in Sweden (Göransson et al. 2017). This will affect how the professions of special education teachers and SENCOs are perceived and whether they are considered to be influential in society (cf. Abbott 1988). This in turn will affect how special education is practised in preschools and schools (Lindqvist 2013; Göransson, Lindqvist, and Nilholm 2015). A practical application of the study is to use the themes of this study to discuss the envisioned practice among special educator students. This could possibly influence and make visible how their reasons for working with special education influence the outcome of such education, both in schools and in entire school systems. It could also strengthen consensus on what special educators' professional jurisdiction should be, as the lack of a binding jurisdiction (Klang et al. 2017) offers a way for special educators to be a part of forming the future of their profession.

Limitations

The current study has limitations that should be considered and evaluated when reading the findings. One limitation is the lack of information about the specific education programmes on which the teachers are enrolled; this could have added value to the analysis if the themes differed between the two groups included in the study. Even though the present findings are based on self-reported data from a particular and limited sample of teachers located in Sweden, the transferability of our findings could be discussed in terms of pattern recognition and context similarity (Larsson 2009). In the analysis, we relied on the participants' accounts of their reasons to study. Thus, there is a risk of participants portraying an idealised narrative of their motivation for further education. Although this might be true, the participants also discussed their worries and doubts about themselves and their future in special education. Further ethnographic studies, including both observations and interviews, should be carried out in order to enhance the ecological validity and to gain a nuanced understanding of special educators' motives to undertake the educational programme.

Disclosure statement

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