

Working from a distance? A study of Special Educational Needs Coordinators in Swedish preschools

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to increase our knowledge of the tasks, perceptions and role of special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) in preschools. The study is part of a total population study where all SENCOs in Sweden ($n = 4252$) who were examined by the examination acts of the years 2001, 2007, and 2008 were sent a questionnaire. In a later phase of the procedure, responses from SENCOs who work in preschools were extracted from the 3190 responses received and reported earlier. Thus, this study consists of 523 participants. The results show that coordinators' working hours are primarily spent on consultation. SENCOs report that they are able to influence their colleagues' views on children's difficulties to a high degree. Regarding SENCOs' perceptions of why children have difficulties in preschools, a large number of SENCOs indicate that this is because preschool is poorly prepared to handle children's differences. The outcome is discussed using theories of professions and jurisdictional control.

Keywords: *special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), preschool, occupational role, profession, jurisdictional control*

Introduction

Swedish preschool is available to all children and is a non-compulsory part of the school system. Almost half a million children participate in preschool activities in Sweden, i.e., 83% of the country's 1 to 5-year-olds (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2017a). Since preschool is the daily environment for a majority of Swedish children, we can talk about institutional learning and the school system as comprising the early years up to 18 years of age in Sweden (Tallberg Broman, 2015).

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Since preschool is open to all children, activities conducted there contribute to a child's learning and development, regardless of whether that child has difficulties or not. Special solutions in preschool are unusual (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2017b). A Swedish study shows that 17% of children in preschool are in need of special support and 4% of them are diagnosed, according to preschool staff (Lillvist & Granlund, 2010). Therefore, it is essential that preschool staff are able to accommodate the needs of all children as they develop and learn in preschool. In this context, the role of special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) in preschools is particularly interesting. SENCOs are expected to have a significant impact on the development of children in difficulties, as well as how regular staff approach these children on a daily basis (Göransson, Lindqvist, & Nilholm, 2015; Lindqvist, 2013a). In addition, several researchers have shown that high-quality preschools have long-term positive effects on education and work, especially for underprivileged children (Havnes & Mogstad, 2009; Heckman, 2006; Ruhm & Waldfogel, 2012; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2011).

Swedish preschool is of particular interest since it has been characterised by an overall view of care, development and learning for many years, a view known as *Edu-care*. However, in recent years, researchers have started discussing a paradigm shift in Sweden, where an emphasis on learning has become more prominent in the governing documents of preschools (Jönsson, Sandell & Tallberg-Broman, 2012; Kjørholt & Qvortrup, 2011; Persson, 2015). Considering this shift towards more learning and teaching in preschool, the role of SENCOs is of great import. What happens to children in need of special support in this new context? Has it become more difficult for SENCOs to respond to the inequality of children's differences, and has this led to an increase in special groups for children in difficulties? Is there a growing need for professions that focus on support? In light of these questions, the occupational role of SENCOs in preschool is interesting to investigate and explore.

In Sweden, special educators consist of two different occupational groups: special education teachers and SENCOs. The SENCO education program was introduced in the early 1990s (UHÄ 1990-06-27). In 2008, the Swedish government initiated a restart of the educational program for special education teachers in compulsory schools. In compulsory schools, special education teachers mostly work with pupils in need of special support one-to-one and/or in small groups. SENCOs work in both compulsory schools and preschools. In most municipalities, special education teachers and SENCOs are employed at the central level to provide support to several preschools and schools (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2008; Tornberg & Svensson, 2012). The work of SENCOs in Sweden differs, for example, from the work of Norwegian Educational and Psychological Counseling Service (PPT) counsellors, whose primary task is to provide an expert assessment of the child (NDET, 2017). PPT staff usually have a master's degree in counselling. Students admitted to the Norwegian Master of Science in Counselling program are recruited from a diverse range of undergraduate programs (Cameron, Tveit, Jortveit, Lindqvist, Göransson & Nilholm, 2018). Swedish SENCOs qualify

by first receiving their teaching degree followed by three years of teaching experience and one-and-a-half years (advanced level) of special educational studies in order to get a SENCO degree. Most SENCOs who work in preschools are preschool teachers with a SENCO degree (Tornberg & Svensson, 2012). This means that Swedish SENCOs have comparatively more education than their counterparts in other nations' school systems. They are trained to teach children in need of special support as well as supervise teachers and staff, document assessments, complete evaluations and help further organisational development in preschools and schools. Even though there are similarities between the occupational roles of special education teachers and SENCOs, there are significant differences (Ahlefeldt Nisser, 2014; Göransson, Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2015). As mentioned earlier, special education teachers work in schools, while SENCOs work in both preschools and schools. SENCOs who work in preschools are the focus of this study.

In this paper, the British term SENCO is used. A SENCO's role, in the British sense, is not exactly equivalent to a SENCO's role in Sweden. However, the tasks performed by British SENCOs are closely related to the tasks of Swedish SENCOs (Lindqvist, 2013a). The term SENCO is used in this article in order to relate the Swedish occupational role and work to similar special education occupations in other countries.

Researchers have pointed out that research on special education in Sweden is insufficient. Emanuelsson, Persson and Rosenqvist (2001) found that there appears to be no single research project or study that can be regarded as study of special education in preschool between 1995 and 2000, although a few recent studies do address this issue, e.g., Granlund and Lillvist (2015), Lutz (2009), Siljehag (2007) and Wetso (2006). We also found it difficult to find international research on SENCOs who only work in preschools. There is a need for research on the availability of SENCOs in preschools as well as knowledge of SENCOs' assignments, workload and roles (Palla, 2015; Persson, 2007). Studies have shown that the professional role of SENCOs is inexplicit and unclear (Lindqvist, Nilholm, Almqvist, & Wetso, 2011). Therefore, it is relevant to gain increased knowledge of the occupational role of SENCOs in preschools.

