Stuck in failure: comparing special education needs assessment policies and practices in Sweden and Germany

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ABSTRACT

The definition for special education needs (SEN) and the policies for its assessment varies widely between countries. This paper aims to investigate similarities and differences through a Swedish-German comparative approach. Based on the distinction between categorical and relational perspectives as expressions of specific thought styles, 58 SEN assessment reports from both countries were qualitatively analysed. The results demonstrate the maintenance of the categorical perspective in terms of focusing on the pupil’s ‘failure’. This result is even more notable in the German examples than the Swedish cases. Exceptionally and in both countries, a relational perspective emerges, taking teaching and the social environment into account. In conclusion, we suggest a flexible SEN approach with a stronger emphasis on the relation between the individual and the learning environment.

Introduction

Regardless of the demands of decategorization in inclusive education (e.g. Skrtic, 1991), identifying pupils with special education needs (SEN) is a statutorily formalized process in many school systems. A large body of research problematizes the negative effects of labelling, such as stigmatization (e.g. Norwich, 2013). At the same time, SEN definitions vary widely, at the same time representing different thought styles (Fleck, 1979). Desforges and Lindsay (2010, p. 3) describe a ‘substantial variation in both policy and practice’ across and within various countries. Some of them, but not all, require a diagnosis of disability when assessing SEN. Similarly, Rix et al. (2013, p. 388) conclude in an international comparative study that ‘no two countries shared a view about who needs support, the nature of the support they provided or the nature of an appropriate curriculum’. Consequently, and hardly surprisingly, the number of students categorized as having SEN differs greatly between countries. For example, an EU report documents a discrepancy ‘ranging from 1.5 percent in Sweden to 24 percent in Iceland’ (European Commission, 2013, p. 10). Such considerable variations can be traced back to national contexts with their specific definitions and statistics; e.g. the aforementioned Swedish percentage contains only students in separated educational settings. Discussing categorizations across countries implies varying definitions of the social construct of SEN.

Bearing this phenomenon in mind, relatively few studies evaluate the assessment processes. Recently, in discussions on inclusive education, questions of testing and diagnostic cultures have attracted attention (Hamre, Morin, & Ydesen, 2018). Within the framework of this project, we examined SEN assessment in the Swedish region, Scania, and the German state, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) (Barow & Östlund, 2018, 2019a). By contrasting two countries, international comparative studies promise deeper insight into varying developments, e.g. regarding policy development and the number of pupils categorized as having SEN.

Aim of the study and research questions

For widening our research, we report here on the nature and rationale of Swedish and German SEN assessment reports from an international comparative viewpoint. Particularly with regards to inclusion into mainstream education, a reflection about the assessment processes is undoubtedly relevant. This paper aims to discuss similarities and differences in SEN assessment reports in Sweden and the German state of NRW. The two countries are of distinct interest because they have undergone major changes in their respective education systems in recent years. Sweden reformed the SEN categorization in 2014. Since the same year, NRW has implemented a new education act that favours inclusive education. Regarding participation in SEN assessment, we take up the notion of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, stating that the ‘child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in...
any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child’ (OHCHR, Undated, article 12, paragraph 2). According to the convention, the view of the child – directly or through a representative – must be taken into account. This is of interest particularly in Sweden, where the child right convention has become national law in 2020. In our research, we address the following research questions:

(1) What are the central elements of SEN assessment in Sweden and NRW;
(2) How do parents and the pupils concerned participate in the assessment;
(3) What consequences do the SEN assessment reports suggest; and more overarching
(4) What thought styles become apparent in the assessment reports?

These questions are pertinent not only in the context of discussions in Sweden and Germany. From a wider perspective and for an international readership, the research exemplifies the significance of SEN assessment within the framework of inclusive education. We suggest that specific pedagogical thought styles, expressed as categorical and relational perspectives (Persson, 2003), become visible in SEN assessment reports.

