

Supporting Pupils in Finnish and Swedish Schools – Teachers’ Views

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the different support systems used by teachers in compulsory education. Class and subject teachers and special educators from Finland (N = 57) and Sweden (N = 57) participated in the study, in which both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Participants completed an electronic questionnaire to identify various ways of pupils who have special educational needs. The findings indicate both similarities and differences between the two countries. One of the most common forms of support was individualization, including pedagogical modifications. Methods of supporting academic skills such as reading differed from those used to support behavioral issues. Positive pedagogy and structuring the environment were used ways of supporting pupils with behavioral challenges. Results for both countries are compared and support needs are discussed.

Keywords: support, Finland, Sweden, inclusion

Introduction

Finland and Sweden, as well as many other countries, aim to achieve inclusion in the field of education (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2007; Nilholm & Göransson, 2013; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017). The focus on inclusion emphasises that all children should be part of a single education system, wherein they are all able to learn successfully (Florian, 2010). Pupils who previously studied in segregated settings, for example, special schools, are now increasingly attending local schools, where they are entitled to receive additional support. However, inclusion does not only concern pupils; it concerns the entire education system – educational policy, teacher education and school organisation (Hausstätter, 2013; Rose, Barahona, & Muro, 2017; Schwab, Holzinger, Krammer, Gebhart, & Hessels, 2015). This can prove problematic, since not all teachers are trained to provide additional support. Indeed, there is evidence to indicate that children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties do not receive sufficient support at school (Botha & Kourkoutas, 2016; Giota & Lundborg, 2007; Lane, 2007; Persson, 2004). Other studies have reported that children who experience difficulties with regards to reading and writing also move through their school careers without receiving adequate support (e.g. Author, 2015). In terms of students who experience difficulties with mathematics, there is currently a lack of evidence concerning the effectiveness of teachers' efforts (Engström, 2016). **In this article, we study how teachers in Finland and Sweden consider that they support their pupils and, relatedly, how they render their schools inclusive.**

There is currently a lack of both knowledge and skills in relation to how best to create an inclusive school, as well as how to adjust the practice of classroom education so that all learners can benefit from it (Biamba, 2016; Lakkala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2016; Meynert, 2014). When creating an inclusive environment, the support on offer can be divided into support for learning and support for participation. If all pupils are to be included, both types of support are required (Morningstar, Shogren, Lee, & Born, 2015; Nilholm & Alm, 2010). While teachers' theoretical knowledge regarding teaching and pedagogics in general can be quite good, they are often unable to identify special needs or make the necessary adaptations or modifications in practice (Fullerton, Rube, McBride, & Bert, 2011; López-Torrijo & Mengual-Andrés, 2015; Shin, Lee, & McKenna, 2016). In order to identify key practices that meet the needs of all students, McLeskey, Waldron and Redd (2014) studied one highly effective, inclusive elementary school. **They identified practices related to student support and instructional quality, such as meeting the needs of all students, providing high-quality instruction and providing teachers with immersive professional development opportunities. The researchers noted the importance of providing teachers with high-quality professional development in their local school context.** Several forms of support and different intervention

programmes exist, all of which aim to both render the school inclusive and promote pupils' well-being. An intervention method intended to combat bullying, which is known as the KIVA school (kiva = nice), has been developed and used a lot in Finland (Haataja, Sainio, Turtonen, & Salmivalli, 2016). The intervention can prevent social and emotional challenges (see also Kimber, 2011). Another tool for providing pupils with support is known as ART (aggression replacement training). ART provides cognitive, affective and behavioural interventions. It is effective in terms of increasing social skills and decreasing problem behaviour (Amendola & Oliver, 2013). A method available for tackling challenges related to reading comprehension involves the use of reading strategies (Meniado, 2016). In fact, several methods exist – it is simply a matter of ensuring that they are appropriately used.