Finally, we see this study as particularly important since: 1) research on special education in preschools is insufficient, both in Sweden and internationally, 2) research on the role of SENCOs in preschools is inadequate, and 3) Sweden is interesting in terms of research for several reasons: a) almost all children, between 1 and 5 years of age attend preschool; b) Swedish preschools have a tradition of promoting and educating all children, which means that preschool activities contribute to children's learning and development, whether they experience difficulty or not; c) according to the OECD (2011), Sweden is still considered one of the most inclusive school systems in the world, and d) the organisational solution to initiate a specialised and trained group (SENCOs) to handle difficulties in Swedish preschools seems to differ compared to other countries.

Aim

The overall aim of this study is to increase our knowledge about SENCOs' tasks, perceptions and roles in preschools. As noted, the need for more knowledge about special

education and the occupational role of SENCOs in preschools is considerable (Ahlberg, 2007; Palla, 2015; Persson, 2007). This study can provide better knowledge of SENCO's professional jurisdiction and contribute to an increased understanding of the work of SENCOs in preschools (see Abbott, 1988). The present study contributes to research with a comprehensive study of the occupational role of SENCO in preschools.

The research questions were as follows:

- (1) What tasks do SENCOs consider to be characteristic of their occupational role in preschools and how do they perceive their capability to influence colleagues' views on children's difficulties?
- (2) What reasons do SENCOs give for educating themselves further as SENCOs?
- (3) What perceptions do SENCOs have about the causes of children's difficulties in preschool?

Before turning to the presentation of this study, a description of the Swedish preschool system and prior research in relation to SENCOs and their counterparts will be presented.

The Swedish preschool system

The Education Act and national preschool curriculum govern Swedish preschools (Government Office, 2018). Pedagogical activities, social goals and children's play activities are central to the preschool curriculum (Government Office, 2016). The curriculum goals state that preschools should strive to create conditions for children's development, indicating a focus on the work carried out in preschools rather than goals for individual children (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2017b). As mentioned above, most children attend preschools in Sweden even though they are non-compulsory.

According to the Education Act, children who are in need of special support in their development shall be provided the support that their special needs require. It is noteworthy that SENCOs are not mentioned in the Education Act (SFS 2010, 800), the most prescriptive document in the Swedish school system. Nor does the curriculum state that there should be specifically trained staff responsible for children in need of special support.

Prior research

Several studies, both international and Swedish, suggest that the occupational role of SENCOs in preschools and schools is unclear (Ahlefeldt Nisser, 2009; Bladini, 2004; Lindqvist et al., 2011; Rosen-Webb, 2011). In an early Swedish study by Malmgren Hansen (2002), SENCOs were examined during their education as well as their first years in the new profession. The study shows that SENCOs found it difficult to establish their new role. Lindqvist's (2013a) study determines that even though SENCOs seem to have established a new occupational role, there is still some uncertainty about what their assignment entails.

Research shows that SENCOs in Sweden have different tasks depending on where in the school organisation they work (Göransson, Lindqvist, Klang, Magnusson & Nilholm, 2015). It is more common for SENCOs who work in preschools to work as counsellors within a municipality's central administration, while SENCOs in compulsory schools, upper secondary schools and special needs schools often teach pupils in smaller groups or individually. Against this background, it is a complex task to compare the different occupational groups. There are also difficulties involved in comparing these occupational groups internationally, both in terms of which educational level (e.g. pre-school, primary school, special school or upper secondary school) SENCOs work in, and, as mentioned previously, the educational background required to become a SENCO. However, as earlier researchers (Devecchi, et al. 2012) have pointed out, we still believe that it is valuable to generate such an international outlook.

International studies reveal that SENCOs' tasks, similar to tasks performed by Swedish SENCOs in compulsory schools, are characterised by teaching smaller groups of pupils rather than working with counseling and management assignments (Abbott, 2007; Cole, 2005; Pearson & Ralph, 2007). According to a survey by Cownes (2005), SENCOs believe that an important part of their work entails counseling, and that they see themselves as consultants who work with pupils, parents and teachers. The importance of SENCOs obtaining support, power and status in order to influence activity and change children's everyday lives is emphasised by Cole (2005). Several studies discuss the difficulties SENCOs have adopting leadership roles and developing the ability to exert influence (Layton, 2005; Oldham & Radford, 2011; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Tissot, 2013). A recent study by Pearson, Mitchell & Rapti (2015) shows limited opportunities for SENCOs to achieve leadership roles. The role of SENCO is perceived as having low status, which is why it is important to redefine this role in order to ensure that the occupation is considered attractive for securing recruitment (Cole, 2005; Pearson, 2008).

One would expect the Nordic countries to be similar when it comes to the role and work of SENCOs (see Takala & Ahl, 2014; Takala, Wickman, Uusitalo-Malmivaara, & Lundström, 2015). Several studies have compared the professional role of SENCOs in Sweden, Finland and Norway (Sundqvist, Ahlefeldt Nisser, & Ström, 2014; Takala & Ahl, 2014; Takala et al., 2015, Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014). These studies found some differences between the countries. For example, in Finland special education teachers spend most of their time with pupils, while in Sweden, the supervisory role of SENCOs is more extensive (Takala & Ahl, 2014). Furthermore, SENCOs in Norway seem to work more often than before with supervising teams rather than teaching individual pupils (Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014). Another study comparing Finland and Norway focuses on special education teacher training, and concludes that the two countries' different systems can enrich each other, which is why these kinds of comparative studies are important (Hausstätter & Takala, 2008).