Special education in the Swedish and German school system

Historically, the education systems in Sweden and Germany have similar roots, but they developed very differently over the last decades. Already in the 1960s, Sweden reformed its school system towards a comprehensive school, literally often described as ‘one school for all’. Despite a variety of policy reforms since the 1990s, the number of special classes and special schools is rather low. Approximately 1% of all students attend special schools for pupils with intellectual disability (särskola). Little more than another 1% – more boys than girls and increasing with age – receive support in special classes (särskild undervisningsgrupp). A very small number of students attend state-run schools for children who are blind, deaf or have severe speech impairments. According to the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and as a main principle, special education support should be provided in regular education. Swedish research highlights the categorical perspective of SEN assessment (Backlund, 2007; Hjörne & Säljö, 2013). Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström (2010) distinguish between pedagogical, social and medical models of SEN assessment. Medical diagnosis, e.g. ADHD, are important in certain schools for resource allocation (Giota & Emanuelsson, 2011), but varying school cultures exist (Odenbring, Johansson, & Hunehäll Berndtsson, 2017).

In contrast to Sweden, most German states administer a multi-track school system. Only for years 1 to 4 at the primary level – in two of the 16 federal states up to year 6 – a school exists aiming at integrating the vast majority of children. At the secondary level, different types of schools exist, leading to different school-leaving qualifications. Parallel to this system, a fourth track of different special schools was established in the twentieth century. Up to 10 different types of special schools have arisen, mainly connected to disability categorizations. Until 1994, this differentiating special school system was the fundament of special education support. A SEN categorization was conterminous with placement at some kind of special school. The introduction of special education support categories (Förderschwerpunkte) shifted the view towards the individual needs of the pupil, but obviously has its roots in the older categorization system.

German research (Eggert, 1988; Ricken & Schuck, 2016) points out the lack of analysis of performances, skills and observations. Parents are hardly involved in the process of SEN assessment. Intelligence tests play a major role, although endure strong criticism (e.g. Barow & Östlund, 2019a; Kottmann, 2006; Pähl & Powell, 2011). At the theoretical level, several authors (e.g. Amrhein, 2016; Dederich, 2016; Hinz & Köpfer, 2016) critically discuss the need for categorization in the context of inclusion.

Different definitions and the scope of special education needs

Sweden and Germany have rather different understandings of SEN. Nevertheless, in an international comparison, the number of students with SEN in both countries fluctuates in a medium range. In recent years, the percentage of SEN students decreased in Sweden while rising in Germany. Figure 1 shows the share of pupils with SEN in Sweden and NRW. Irrespective of certain differences, there are more SEN cases in upper years, and almost the same SEN percentage in year 9.

The Swedish Education Act defines SEN as the risk that a student cannot meet the required learning objectives or has ‘other difficulties’ in school (SFS 2010:800, chapter 3, § 8); it is not stipulated what type of difficulties these could be. Special support is defined as ‘measures of more intervening character which normally are not possible to conduct for teachers and other school staff in the framework of usual teaching’ (Skolverket, 2014, 11; translation by the authors). Therefore, special support is differentiated from so-called additional adjustments introduced in 2014. As a consequence of the new policy, the number of students with SEN in Sweden diminished from 12.2% in 2013/2014 to 5.3% in 2018/2019 (Skolverket, 2019). Concerning the categorization ‘additional adjustment’, no statistics exist. Only students with SEN have the right to an ‘individual support plan’. Although less SEN categorizations exist, the number of pupils missing learning objectives at the end of compulsory school is currently 15.6%
In Sweden, there are major differences between the 16 federal states regarding SEN assessment. These variances concern the role of the parents in the categorization procedure, administrative responsibilities and placement options (Sälzer, Gebhardt, Müller, & Pauly, 2015). In NRW, the focus of the German portion of this study, SEN is connected to various support categories, mainly disability definitions. Nowadays, the most common support categories are ‘learning’, ‘emotional and social development’, ‘intellectual development’ and ‘speech’. Moreover, the categories ‘physical and motor development’, ‘hearing and communication’, and ‘sight’ exist. In particular, the category ‘learning’ – earlier named ‘learning disability’ (Lernbehinderung) – has evoked criticism owing to its terminological ambiguity (Barow & Östlund, 2019a). According to the reform of certain regulatory documents in 2014, special education support should be supplied in regular school. In practice, however, the proportion of pupils in special schools (4.6% in 2018) is roughly at the same level as it was 25 years ago (Ministerium für Schule und Bildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2019, p. 35). The impact of inclusion in NRW is connected to the dramatic increase of SEN categorizations over the last decades: from approximately 4.5% in the mid-1990s to 8.1% in 2018 (ibid.).