Comparing Finland and Sweden

The decision to compare data from Finland and Sweden, two neighbouring social democratic countries (Lundahl, 2016), was based on the idea that specifically researching similar countries can reveal fine-grained differences and, therefore, perhaps aid in identifying things that are otherwise taken for granted (Landman, 2000). Finland and Sweden exhibit both similarities and differences. For instance, both countries offer free education for all and have similar goals for achieving inclusion and equality in education. According to current Finnish and Swedish educational documents – for example, education acts (Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998; Finnish Basic Education Act, 2010; Swedish Education Act, 1985; Swedish Education Act, 2010), national curricula (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011) and national education strategies (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2007; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011) – every pupil should be supported with regards to learning well and enabled in relation to achieving their educational goals, with all teachers being expected to provide support. Education in Finland and in Sweden differs, however, in terms of school results, at least as they are measured in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) evaluations, with Finland being among the top performers, while Sweden lags some way behind (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015; Vettenranta et al., 2016). Education in Finland, when compared to the situation in other Scandinavian countries, is more highly valued and stronger confidence is seen among teachers (Simola, 2005).

Giving and Receiving Support in Finnish and Swedish Schools

Mainstream schools in Finland and Sweden employ special educators in addition to regular teachers. In Finland, the special education offered in mainstream schools is either full time in separate special classes or schools, or part time with one or several special education teachers providing support for those who need it. In the case of part-time special education, no statement is required in order to receive support. However, where a need arises for regular special support, an individual educational plan (IEP) must, by law, be written for the pupil in question (Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998; Finnish Basic Education Act, 2010). Since 2010, three forms of support have been offered in Finnish schools, namely general, intensified and special support (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2015; Finnish Basic Education Act, 2010; Finnish Ministry of Education, 2007). While general and intensified support are mainly offered in classrooms by class and/or subject teachers, special support (and, sometimes, intensified support) can be provided in classrooms, although it is mostly provided in a separate room within the same school by a special educator. It is also available in special schools. Special educators play quite a large role in Finnish schools; therefore, class and subject teachers may feel that providing support is the job of only the special educator, meaning that it is not the responsibility of class or subject teachers.

In Sweden, mainstream schools employ one or several special teachers or special pedagogues (sometimes both). Special pedagogues (special education co-ordinates, or SENCOs) mainly coordinate special needs. According to the relevant education policy (Swedish Education Act, 2010; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014), all pupils who attend Swedish schools are offered guidance and support in the regular classroom. Additional support is provided at two levels, namely extra adaptations and special needs support, which can both be provided in the regular classroom. Special needs support requires an IEP as well as an official decision by the head of the school. Special needs support is only given when the pupil is unable to achieve educational goals despite receiving extra adaptations (Swedish Education Act, 2010; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014).

In addition, schools in both Finland and Sweden have extended welfare teams comprising a school psychologist, a social worker, a nurse and a medical doctor, who provide consultation and medical services as and when required (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017; Hjørne, 2004). Teachers work in cooperation with these teams to either prevent problems or address problems when they occur (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017; National Board of Health and Welfare & Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016; Swedish Education Act, 2010). Schools in both countries hence employ several experts dedicated to providing pupils with extra support.

However, although the two countries' education policies state that support for pupils is not conditional on, for example, a medical diagnosis, research shows that in practice a diagnosis is often required for the provision of support during everyday schooling (Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998; Finnish Basic Education Act, 2010; Göransson, Nilholm, & Karlsson, 2011; Hjärne, 2016; Pulkkinen & Jahnukainen, 2016). According to Finnish law (Finnish Basic Education Act, 2010, § 17), a pedagogical statement can be complemented by a statement from a medical expert when considered necessary.

In Finland, the system for keeping statistics regarding pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) changed in 2010. Prior to that change, it was possible to identify the reason behind special education provisions. In primary education, the most common reasons were reading and writing difficulties, followed by mathematics challenges and challenges related to language development. At the secondary level, the top two needs were the same, while the third was challenges related to foreign languages (Official Statistics Finland [OSF], 2010). During the 2014–2015 school year, some 22.7% of pupils in Finland received part-time special educational support (OSF, 2016a). Further, 7.3% of school-aged pupils received special support and, as such, had an IEP in 2016 in Finland (OSF, 2016b).