As mentioned earlier, the role of SENCOs in preschools is relatively unexplored, even from a Nordic perspective. The few studies that do investigate SENCOs in

preschools indicate that SENCOS mostly work as supervisors and counselors (Göransson et al., 2015; Renblad & Brodin, 2014). A few Swedish studies examine SENCOS as counselors in preschools as well as the complexity that this particular role holds (see, for example, Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009; Bladini, 2004). But, as Lindqvist (2013b) points out, there are few studies (if any) that investigate the relationship between SENCOS and preschool teachers and how this affects children in need of special support. Furthermore, Lindqvist and her colleagues (Lindqvist et al., 2011) investigate how different professions view the role of SENCOS. It appears that all occupational groups believe that SENCOS should have a major impact on the educational content provided to children who need special support. Compared to preschool teachers, SENCOS explain children's difficulties from a more relational perspective (Lindqvist et al., 2011; Lindqvist & Nilholm 2013). The comparison also shows that preschool teachers are more positive than SENCOS when it comes to diagnosing children to gain support (Lindqvist et al., 2011).

Theoretical framework

A theory of professions, primarily based on Abbott (1988), will be used here to understand the occupational role and work of SENCOS.

Abbott (1988) argues that the professions exist in a system, and each occupation is bound to certain tasks. Within this system, various professions compete for jurisdiction over work areas. Jurisdiction means that the profession claims control of both knowledge and certain work tasks. A profession's jurisdiction affects others, which means that the boundaries between professional jurisdictions can change in the workplace and that occupations resolve conflicts of jurisdiction in different ways (Abbott, 2005). A profession's jurisdiction is not permanent, with work reinforcements and weaknesses being established through competition within the system. Thus, professions compete by taking over each other's tasks. This leads to changes in the occupational system, e.g., work tasks are reformed or abolished. Brante (2014) argues that Abbott's theory can explain aspects of rivalry and competition between nearby professions. This makes the theory interesting in relation to the occupational role of SENCOS in preschools and the areas of work they claim.

The state is an important actor in the creation of professions, particularly in continental European countries (Brante, 2014; Evetts, 2011). Brante (2014) points out that through political decisions, the state can initiate the professionalization of occupations, and the autonomy of professionals is therefore dependent on government policy and interest. The concept of professionalism is used in a normative way to promote and facilitate changes of professions introduced "from the top" (Evetts, 2013). Brante's (2014) and Evetts' (2011) reasoning can be applied to how the state has influenced the establishment of education standards for SENCOS, as well as their occupational role.

In this article, we are interested in SENCOS' perceptions. Therefore it is relevant to use different perspectives on special education. There are a number of ways to look at special education and its related tasks (see Nilholm, 2005). Two perspectives are

usually distinguished. These perspectives are referred to in different ways (Nilholm, 2005). In this article, we use Persson's (1998) terms, *categorical* and *relational perspective*, to understand how SENCOs explain causes of children's difficulties.

Regarding the categorical perspective, a child's difficulties are seen as innate or otherwise linked to the individual. From this perspective, the "problem" is placed at the individual level, and it is the individual who has shortcomings. Thus, the individual becomes the focus of special education measures. From a relational perspective, difficulties are seen to arise in the child's encounter with different phenomena in the environment. The focus of special education measures is on the child, the teacher and the environment.

These two perspectives do not necessarily exclude each other, but should be seen as ideal types. They are constructions that help us understand the difference between phenomena and abstractions (Nilholm, 2007; Persson, 1998). These two perspectives have different consequences for how special needs education is structured and organised (Ainscow, 1998).

Method

Participants

This study seeks to explore the role of SENCOs who work in preschools in Sweden ($n = 523$). The study is part of a total population study where all SENCOs in Sweden ($n = 4252$) who were examined by the examination acts of the years 2001, 2007, and 2008 were sent a questionnaire. Data were gathered between March and May 2012. Data collection procedures are further described below.

Procedure

The questionnaire was developed in 2012 and partly based on prior questionnaires (see Göransson, Magnússon & Nilholm, 2012; Lindqvist et al., 2011; Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2013; Nilholm et al., 2007). It was carefully reviewed, throughout the entire construction phase, by several internal and external researchers as well as by professionals with statistical expertise from Statistics Sweden. Statistics Sweden is a national agency that is responsible for producing and distributing official statistics. In January 2012, Statistics Sweden was given the task of distributing the questionnaire and collecting and recording the responses received. Everything was administrated through Statistics Sweden, and their experts also developed and provided data sheets. Six SENCOs tested a preliminary version of the questionnaire in early spring of 2012. Feedback received from the participants in this pilot survey was mostly positive and only minor changes needed to be made. The preliminary questionnaire was also read by and discussed with two senior lecturers with long experience teaching SENCOs. When the questionnaire was sent out, an introductory letter was attached to the survey which promised confidentiality for participants in the study. Three reminders were also distributed, and the final response rate was 75 per cent ($n = 3190$; see also Göransson, Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2015). In a later phase of the procedure, the responses from SENCOs

currently working in preschools were extracted from the 3190 responses received and reported earlier. Thus, this study consists of 523 participants (i.e., 16.4 % of the 3190 respondents). There is a lack of statistics on SENCOs who work in preschools in Sweden. However, the number of SENCOs ($n = 523$) in this study correlates with the number of SENCOs working in preschools reported in previous studies (see Tornberg & Svensson, 2012). Thus, this study can be seen as an investigation of all SENCOs working in preschools in Sweden who were examined by the examination acts of the years 2001, 2007, and 2008 (c.f. Göransson, Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2015).