Processes of SEN assessment

The rules regarding the initiative for the assessment vary between the two countries. In Sweden, school staff, parents or the pupil concerned can apply. In NRW, the 2014 reform stresses the parents’ responsibility in applying for SEN assessment. Only under exceptional circumstances can the school formally request it. However, previous research (Barow & Östlund, 2019a) demonstrated that, practically speaking, schools are still in the initiating position.

In Sweden, national guidelines for SEN assessment exist (Skolverket, 2014). These regulations stipulate pedagogical investigations at the levels of the individual, group and school. The carrying out of the SEN assessment in Sweden is accounted for by multi-professional pupil welfare teams (Hjörne & Säljö, 2013), with the school principal as the accountable decision-maker. The pupils’ guardians are also invited as cooperative partners with the assessment. In contrast, in NRW, the school administration is in charge of the entire process. A SEN teacher and another teacher from a regular school, usually the class teacher, have the task of preparing a report surrounding the pupil concerned.

In both countries, the assessment has the objective of answering the question of whether SEN can be attributed in the case of challenges faced. In Sweden, the pedagogical assessment covers the situation of the pupil at the individual, group and organization levels. In the case of possible placement at a school for pupils with intellectual disability (särskola), beyond the pedagogical report, there is needed social, psychological and medical assessment. In NRW, the emphasis is more on assumed support categories, e.g. on ‘learning’ or ‘speech’. In the case of SEN, the school administration suggests at least one regular school with an inclusive setting. However, parents have the right to choose a special school instead.

Theoretical orientation

In special education, the distinction between a categorical perspective and relational perspective is
relatively common, at least in a Nordic context. With respect to Alan Dyson’s work, Persson (2003) has developed an ideal-typical model regarding the consequences for special education activities. A number of these aspects are highly relevant concerning research on categorization processes. Regarding the ontology of and the reasons for SEN, the categorical perspective refers to ‘actual characteristics of individuals’ and ‘students with difficulties’ (ibid.; p. 277; italics in the original). On the contrary, the relational perspective emphasizes that SEN are ‘social constructs’ and sees ‘students in difficulties’ (ibid. italics in the original). Whereas the categorical perspective is ‘differentiating and categorising’ regarding an approach to difference, the relational perspective accentuates the ‘unifying’ aspects (ibid.). While the categorical perspective stresses individual shortcomings, relational perspectives are more oriented towards the learning environment and form a holistic support approach.

Epistemologically, Persson refers his model to Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm shift. In our research, we concentrate rather on Ludwik Fleck’s thought style approach. In his definition, thought style means the readiness for ‘direct perception, with corresponding mental and objective assimilation of what has been so perceived’ (Fleck, 1979, p. 99; italics in the original). Fleck sees the supplement, development and transformation of thought styles as being responsible for empirical discovery. In contrast to Kuhn’s paradigm shift, different thought styles can exist in parallel, just like the categorical and relational perspectives. We suppose that SEN reports reflect different thought styles closely related to the categorical and relational perspective. In our research, we in fact discuss the significance of differing thought styles. Inspired by Clark, Dyson, and Millward (1998), we make the assumption that existing education systems lead to a dilemma when aiming to avoid categorizations and there is a continuing need to differentiate teaching according to individual learning needs.

Methods and materials
Based on Bray and Thomas’ framework for comparative education analysis (Bray & Thomas, 1995), we combine the level of countries (Sweden, centralized education system) with the level of states (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, decentralized education system). At the same time, we assume a variety of concrete approaches on the district level (municipalities) within each country. Giving the limitations of the research design, we aspire to fulfil the demand of a multilevel analysis, at least partly. In our study, we address pupils with SEN as a certain group in the context of the related categorization process as a particular aspect of education. The material for this research contains 58 SEN assessment reports, 29 from each country, dated mainly between 2014 and 2016. Using such pedagogical documents for research is supposed to offer a greater understanding of educational practices. By doing so from an international comparative point of view, we hope to make visible similarities and differences regarding SEN assessment practices in Sweden and Germany. Owing to the diverse structure of the German education system, we based our work on NRW, one of the largest states in terms of area and population. We selected the municipalities based on aspects of population density (urbanity vs. rurality), bearing in mind that the selection in qualitative research cannot be representative. Data were collected in three southern Swedish municipalities and five NRW municipalities. We requested schools (Sweden) and school administrations (NRW) to anonymize SEN assessment reports and render them accessible for research. Based upon the fact that the German reports are not generally accessible, we were dependent on the cooperation and preselection of the school administration in these municipalities.