While it is difficult to specify the exact number of pupils in Sweden who receive special education (or the reasons for such educational provision), an IEP must be written when a pupil requires support. It is known that 12% of all pupils had IEPs during the 2013–2014 school year, when compared to only 5.6% during the 2015–2016 school year. The reason for this decrease is likely the change in the School Act (Swedish Education Act, 2010) implemented in 2014, which allowed schools to provide support without producing any written action plans. IEPs are written more frequently for boys than for girls, and most IEPs are related to pupils in the 9th grade. However, the reasons behind IEPs remain unknown, since no statistics are collected in Sweden (Hjärne, 2016; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2015, 2016). Still, it has been established that an increasing number of pupils are being diagnosed with neuropsychiatric disorders, apparently representing a group increasingly excluded from mainstream education (Hjärne, 2016).

Inclusive Teaching and Education

The exact meaning of inclusive education is not easy to define. According to Allan (2014, p. 511), it is “a troubled, problematic and contested field” in which some researchers argue that all children should be educated in mainstream schools, while others argue in favour of the retention of special education. Florian (2010) and Thomazet (2009), for example, have stated that the fundamental

principle of inclusive education is that schools should provide education for all pupils and, further, that they should adapt that education to existing needs so all children are part of a single educational system. In this way, barriers to learning and participation are reduced for all students, not only those with impairments or those who are categorised as having special educational needs (also Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

Hausstätter (2013) described inclusion as an unfinished process. When inclusion is seen as being unfinished, it steers the focus towards the ongoing process of school development, which is connected to issues such as democracy and freedom of speech (Hausstätter, 2013; Nilholm, 2006). The social environment within an educational institution needs to be developed in such a way that pupils feel they belong to the school community (Movkebayeva, Oralkanova, Mazhinov, Beisenova, & Belenko, 2016; Yuval-Davies, 2006).

In practice, inclusion has often been interpreted as meaning that pupils are kept in one group and not taught outside their own classroom. However, that is only one, narrow view of inclusion. Inclusion can be achieved in many ways, since it is not dependent on the place of teaching, especially in the modern digital age and with open learning spaces (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008; Rose, Barahona, & Muro, 2017; Schwab, Holzinger, Krammer, Gebhart, & Hessels, 2015; Smith, 2015). We understand that inclusion is not just a structural issue concerning how best to organise or change the different aspects of the school, but also an ethical concept (Reindal, 2010). In line with the approach of Nilholm and Göransson (2013) and Morningstar et al. (2015), we consider that support, in order to be truly inclusive, needs to include support for both learning and participation.

Aim of the Study and Research Questions

The aim of the present study is to focus on the various support needs perceived by teachers in Finnish and Swedish inclusive classrooms, which feature diverse pupils. Hence, our research questions are as follows. 1) What types of student support needs do teachers perceive? 2) What kind of support do teachers provide students who are experiencing difficulties with reading and writing, mathematics, and socio-emotional development? 3) How do teachers address the concept of inclusion in relation to supporting students?

Method

For the purposes of this survey-based study, an electronic questionnaire was sent to several schools in both Finland and Sweden. More specifically, it was sent to schools in two large southern cities

and two large northern cities in both countries. The items included in the questionnaire were based on those used in a previous study (Author, 2008), which outlined the essence of the chosen areas of support (reading and writing, mathematics and behavioural issues). In all four cities, permission to conduct the study was received from the relevant Educational Board. The link to the questionnaire was sent to the schools' head teachers (both primary and secondary), and the head teachers then forwarded the link to the teachers. The one criterion for selecting schools was to approach both primary and secondary schools. The questionnaire was sent to 80 schools, and one reminder was sent to all the head teachers. However, the schools were very busy, and only 14 schools in Finland and 16 schools in Sweden agreed to respond to the questionnaire. The teachers themselves decided whether or not to respond. In addition, special education teaching students at one university in each country (all of whom already had teaching degrees and experience as teachers) were sent the link to the questionnaire.