The questionnaire

The questions analysed in the present article were part of a larger questionnaire, which originally comprised 52 overarching questions with sub-questions. The questionnaire primarily consisted of closed questions with a few open-ended questions. Several of the response alternatives were constructed on a Likert scale. With most of the questions, respondents could choose multiple options when answering. The questionnaire was designed to cover several aspects of SENCOs' work in preschools and primary schools (e.g., work tasks, competencies and perspectives on school difficulties). It was directed to special education teachers and SENCOs who work both in preschools and schools. Thus, concepts (e.g., children/pupils, groups/classes) (see Göransson, Magnússon & Nilholm, 2012) familiar to preschool and school practice were necessary to use in the survey. In this article, the results are reported through a selection of six questions relevant to the research questions presented above.

Data analysis and presentation

Analysis of the data was completed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 24, in which descriptive statistics were computed, using frequency tallies. This was done since the whole population of SENCOs working in preschools was studied, thus, an inferential statistic was not used. Some of the questions presented in the result had several response alternatives. These responses were most often dichotomised (e.g., the response alternatives 1 = very important, 2 = rather important, 3 = rather unimportant, 4 = very unimportant, were dichotomised into important/unimportant). This was done to present a complex set of data in an accessible mode.

Results

The first results concern the tasks SENCOs describe having, and how they evaluate their capability to influence colleagues' views on children's difficulties. These results are followed by a presentation of the reasons that SENCOs consider important when entering further education to become a SENCO. The results section concludes with a presentation of SENCOs' perceptions on children's difficulties, and how they rate different causes and the importance of a medical diagnosis.

Before presenting the results, it can be beneficial to present some background data about the participants in the study. The most common SENCO is a woman (97%) and

she was born between 1947 and 1980. In addition to employment in preschools, SENCOs may also work in other parts of the school organisation, such as within the central support team within the municipality, a primary school or special needs school. As mentioned earlier, it is rare for one SENCO to be employed at a single preschool. SENCOs usually work centrally within the municipality with assignments aimed at several preschools and/or schools (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2008). SENCOs' form of employment can thus differ. What characterises the participants in this study is that they all work in preschools.

SENCOs' tasks

Respondents were asked to estimate how much of their working time they devote to different tasks (see Table 1). In the analysis, the results were divided into five time intervals, 0% being the tasks that SENCOs estimated they never do, followed by 0.1–19%, 20–50%, 51–75% and 76–100%. Thus, Table 1 shows the tasks the respondents indicate that they spend their working hours doing within the different time intervals. It was also possible for SENCOs to fill in the amount of work time they devote to other tasks. We interpret that the list of tasks cover what SENCOs do relatively well, since 85% say they never spend time on tasks not listed in the questionnaire.

Table 1: Percentage of respondents who state how much of their work time they use on different tasks. The number of respondents is presented in parentheses.

TASKS	0% of time devoted to the task	0, 1–19% of time devoted to the task	20–50% of time devoted to the task	51–75% of time devoted to the task	76–100% of time devoted to the task
Teach children/pupils individually	46% (N = 242)	25% (N = 132)	20% (N = 107)	0,02% (N = 15)	0,017% (N = 9)
Teach children/pupils in smaller groups	60% (N = 316)	21% (N = 115)	13% (N = 68)	0,013% (N = 7)	0,005% (N = 3)
Teach in 'regular' classes/groups	86% (N = 451)	0,065% (N = 34)	0,036% (N = 19)	0,0019% (N = 1)	0% (N = 0)
Lead qualified dialogues, individual children/pupils	66% (N = 346)	30% (N = 158)	0,005% (N = 3)	0% (N = 0)	0% (N = 0)
Consultation, counselling, dialogues with assistants	68% (N = 306)	36% (N = 192)	0% (N = 0)	0% (N = 0)	0% (N = 0)
Consultation, counselling, dialogues with teachers	0,074% (N = 39)	37% (N = 196)	45% (N = 238)	0,047% (N = 25)	0,007% (N = 4)
Collaboration with legal guardians	13% (N = 69)	78% (N = 411)	0,051% (N = 27)	0% (N = 0)	0% (N = 0)
Collaboration with school administration	17% (N = 89)	63% (N = 334)	15% (N = 82)	0,0019% (N = 1)	0% (N = 0)
Other school development	34% (N = 183)	52% (N = 275)	0,09% (N = 48)	0% (N = 0)	0% (N = 0)
Evaluation, individual ed. plans and documentation	13% (N = 69)	47% (N = 251)	35% (N = 186)	0,0019% (N = 1)	0% (N = 0)
Collaboration with pupil welfare team	35% (N = 184)	55% (N = 291)	0,055% (N = 29)	0% (N = 0)	0,0019% (N = 1)
Collaboration with municipal administration	75% (N = 396)	21% (N = 110)	0,0019% (N = 1)	0% (N = 0)	0% (N = 0)
Collaboration with external agencies	19% (N = 104)	73% (N = 382)	0% (N = 23)	0% (N = 0)	0% (N = 0)
Other	85% (N = 447)	0,065% (N = 34)	0, 015% (N = 8)	0,003% (N = 2)	0,003% (N = 2)

The following presentation is an extract from Table 1. It becomes clear that 45% of SENCOs who work in preschools spend between 20–50% of their working hours on consultation, counseling and in qualified dialogue (i.e professional dialogue) with teachers. These three tasks comprise how most SENCOs say they occupy most of their time. Furthermore, evaluation, individual education plans and documentation are also tasks that they (35%) spend between 20–50% of their working hours on.

Figures 1 and 2, below, are excerpts from Table 1. They are presented to visualise how SENCOs' working hours are devoted to different tasks.