We carried out a qualitative document analysis of the collected material, focusing on ‘meaningful and relevant passages of text’ (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). Beginning with formal aspects, like length of the reports and age of the pupils, we identified the themes initiation, reason and conduct of the SEN categorization process, previous support of the pupil, participation of parents and the pupil concerned, and proposed consequences of the assessment. We summarized the data in a table (Barow & Östlund, 2019b) and evaluated the material by searching for specific themes and patterns, particularly with regards to similarities and differences between the Swedish and German reports.

Results
The analysis of the assessment reports was guided by the research questions and yielded four main themes. We summarize them as: central characteristics of the assessment; participation of pupils and guardians; consequences of the assessment; and thought styles. Quotations from the SEN assessment reports are reproduced as case 1–58, where cases 1–29 are from Sweden and cases 30–58 from Germany.

Central characteristics of the assessment
Assessment reports in both countries follow a specific nature and rationale. When comparing the reasons, complexity and content of the reports, we see both similarities and differences. For one, the Swedish pupils are considerably older than their German counterparts. In Sweden, many young people receive a SEN categorization above the age of 12 years. In Germany, foremost younger children are categorized as having SEN. Regarding the
common support category, ‘learning’, the SEN categorization is often carried out at the end of the school-entry phase, approximately 9 years of age.

In Sweden, the assessments were conducted for determining new or evaluating existing SEN; they are short-dated and SEN may cover certain months. In contrast, the German reports were only compiled when applying for SEN; they are medium- to long-term-oriented in the case of SEN at least one school year. The evaluation in NRW is the task of the class conference, a joint decision of teachers.

The complexity and length of the reports differ enormously. Based on state rules, the Swedish reports follow municipality guidelines and are rather short: two to three pages plus an appendix. The primary elements are a description of the background, current school situation, individual level, group level, conclusion and analysis. In some cases, a ‘deepening pedagogical assessment’ – with the objective of preparing a support plan (åtgärdsprogram) – contains motoric, communication, social skills, routine situations, learning ability, knowledge requirements, measures and personal reflections. However, all information is very summarized.

Compared with this, the German assessment reports vary in length, between three and 25 pages. On average, they comprise about nine pages plus an appendix. In these reports, a case history, classroom observations, discussions with guardians and occasionally with pupils, different types of tests and sometimes medical reports are recurring elements. Information from other experts, such as speech therapists or child psychiatrists, is often included. Instead of guidelines, the report structure has its roots in local traditions and individual preferences of the assessors.

In Sweden, observations are part of the SEN assessment. However, based on the examined reports, the focus and outcome of the observations is often unclear. In addition, in the German cases, classroom observations are a firm component of the assessment. The descriptions of the observations vary, and sometimes no distinction is made between observation and interpretation. For example, without further specification of the observations, one report states that the child ‘is well integrated and feels comfortable’ in the class (case 34). Moreover, very vague is how the observations are linked to the recommended consequences of the assessment.

In Sweden, intelligence tests are only part of the assessment when placement in a special school for pupils with an intellectual disability is considered. In such situations, school psychologists conduct the relevant test. In NRW, different tests are very common, predominantly intelligence tests, but also tests, e.g. regarding perception. Intelligence tests are conducted by a special educator: foremost in the presumed support category ‘learning’, but also as a boundary with respect to ‘intellectual development’, ‘speech’ or ‘emotional and social development’. The test mostly serves the function of affirming the SEN support category ‘learning’, manifesting a low intelligence test score, and thereby strengthening a defect-oriented perspective on the pupil. In certain cases, however, the interpretation is tendentious. For example, a male pupil with a migration background (case 42) and according to the SEN report, living under ‘restricted housing conditions’, achieved the slightly below average test value of 91 on the K-ABC II intelligence test; in two subtests, he received a score of 80. The SEN assessors concluded that the ‘demonstrated weaknesses in the domains of the K-ABC II plead for SEN in the area of learning’. In two other subtests, the pupil performed above average (108 and 106), but there is no interpretation concerning these test scores. In most reports, however, the boundary function of the tests becomes clear following the logic of different support categories.