Participants

In total, we received 114 responses, 57 from Finland and 57 from Sweden (see Table 1). Of these, six respondents from Finland and eight from Sweden were special teacher/pedagogue students. Of the Finnish students, two worked as subject teachers, two as class teachers and two as special teachers during their studies. Half the Swedish teachers worked as special educators and half as class teachers. The mean age of the Finnish teachers was 41 years (range = 24–56 years, SD = 8), while the mean age of Swedish teachers was 44 years (range 26–60 years, SD = 9). Some teachers held double qualifications. For example, seven teachers in Finland and nine in Sweden also had special education degrees, although they were currently working as class or subject teachers. The data can be split on this basis (i.e. holding a special education degree or not).

**** Table 1. Respondents' profession during the current academic year ABOUT HERE****

For the Finnish teachers, the mean number of working years was 11 (range = 4–25 years, SD = 7), while for the Swedish teachers, the mean number of working years was 15 (range = 1–34 years, SD = 7). The respondents came from all stages of the compulsory education system (Table 2). Nine of the Finnish respondents and five of the Swedish respondents were male.

***** Table 2. In which stage are you working now? ABOUT HERE *****

Data Collection and Analysis

We used a mixed-methods approach during the analysis of the data. The electronic questionnaire included both open-ended and closed questions, and some questions involved Likert-type graded responses. In total, there were 32 questions. For our present purposes, we will focus on those questions related to support needs and types, as well as to inclusion (see Appendix). The Likert-type questions (graded from 1 to 4) have been dichotomised in order to render these complex data more accessible. The quantitative data include frequencies.

The open-ended questions were analysed using conventional and summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kondracki & Wellman, 2002). The former was used to condense the data, while the latter was used to quantify the qualitative data where relevant. The responses were always read by two researchers, who first made an independent content analysis. This was performed by relating the data to the literature concerning support services (directed approach; see Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Several subcategories were identified, which were then independently condensed to offer a suggestion of the main categories by each researcher. After this was done, the two researchers discussed and compared all the categories. Following the discussions, the final main categories were compiled (see also MacLure, 2014). The aim during the last phase was to reach an abstract level of understanding so that it was possible to proceed towards theoretical concepts.

Results

Current Support Needs

Separately, we asked the teachers to identify the four *most common problems* requiring support from teachers, with two questions concerning 1) general support needs and 2) support needs, especially during the current academic year. The top three identified support needs were the same in both countries, with only the order changing, depending on whether the response related to only the current academic year or to their whole teaching career. Focusing on current needs, the top three challenges identified in Finland were related to *mathematics, reading and writing* and *behaviour*. In Sweden, the top three were *reading and writing, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)* and *behavioural challenges* (see Table 3). When constructing Table 3, the Likert alternatives *a lot*

and *quite a lot* were counted together. Overall, the support needs identified in both countries proved to be quite similar, as did the division of categories.

**** Table 3. Respondents' perceived support needs for the current academic year. ABOUT
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Support needs in three common areas

Open-ended questions were used in relation to the three challenges assumed in advance to be most common, namely reading and writing, mathematics and socio-emotional development (Author, 2008). The teachers were asked to describe the kinds of adaptations or support systems used with pupils facing such challenges. Using conventional content analysis, the teachers' responses were condensed into main categories, which are discussed below as well as presented in Tables 4, 5 and 6.

Support for reading and writing difficulties. In terms of the support provided for pupils facing reading and/or writing challenges, six areas of support were identified, and they were compressed into three main categories: *Individualisation*, *Cooperation* and *Mental support* (Table 4).