As Figure 1 shows, 78% of SENCOs state that they spend 0.1–19% of their working hours in collaboration with legal guardians. Collaboration with external agencies is also included in the duties and the figure displays that 73% of respondents use 0.1–19% of their working hours on this task (see Figure 1).

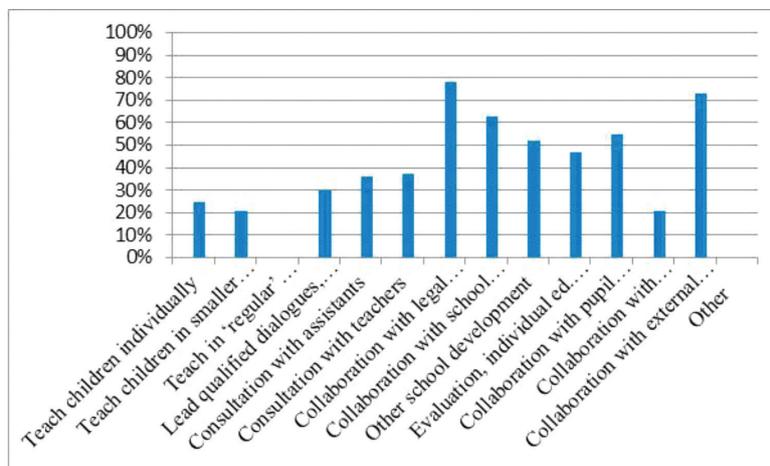


Figure 1: Percentage of SENCOs who identify which tasks occupy 0.1–19% of their working hours.

Figure 2, below, shows the tasks that SENCOs state that they *never* do. SENCOs estimate that they never teach in classes or in smaller groups (see Figure 2). On the other

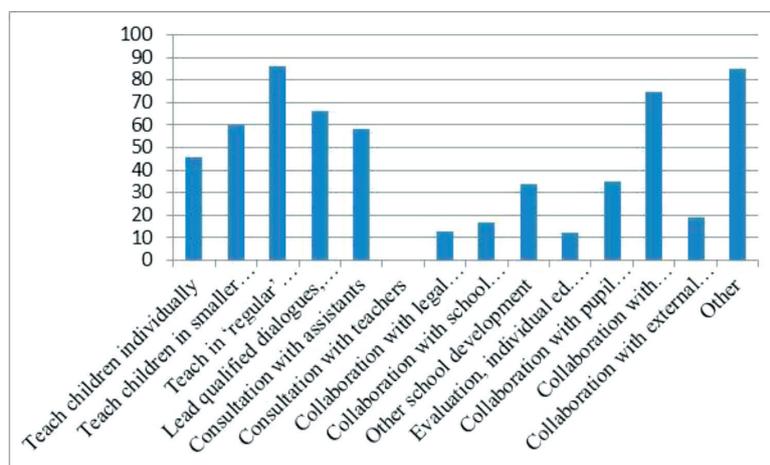


Figure 2: Percentage of SENCOs who identify which tasks occupy 0% of their working hours (by respondent percentage).

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hand, teaching children individually is represented. However, a large proportion, 46%, of the SENCOs state that they never teach children individually. Nor do they engage in qualified dialogues with individual children to any measurable extent. The same goes for collaboration with municipal administration, which 75% of the respondents highlight as a task they do not take part in.

The possibility to influence

With regard to SENCOs' perceived capability to influence their colleagues' views on children's difficulties, 96% of respondents consider that they have a very large/rather large possibility to influence their colleagues' views.

Reasons for further education to become a SENCO

SENCOs received the following question: *How important or unimportant were the following reasons to you for starting your education to become a SENCO?* Table 2 shows the different options that the respondents could choose from and which options were chosen most.

Table 2: Percentage of SENCOs who indicate "very important" as reason for further education.

RESPONSE ALTERNATIVES	VERY IMPORTANT
I wanted to work with qualified dialogues	42%
I wanted to work with consultation	32%
I wanted to work individually with children in need	12%
I wanted to teach children in group activities	0,0%
I wanted to work with school development	37%
I wanted to work to prevent school problems	48%
I wanted to work with children with specific problems	30%
I wanted to work in teams	38%
I wanted to help children in difficulties	61%
I wanted to educate children in difficult situations	44%
I did not enjoy my job	0,0%
The principal wanted me to further educate	0,1%
I was inspired by SENCOs in my environment	19%
I experienced difficulties during my own school years	0,0%
Someone in my family/friends has had disabilities school difficulties	0,1%
I have disabilities	0,0%
I thought it would be easy to get work	0,1%
An opportunity for personal development	67%
A career opportunity	29%
Formal eligibility	45%
Other	0,1%

Table 2 shows that the main reason respondents chose further education was the possibility of personal development. Furthermore, 61% say that the opportunity to help children in difficult situations is the most important reason. Another reason is the ability to help prevent school problems, which 48% of respondents believe to be the main reason for further education.

SENCO's perceptions

The following question was posed: *How important/unimportant do you think the following reasons are when children/pupils encounter difficulties in preschool/school?*

The options provided were:

- (a) Schools'/preschools' goals are too difficult
- (b) The child's individual deficiencies
- (c) Preschool/school is poorly prepared to handle differences
- (d) The child's home environment is insufficient
- (e) Some teachers' skills are insufficient
- (f) Some groups/classes function badly
- (g) Other

Regarding the answer to the question, 96% of SENCOs' chose the option "preschool is poorly prepared to handle differences". Also, 95% of SENCOs respond that "some teachers' skills are insufficient" as very important/rather important cause of children's difficulties (see Figure 3). SENCOs do not concur to the same degree regarding "the child's individual deficiencies", with only 39% responding that this is a very important/rather important reason why children encounter difficulties in preschool. We can also see from Figure 3 that 84% of SENCOs chose "some groups function badly" as an important reason.