The SEN assessment reports in both countries describe clearly, in some cases in NRW dramatically, the school problems of the individual. For instance, the assessors wrote in the SEN assessment report for a German girl in class 3:

[Name] is with her cognitive resources, noticeably reflected in the results of the [intelligence test] SON-R-40, in primary education substantially and permanently overstrained by school requirements (case 41). Descriptions of the pupils’ capacities are often negative, listing the ‘weaknesses’ of the child: he/she ‘cannot’ respectively ‘have difficulties with’ are the most common phrases. However, in some cases, assessors obviously characterize the pupil in a better light by describing the necessary adaptations and opportunities for educational success. Our results are to some extent inconsistent, but with a tendency towards a deficit-orientated perspective.

**Participation of pupils and guardians**

The reports, both in Sweden and Germany, usually describe discussions with parents. In Swedish cases, it is largely unclear how parents were involved. Only in exceptional cases, the reports document their perspective, e.g. they expressed uncertainty about their child’s school situation. In many reports from NRW, parents formally initiate the assessment, and often they contribute with information surrounding case history. In the final section of the reports, parents state their wishes: frequently continuance at regular school, sometimes a change to a special school. With regards to the pupil’s future placement, this section features a hint to the decision-maker in the school administration. Overall, the German reports strive for consensus with parents.
Formally, reports from Sweden and NRW mention the participation of pupils in the assessment. However, the Swedish documents neither explain the realization of participation nor the impact. Similarly, the German reports are very vague when it comes to the pupils’ perspective. Information in both countries is often superficial (‘He says he is good in playing football’, case 3) or describes the pupil’s everyday knowledge, but it hardly has any effect on the assessment outcome. Only in special cases do the reports document the pupils’ voice. This is the situation for a Swedish boy in class 9 who tells the assessors that ‘he cannot remember things’ (case 16). A seven-year-old German girl who feels the pressure of the peer group reports on her learning problems: ‘The children deride her, what [name] feels is mean’ (case 36). Another girl the same age will later change to a special school. According to the report, she explained:

I have little weaknesses in German, maths, and in science education. I am good in religious education. In summer, I will attend another school, because I am learning so slowly (case 44).

The authors of the assessment report commented:

[Name] is reflecting her school situation relatively differentiated and realistic with regard to her “weaknesses”. The outlook concerning a possible school change makes her sad on the one hand, because she has to leave her friends, but on the other hand, hopeful with regard to a more satisfying learning development. Obviously, her parents support this attitude (case 44).

Irrespective of the outcome of the assessment, the decision to change to a special school is pre-empted in this report.

Consequences of the SEN assessment

In both countries, the SEN assessment reports are key elements in the handling of a difficult school situation. Legal statutes regulate the framework of the assessment, even though there are key differences. In Sweden, the investigation regarding the specific definition of SEN is central. It is the basis for further discussion within the pupil welfare teams. In NRW, in most cases, the investigators suggest a support category. Subsequently, the school administration decides on a SEN categorization and the pupil’s placement.

Although these are differences that exist in the formal proceedings, there are obvious similarities. Placement is a central issue, even though more noteworthy in NRW. In Sweden, placement in the special school for pupils with intellectual disability (särskola) or in a special teaching group (särskilt undervisningsgrupp) are options, e.g. expressed as:

A silent learning environment, willingly in a small group with a special teacher (case 9).

However, more common is the continuance in ordinary classes, partially combined with some extra support outside regular class. In NRW, a SEN categorization can lead to transfer to a special school (Förderschule) in accordance with the respective support category, transfer to another primary school with an integrative setting (Gemeinsamer Unterricht) or remaining in an ordinary class if special education resources are available. Formally, assessors have no mandate to recommend any placement. Regardless, in many reports, there are recommendations concerning special schools sometimes paraphrased as ‘is in need of a small group’. Thus, the SEN assessment in Germany often leads to more sweeping consequences for individuals.

With respect to staff, Swedish reports often propose support through additional staff, mainly paraprofessionals, but sometimes also special educators. In German reports, there are hardly concrete suggestions regarding personnel prerequisites. In general, certain assessors recommend ‘appropriate’ special education resources. These recommendations reflect differences in the school systems, in particular, the availability of paraprofessionals. While in Sweden, paraprofessionals are employed by a school, though in NRW, the social and youth welfare authorities grant assistants’ employment. This approach makes paraprofessionals less visible in the context of the examined reports.

Pedagogical and didactical recommendations appear in SEN assessment reports, but differentially to a certain degree. Suggestions for the individual level, e.g. skill training in reading, can be found both in the Swedish and German reports. In reports from NRW, development areas, like, e.g. perception are often described in detail, but pedagogical consequences are quite frequently vaguely indicated.