Individualisation involves three subcategories: *individual tasks*; *more time, practice or teaching*; and *technical devices*. The individual tasks include issues such as adaptations and modifications, where teachers provide pupils with individually tailored tasks, exercises and teaching. The tasks were fewer and easier, and readymade notes were supplied along with oral options during exams. This result was the same in both countries. Interestingly, the option to complete tasks and exams orally was mentioned many times (more than ten) in the Swedish data, but only a few times in the Finnish data. Other measures included choosing texts that would interest pupils, summarising the text for pupils, practicing phonological awareness and echo-reading. A small component of this individualisation involved metacognitive strategies, which were taught in both countries, albeit not extensively (less than ten mentions).

In the Finnish data, the second subcategory of individualisation (Table 4) was more time, practice or teaching for pupils. The pupils required a peaceful tempo in order to manage their tasks, and extra teaching was available in support lessons or during breaks. Allowing more time to complete

tasks was a very common means of supporting pupils. Extra time is also an option in Finnish matriculation exams if a student has reading and writing difficulties that have been tested (see Finnish Matriculation Examination, 2017). This subcategory came third in the Swedish data.

The second subcategory in the Swedish data, namely technical support (third in the Finnish data), refers to support mainly involving the use of a computer or some other device in order to produce or record the voice, including audiobooks. Interestingly, computers were seldom mentioned in the Finnish data, although there is evidence to suggest that they are used a lot (Panula, 2013). The remaining two main categories, namely cooperation and mental support, are small yet important. Cooperation includes various forms of small-scale cooperation with other teachers or parents, as well as bigger-scale cooperation on an organisational level (e.g. ability groups, co-teaching, homework clubs or small groups). Finally, mental support refers to things such as praise or discussion with the pupil.

****Table 4. Respondents' approaches to supporting pupils with reading and writing difficulties.
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The biggest difference between the two countries was the more frequent use of technical devices (such as speaking keyboards or audio-recorded material) among Swedish teachers when compared to their Finnish counterparts. Another difference was that the Finnish teachers more frequently mentioned the need for more time/teaching/practice than the Swedish teachers. These differences are difficult to explain and could partly be due to our classification. Some Finnish teachers may not have considered that "using something more" included the use of technical devices. Another possibility is that Swedish schools have greater access to technical devices. Nevertheless, the content of individualisation requires further research.

Support for mathematical difficulties. In terms of mathematics (Table 5), three main categories were identified. The first main category was, again, *individualisation*. It was formed from four subcategories, which were the same in both the Finnish and Swedish data. The first subcategory, *concrete materials, tools and equipment*, involves using things such as pearls, dice, bricks and pictures; drawing maths and the use of videos were also counted here. In both countries, the second subcategory was *more time, teaching or practice*. The third most frequently mentioned subcategory was *individual tasks*, including modifications and adaptations, such as drills, repetition, modelling, wording of tasks and individual exams. The fourth subcategory within individualisation was the use of *technical equipment*, which was more commonly mentioned in the Swedish data than in the

Finnish data. The second main category in the Finnish and Swedish data was *cooperation*. This included working with adults, such as other teachers, parents and the school welfare team, as well as experts from outside the school. In both countries, the third main category was related to the various forms of *organisational support* involved in teaching, including the use of the services of a special teacher or teaching in smaller groups, as well as planning the schedule so that it was possible to implement ability grouping.

**** Table 5. Respondents' approaches to supporting pupils with mathematical difficulties.
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Again, the biggest difference between the two countries concerned the use of technical equipment, with their approaches otherwise being surprisingly similar.

Support for behavioural challenges. In terms of the third area of support, namely *behavioural challenges*, four main categories were identified (see Table 6). The most common provision in Finland was *positive social support* in some form or other. This included “endless” (in the teachers' words) discussions with the pupil, talking about what had happened and trying to understand the consequences, as well as providing clear hints about appropriate behaviour and listening to pupils. Abundant positive feedback was provided whenever possible, including rewards, praise, small prizes (e.g. stickers) and hints about positive behaviour. This theme came third in the Swedish data, where the first main category was *individualisation*. It included issues such as *individual tasks*, where teachers reported adapting tasks, tests and exams to facilitate pupils' learning, allowing more time for tasks, tests and exams, and ensuring shorter work periods with breaks. During lessons, the teachers focused on issues such as drama pedagogy, clear instructions, structured lessons, individual tasks, incremental tasks, clear goals and picture timetables. *Structuring the physical environment*, which included issues such as creating small “walls” to separate pupils, using masking tape to mark areas, providing opportunities to move and making the environment clear and comprehensible for pupils, also fell within this main category. Individualisation was the second main category in the Finnish data.