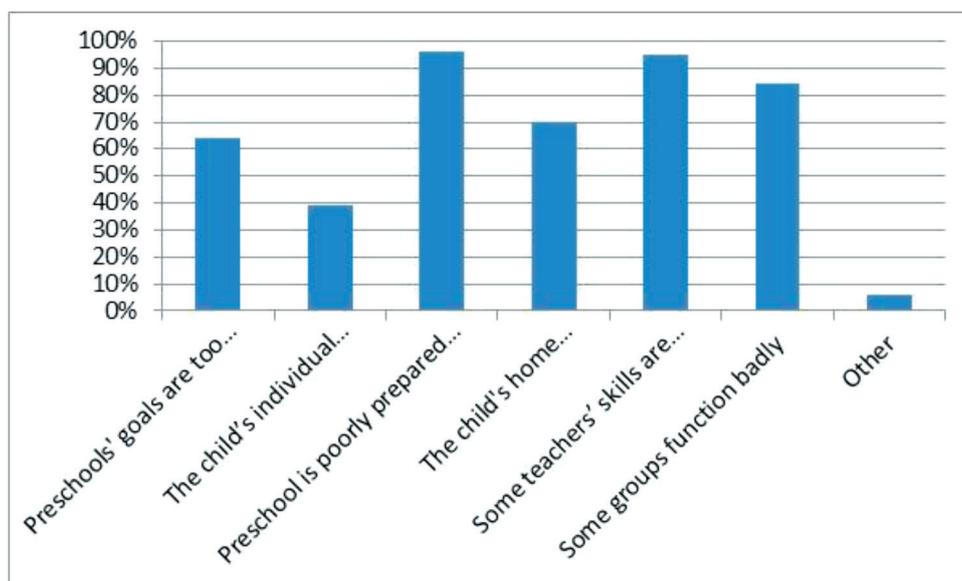


Figure 3: Percentage of SENCOs who perceive various reasons to be very important and rather important explanations for why children encounter difficulties in preschool.

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SENCOs also replied to the questions: *How important or unimportant is it that children are diagnosed in order to receive special support in the preschool/school/organisation in which you work?* and *How important/unimportant do you think a medical diagnosis should be in order for children/pupils to receive special support in the preschool/school/organisation in which you work?*

Responses to the first question reveal a similar spread across the response options. Diagnosis is very important/rather important to 42% of the respondents (see Figure 4).

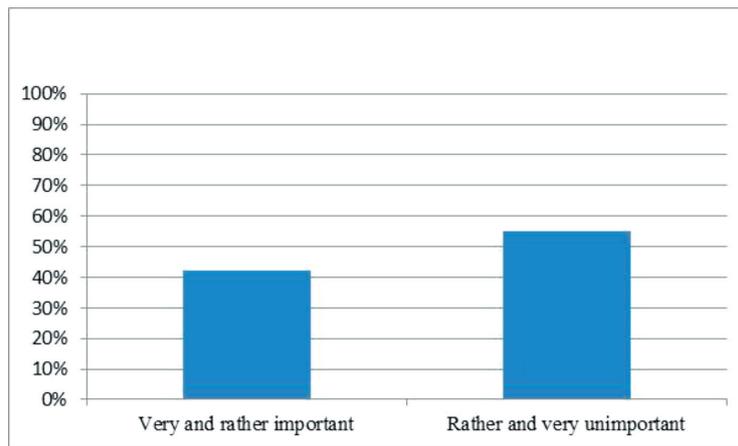


Figure 4: Percentage of SENCO's perceptions on the importance of diagnosis for support in preschool.

However, the message is clear: SENCOs do not think that diagnosis *should* be important in order for a child to receive support. Of the respondents, 90% state that diagnosis should be rather unimportant/very unimportant in order to receive support (see Figure 5).

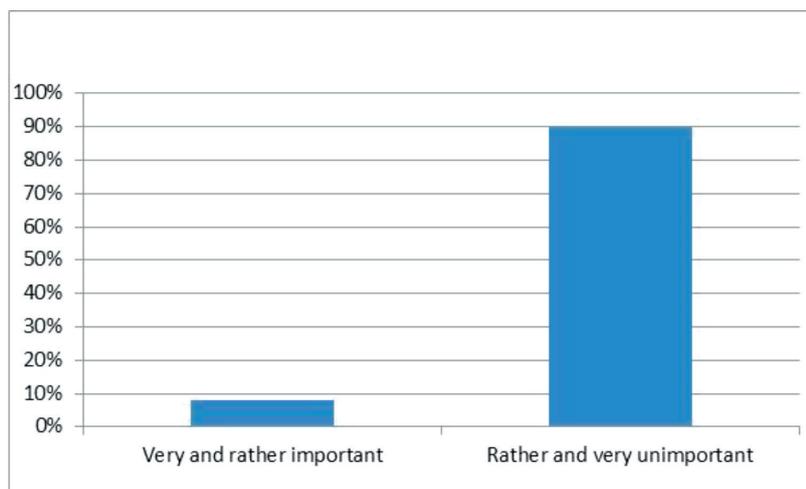


Figure 5: Percentage of SENCO's perceptions on how diagnosis should affect getting support in preschool.

Summary of primary findings

In summary, the results show that most SENCOS' working hours are primarily spent on the following: consultation, collaboration and evaluation. SENCOS assess that they have opportunities to influence their colleagues' views on children's difficulties. The reasons SENCOS state as most crucial for their decision to continue their education to become a SENCO were the opportunity to gain personal development, possibilities to help children in difficult situations and to work preventively with school problems. With regard to SENCOS' perceptions on why children have difficulties in preschool, a large number of the respondents reply that preschool is poorly prepared to handle differences. Another clear result from the study is that SENCOS do not believe that a medical diagnosis should be of importance in order for children to receive support in preschool.