According to Swedish regulatory documents, the group level should be considered. However, there are often just general comments on the pupil’s situation in the group. In-depth pedagogical reflections exist occasionally, e.g. when Swedish assessors describe:

Adapted placement in the classroom and in the dining hall. We are always careful and think out the choice of classmates [name] can cooperate with in smaller groups, e.g. when playing the memory game (case 4).

However, both in Sweden and Germany, reflections about support opportunities are often rather general. They hardly provide concrete guidance surrounding how to implement special education support. This transformation into educational practice is a part of subsequent individual support plans (åtgärdsprogram, Förderplanung).
Thought styles reflected in the reports

Different interpretations of the nature and rationale of the term SEN are already enshrined in the regulatory documents. However, there are apparent similarities between Swedish and German SEN assessment reports even though there are differences regarding the formal structure of the assessment. The large majority of reports concentrate on the individual level, evaluating pupils’ capacities and – more frequently – their failure in school. Both in the Swedish and German reports, there are innumerable remarks on the inabilities of the respective pupil. Two examples – the first from Sweden, the second from Germany – may illustrate this tendency.

[Name] has not yet cracked the reading code. She knows from time to time some words/letters [...]. It is clear to note when she does not manage or is a bit tired. [Name] did not reach the learning objectives in basic mathematics for year 1. She has difficulties with perseverance and working speed because of disability (case 5).

The longer stay in the school-entry phase and comprehensive support measures did not lead to [name] compensating his deficits. He still has significant learning difficulties in the areas of mathematics and language as well as in other study areas (case 30).

Yet, there are also some more balanced descriptions in both countries, as both Swedish and German reports state:

[Name] tries his utmost with trying to pronounce and he is using sign-supported language, too. He made big progress in reading. Comprehension is relatively good, but writing capabilities are poor because he cannot mouth words correct. The computer is a good assistive device, with speech synthesis and other programs (case 2).

[Name] is open for new educational content, and she is surpassingly motivated to acquire competences and skills. [...] It can be observed that [name] reaches her limits regarding cognitive capabilities (case 34).

In our analysis, it seems that balanced descriptions of pupils’ performances are more common in Sweden than in Germany. However, owing to the limited empirical material, this question would merit further studies. Regardless of whether the characterization of the pupil’s achievement stresses deficits or if it is more balanced, the focus in both cases is on the individual, hardly on interactional aspects or further development of the learning environment. Most SEN assessment reports see the pupil as the bearer of a problematic situation. Thus, a rather categorical perspective becomes evident based on a thought style that a pupil has a problem.

Only in exceptions does a relational perspective emerge, illuminating the mismatch between teaching and the pupil. A Swedish report put forth:

What does not work: teaching which is not adapted to the needs and the requirements of the pupil (case 16).

Worth underscoring is one German SEN assessment report that elucidates in a ‘resource analysis’ the necessary support condition, in particular social aspects. The pupil should experience the ‘social structure of the peer group’, accepting and ‘offering’ help in interaction with others (case 36). Even though such relational perspectives are rare, the example shows that they can occur.

Discussion

We discuss our results concerning the methodology and in relation to previous research. Concerning methodology, the relatively small number of SEN assessment reports from both countries and preselection by the school administration is leading to limitations with respect to the generalization of our results. However, certain trends and patterns become apparent, even though we were depending on the provision of data material. In terms of triangulation, we seek to minimize this effect by revisiting our results from interview studies on the same subject (Barow & Östlund, 2019a).

Between Sweden and Germany, the differences of SEN concepts become plainly visible. In the Swedish regulations, SEN arise when there is a high probability that a pupil is missing the learning objectives. In Germany, the points of departure are disability definitions transferred into support categories. An important exception is the support category ‘learning’, resembling the Swedish SEN categorization, but different with regard to its origin in the term ‘learning disability’ (Pfahl & Powell, 2011). The consequences in Sweden are more flexible and momentary in terms of SEN categorizations, while the German SEN category, ‘learning’, often affects a student’s entire school career. However, as well, the Swedish SEN categorization system is problematic as long as the number of pupils who do not achieve their learning objectives at the end of compulsory school is approximately twice as high as the number of pupils with SEN.