The second most common means of supporting pupils in Sweden was *cooperation with different stakeholders*, which mostly included paraprofessional staff, student assistants and teacher assistants.

The teachers also cooperated with the school welfare team, although only one teacher mentioned cooperation with the school principal or the special pedagogue. Cooperation was the third main category in the Finnish data.

The final main category in both countries, namely *behaviour regulation* (or, as some teachers referred to it, *discipline*), included requiring the pupil to leave the class, calling for help, raising issues with the pupil or simply maintaining tight discipline. In such cases, the focus was strongly on the pupil rather than on the school as a system. To this category, we added programmes intended to change pupils' behaviour. Only two Finnish teachers mentioned systematic programmes developed to support social and emotional well-being, such as the KIVA school programme (see Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2011) and the Friends programme (Barrett, 2007). In the equivalent Swedish category, the teachers described using elements of structural manual-based programmes, such as ART (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2017a), SET (social and emotional training) (Kimber, Sandell, & Bremberg, 2008) and low affect treatment (Hejlskov Elvén, 2014), social stories and emotional maps. All these programmes were named by the special educators. The teachers also reported the use of promotional and preventive strategies during transfer situations (e.g. being the first person to leave the classroom, support during breaks and avoiding queues) in this category.

**** Table 6. Respondents' approaches to supporting pupils with behavioural challenges ABOUT
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Positive approach, co-operation and individualisation were most commonly used to address behavioural challenges in both countries.

Summary of the Main Approaches to Various Difficulties

In summarising Tables 4, 5 and 6, we can state that the issues mentioned by the teachers were quite similar in both countries. The categories of support used in inclusive settings identified by Buli-Holmberg and Jeyaprabhan (2016) were represented in the methods used to support reading and writing, mathematical and behavioural challenges. In that study, the crucial elements were characterised as *interaction, support and adaptation*, and these can all be found in our data. One less frequently mentioned area of support, as stressed by McLeskey et al. (2014) in their study of inclusive education, is *organisational issues*, which includes support provision for diverse settings

as well as the responsibilities of school and municipality leaders. The teachers seldom referred to the head teachers or to other school authorities, instead focusing on their personal actions. In relation to academic challenges such as reading, writing and mathematics, the approaches adopted in the two countries were broadly similar. Individualisation was a key issue, as was the subcategory of more time and practice. Indeed, when learning reading and mathematics, one needs to practice and to be given sufficient time to complete the tasks. However, the approaches to behavioural issues differed from those applied in the context of academic issues, since the two are seen to demand entirely different skills.

We also compared the number of words included in the teachers' written responses regarding reading and writing issues, which all the teachers encountered (in contrast, for instance, to mathematics issues). The average number of words written by the Finnish subject teachers was 12.8, while the mean for the class teachers was 10.9, as compared to 20.7 words among the special teachers. In the Swedish data, the subject teachers wrote 10.3 words on average, while the class teachers wrote 14.2 and the special educators wrote 22.1. In both the Finnish and Swedish data, the special teachers/special pedagogues referred to the greatest number of support approaches.

In-service training needs

The questionnaire included one question concerning the teachers' in-service needs. The areas where the Finnish teachers felt a need for training related to emotional, neuropsychiatric and behavioural challenges (Table 7). The Swedish teachers reported that they needed training in issues related to challenges in language development, behavioural challenges and autism and/or ADHD.