Discussion

The following questions will be discussed below: (1) the limitations of the study, (2) the results in relation to previous studies and our theoretical framework, and (3) possible consequences for practice and future research.

The respondents in this study work in preschools but, as mentioned earlier, they may also work in other school organisations, for example, in a central support team within the municipality, in a primary school or in a special needs school. These different parts of the school system are governed by diverse policy documents and organised in different ways. This means that the results can be difficult to interpret since some of the respondents have to, for example, handle different goals and documents depending on where in the school organisation they operate on a daily basis. Furthermore, qualitative studies of SENCOS' work in preschools are necessary in order to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the results presented in this study.

The aim of this study was to increase our knowledge about SENCOS, their tasks, perceptions and role in preschools. The results show that SENCOS in preschools are mainly engaged in consultation, counseling and leading dialogues with teachers. They do not spend a lot of their time teaching children in smaller groups, teaching children individually or leading qualified dialogues with individual children. Based on this result, it can be concluded that SENCOS in preschools do not work in close contact with children. The reported data indicate that SENCOS operate in other contexts, including work aimed at staff and parents. This is consistent with previous studies showing that it is more common for preschool SENCOS to work with counseling in central administration (Göransson et al., 2015). Lindqvist and Nilholm (2013) point out that preschools do not have a tradition of employing special education teachers who work individually with children in need of support. Rather, SENCOS' work has been more focused on the guidance of staff in order to support them in their work with children's needs. In the same vein, the survey by Cowne (2005) also shows that SENCOS who work in schools believe that an important part of their work is counseling. This also seems to be a trend in the Nordic countries (see Lindqvist & Cameron, 2014; Sundqvist, Ahlefeldt Nisser, & Ström, 2014).

Against this background, the role of SENCOs in preschools can be described as detached from teaching and interactions with individual children and groups of children. In this study, 96% of the respondents consider themselves to have considerable influence on their colleagues' views on children's difficulties. Given that SENCOs work remotely from children, this result is interesting, and one may question whether or not this is the case.

According to the results, several of the tasks that SENCOs perform are collaborative in nature. This is in line with the statutes of the Swedish Education Act, where it states that a child's guardian should be given the opportunity to participate in the design of support measures (SFS, 2010: 800, chapters 8, 9). In this context, it is interesting to consider the role of regular preschool teachers with regard to co-operation with parents. According to policy documents, co-operation with the child's guardian is primarily the responsibility of the preschool teacher (Government Office, 2016). If we relate this result to the reasoning of Abbott (1988) about occupational groups' ability to claim certain knowledge and carry out certain tasks in order to gain jurisdictional control, it can be concluded that SENCOs believe that they can claim jurisdiction over this area of competence (i.e., collaboration with legal guardians when children are in need of special support). The result of this current study is in line with previous studies (e.g., Cowne, 2005; Göransson et al., 2015; Lindqvist et al., 2011) which indicate an expectation for SENCOs to take responsibility for children with different kinds of difficulties. However, once again, we question whether SENCOs should actually take on responsibility for collaboration with guardians, when the results indicate that they have little direct interaction with the children.

Personal development was the reason that most SENCOs put forward when they responded to the question why they chose to become a SENCO. Helping children in difficult situations and having the possibility to work preventively with school problems were also chosen as important reasons. As pointed out earlier, SENCOs work rather distantly from children in preschool. As such, their responses as to why they started their education are interesting. The question arises: How can SENCOs help children in difficult situations and prevent school problems when they exercise a rather distant work role? The way in which they contribute through consultation, counseling and leading qualified dialogues with preschool teachers is relevant to further analysis. Direct effects on children through counseling and consultation to teacher teams is a largely unexplored area (Lindqvist, 2013b).

In this survey, a large proportion of respondents state that the causes of children's difficulties in preschool are due to the fact that preschool is poorly prepared to handle differences and that some teachers' skills are insufficient. The results indicate that SENCOs have a relational perspective concerning children's difficulties, i.e., children's difficulties arise when the child encounters different phenomena in the environment (see Persson, 1998). On the other hand, a minority of the SENCOs state that individual deficiencies are an important cause of difficulties. Thus, a categorical perspective on children's difficulties is not prominent among SENCOs. The

result, i.e., that SENCOS state that the causes of children's difficulties in preschool are due to the fact that preschools are poorly prepared to handle differences and that some teachers' skills are insufficient, is also interesting given the fact that the government created SENCOS' professional role (see Evetts, 2011; Göransson, Lindqvist & Nilhom, 2015) almost 30 years ago to influence these specific issues. How much, and what *can* SENCOS influence are relevant questions to pose, especially since 96% of the respondents claim that they have a significant capability to influence their colleagues' views.