Not the least with regards to formality, Swedish and German reports differ. The Swedish reports are very summative, making it difficult for the reader to understand the pupil’s situation. Based on earlier research, we assume for Sweden that deepened discussions take place within pupil welfare teams (Backlund, 2007; Hjörne & Säljö, 2013). The German reports are mostly longer, but vary enormously with respect to content. The waiver of binding regulations makes it difficult to compare SEN reports, not least in terms of legal certainty.

Central features of SEN assessment in both countries are classroom observations. In many cases, both in Sweden and Germany, the impact of the observations on the assessments is not clear. The focus is ambiguous and results typically poorly documented. In Sweden, the existing national guidelines are non-specific with regards
to the content of the observations. For the German cases, it is apparent that time pressure leads to superficial observations (Barow & Östlund, 2019a).

In line with previous research in both countries (Backlund, 2007; Ricken & Schuck, 2016), participation of parents and pupils in the SEN assessment hardly takes place. In both countries, the expert view of the professionals dominates this process. In the Swedish reports, owing to the summarizing form of the reports, the parents’ impact becomes faintly visible. After the law reform in NRW in 2014, however, parents formally initiate the assessment and – even more importantly – influence the outcome in terms of future placement (Barow & Östlund, 2019a). Regarding the perspective of the pupil, and with reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, Undated), it is striking that children’s voices both in Sweden and Germany hardly seem to matter during the SEN assessment.

Medical diagnoses, like, e.g. ADHD, appear in the Swedish and German reports. In our material, we could not find such a strong impact, as suggested by Giota and Emanuelsson (2011). However, this can result from the selection process of the assessment reports, bearing in mind that local traditions can vary (Odenbring et al., 2017). For Germany, based on the existence of pedagogical support categories, the medical diagnosis seems to play a subordinate role even though some reports include diagnoses to underscore the problematic situation of the pupil.

Previous work (Eggert, 1988; Hjörne & Säljö, 2013; Isaksson et al., 2010; Ricken & Schuck, 2016) emphasizes the inertia of the categorical perspective, stressing that the pupil has a problem. We can confirm this tendency in the majority of reports. At the same time, we determined certain exceptions, clarifying that it is possible for SEN assessors to understand school problems from a relational perspective (Persson, 2003). From this point of view, the relation between the pupil and its environment as well as the learning environment itself comes into focus. This supplies a more holistic approach, seeing maladjusted teaching as a problem that needs a solution. It is crucial that such a relational perspective on learning can exist – although rare – in Sweden and in Germany. This brings attention to the fact that different thought styles (Fleck, 1979) can exist parallel, no matter what the legal regulations stipulate. The SEN assessors have obviously some scope for interpretation of the rules.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have discussed the policy and practice of SEN assessment in Sweden and Germany. The conduct of this process is often framed with a deficit mode. Only sometimes, the competences and concrete future educational needs are in the focus of assessors. In terms of a categorical perspective (Persson, 2003), seeing the individual pupil as the bearer of a problem is even more pronounced. This thought style seems to be very robust and vital in school practice.

To some extent, and particularly in NRW, this can be traced back to the legal regulations, abetting the exploration of the individual shortcomings and leading to categorizations (Dederich, 2016; Hinz & Köpfer, 2016; Norwich, 2013; Skrtic, 1991). As long as the scope of SEN assessment is with respect to the individual pupil – and not on the learning environment – this dilemma (Clark et al., 1998) will persist. In Sweden, the guidelines for SEN assessment suggest a stronger consideration of the social environment in terms of the group and school level. However, based on the strong focus of suggested measures at the individual level, an implementation gap becomes visible.

We suggest a flexible SEN approach with a stronger concentration on the relation between the individual and the learning environment, in particular regarding future support measures. A stronger participation of pupils in the SEN assessment is vital. This, not in the least, implies for the German case a reform of SEN assessment policy. Future research should concentrate on the implementation and long-term consequences of SEN policies, both for the school system and individual pupils. This is relevant not only to the increase of SEN categorizations over the course of a school career. With today’s situation, at the end of compulsory school, in Sweden and Germany, approximately eight percent of pupils are considered to have SEN – definitely not a success story. This presumably makes it more difficult for these young people to manage their transition to adulthood.

Notably, our research in Sweden and Germany also shows some examples, where a relational perspective on school problems emerge. Irrespective special education traditions in both countries, the perception of school challenges can obviously vary depending on the perspective of SEN assessors. Even though it is challenging to develop a thought style towards a relational perspective, it is already possible today.

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