Furthermore, based on the results, it appears that SENCOS do not think that a diagnosis should affect children's eligibility to receive support in preschool. This is in line with previous research, where a study shows that SENCOS do not consider a diagnosis to be necessary. Preschool teachers, on the other hand, are more positive towards diagnosing children in order for them to receive support (Lindqvist et al., 2011). This is also the case concerning SENCOS' views on children's difficulties: SENCOS appear to represent a more relational perspective than their colleagues at preschools (see Lindqvist et al., 2011; Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2013). Relating to our previous discussion, despite the differences in views, 96% of the SENCOS respond that they have significant capability to influence their colleagues' views on children's difficulties. This result is contradictory to other studies, where SENCOS are reported to have limited opportunities to change the opinions of other groups, exercise influence and carry out their leadership role (see Göransson, Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2015; Layton, 2005; Oldham & Radford, 2011; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Tissot, 2013). Based on Abbott's (1988) reasoning, once again, there is a constant struggle between occupational groups on areas of work and knowledge. SENCOS' unequivocal statements about the possibility to influence their colleagues could be a strategy to gain legitimacy and to increase their jurisdictional control over children in need of support. This demonstrates the need for further research on preschool teachers' perceptions on the role of SENCOS and how this role is negotiated in preschools. Since the professional role of SENCOS was created and initiated by the state (see Brante, 2014; Evetts, 2011), and not from the explicit need of other professions, it becomes even more relevant to investigate how preschool teachers look upon the role of SENCOS.

To sum up, we argue that this study can 1) provide further clarification about the professional role of SENCOS in preschools; 2) enlighten decision makers about how SENCOS work in preschools; and 3) inform decision makers about the need to further investigate what impact the introduction of SENCOS has had in preschools and the effect their work may have on children in difficulties. We believe that this paper sheds light on some of the issues that have been, to date, unclear regarding the occupational role of SENCOS in Swedish preschools. We also believe that this study can be valuable in a Nordic context as well as internationally. Using the reasoning of Abbott (1988), we argue that issues concerning struggle and negotiation of new and existing professions are universal dilemmas in education, not least when it comes to occupational groups involved in special support. Furthermore, this study shows the need

for future research on SENCOs' work in a number of areas, for example, how other occupational groups, especially preschool teachers, perceive SENCOs' work and role.

As mentioned earlier, researchers have begun discussing a paradigm shift, where an emphasis on learning has become more prominent in preschools' governing documents (see Jönsson et al., 2012; Kjørholt & Qvortrup, 2011; Persson, 2015). This may mean that preschools will become more similar to schools. In this context, it is relevant to consider what this may mean for children in difficulties. Children's differences and possibly their difficulties, might become more highlighted. Against this background, occupational groups' different views regarding how children's difficulties should be interpreted and treated, become relevant (cf. Lindqvist, 2013b). What will the role of SENCOs be in the future? Will the support SENCOs provide be geared towards preventive work or remedial action, if and when activities, staff and children do not achieve the demands required by the state? Thus, studies about the future role of SENCO in preschools is important and relevant, for professionals, for decision makers and not least for the research community.

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Appendix

The questions analysed in the present article were part of a larger questionnaire, which originally comprised 52 overarching questions with sub-questions. The questionnaire was designed to cover several aspects of SENCOS' work in preschools and primary schools (e.g., work tasks, competencies and perspectives on school difficulties). It was directed to special needs teachers and SENCOS who work both in preschools and schools. Thus, concepts (e.g., children/pupils, groups/classes) (see Göransson, Magnússon & Nilholm, 2012) familiar to preschool and school practice were necessary to use in the survey. In this article, the results are reported through a selection of six questions (see below) relevant to the research questions.

(1) What tasks do SENCOS consider to be characteristic of their occupational role in preschool and how do they perceive their capability to influence colleagues' views on children's difficulties?

13. How much of your employment as a special teacher/SENCO do you work with the following activities (also count in preparation time where this occurs)?

Estimate the percentage and divide to 100%.

Teach children/pupils individually			
Teach children/pupils in smaller groups			
Teach in 'regular' classes/groups			
Lead qualified dialogues, individual children/pupils			
Consultation, counselling, dialogues with assistants			
Consultation, counselling, dialogues with teachers			
Collaboration with legal guardians			
Collaboration with school administration			
Other school development			
Evaluation, individual ed. plans and documentation			
Collaboration with pupil welfare team			
Collaboration with municipal administration			
Collaboration with external agencies			
Other			

42. How large or small do you assess your possibility to influence your colleagues' views on children's/ adolescents'/ adults' difficulties?

- Very large
- Rather large
- Rather small
- Very small

(2) What reasons do SENCOS give for further educating themselves to SENCOS?

37. How important or unimportant were the following reasons to you for starting your education to become a SENCO?

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	Very important	Rather important	Rather unimportant	Very unimportant
I wanted to work with qualified dialogues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wanted to work with consultation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wanted to work individually with children in need	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wanted to teach children in group activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wanted to work with school development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wanted to work to prevent school problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wanted to work with children with specific problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wanted to work in teams	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wanted to help children in difficulties	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I wanted to educate children in difficult situations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I did not enjoy my job	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The principal wanted me to further educate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I was inspired by SENCOs in my environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I experienced difficulties during my own school years	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Someone in my family/friends has/had disabilities/school difficulties	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have disabilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I thought it would be easy to get work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
An opportunity for personal development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A career opportunity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Formal eligibility	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other, enter what in the box below	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(3) What perceptions do SENCOs have about the causes of children’s difficulties in preschool?

38. How important/unimportant do you think the following reasons are when children/pupils encounter difficulties in preschool/school?

	Very important	Rather important	Rather unimportant	Very unimportant
Schools’/preschools’ goals are too difficult	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The child’s individual deficiencies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Preschool/school is poorly prepared to handle differences	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The child’s home environment is insufficient	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some teachers’ skills are insufficient	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some groups/classes function badly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other, enter what in the box below	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



40. How important or unimportant *is* it that children are diagnosed in order to receive special support in the preschool/school/organisation in which you work?

- Very important
- Rather important
- Rather unimportant
- Very unimportant

41. How important/unimportant do you think a medical diagnosis *should* be in order for children/pupils to receive special support in the preschool/school/organisation in which you work?

- Very important
- Rather important
- Rather unimportant
- Very unimportant