*** Table 7. Skills the respondents perceived themselves to need in order to provide support.

ABOUT HERE ***

The observed difference in the need for training with regards to language development challenges is interesting and invites further research. The issues related to emotional problems, behavioural challenges and ADHD referred to similar features, such as norm-breaking behaviour. The teachers indicated a need for more skills in order to deal with situations in which a child's behaviour transgresses the norm.

Inclusive perspectives

We also asked the teachers about where support is provided to the pupil—*individually outside the classroom, in a small group outside the classroom, in the regular classroom, or at some other place*—as well as what form it takes in each case. The majority of Swedish teachers said that support was provided in class (40 mentions, which accounted for 70% of respondents). In the Finnish responses, the same places were mentioned, although three separate questions were used—one for each form of support. In Finland, general support was provided in the regular classroom according to the majority of teachers (n = 44, 77%), intensified support was provided in a small group outside the classroom (n = 33, 60%) and special support was provided in a small group outside the classroom (n = 38, 67%).

In addition, we asked who was principally responsible for SEN pupils. In total, 25 (55%) of the Swedish teachers said *all teachers who teach this pupil*, followed by *the special educator* (n = 16, 27%). However, the Finnish teachers said that *the special teacher* had the most responsibility (n = 22, 39%), while the option *all teachers teaching this pupil* accounted for only 18% (n = 10) of responses. On that basis, it can cautiously be said that the Swedish schools involved in this study seemed more inclusive, while they made less use of the pull-out model (see Rose et al., 2017), taking pupils out of the class to small groups. However, the questions were very general, and hence further investigation is required.

Discussion

This questionnaire study involving teachers from Finland (N = 57) and Sweden (N = 57) confirmed that class and subject teachers, as well as special educators, know and use a range of approaches to support SEN pupils in the classroom. However, special educators were found to have more methods in their repertoires for dealing with such pupils than class or subject teachers. Class and subject teachers can support pupils who experience general challenges, although they require more knowledge and skills to deal with diverse and specific challenges, such as emotional challenges. Nevertheless, no significant differences were found between the two countries.

Support for Reading and Writing, Mathematics and Behaviour

According to the respondent teachers, the most support is needed for reading and writing and mathematics in Finland, while in Sweden the most support is needed for reading and writing and ADHD challenges. **Based on our small data set, these results are simply indicative, and there is**

hence a need to collect more data in order to draw clear conclusions. However, we could question, why mathematics in Finland? Mathematical learning difficulties have become more common over the years, according to both official statistics (OSF, 2010) and recent Finnish research (Kyttälä, Aunio, Lepola, & Hautamäki 2014; Kyttälä, Kanerva, & Kroesbergen, 2015; Mononen & Aunio, 2016). In addition, online services for learning difficulties involving reading and mathematical difficulties have been established (LukiMat, 2017). The amount of recent research that has been conducted, as well as the many services available, might have directed the focus more towards mathematical difficulties in Finland, causing teachers to become more aware of them, although this notion requires further research.

Both Finnish and Swedish teachers prioritised reading and writing, since such skills are so central in education. There has also been an increase in the practice of measuring students through national testing in Sweden. However, various means of international testing, such as TIMSS (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement [IEA], 2017) and PISA (OECD, 2015), are used in both countries. One reason for our results could be the specific investment made by the Swedish government since 2012 in terms of in-service courses directed towards reading, writing and mathematics. The government provides grants to teachers who teach these courses (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2017a, 2017b). Another factor could be the possibility for teachers to specialise in mathematics challenges during their special teacher studies (Göransson et al., 2015). It is possible that mathematical challenges are seen as more the responsibility of special education experts and, therefore, are not at the top of the Swedish list. Nevertheless, the small data set means that such conclusions should be interpreted with caution.

How can the high ranking of ADHD in Sweden be explained? One reason could be that during the last decade, neuropsychiatric diagnoses (e.g. ADHD and autism) have played an increasing and significant role in explaining children's school-related problems, a development that implicates increased individualisation and medicalisation (e.g. Eriksson-Gustavsson, Göransson, & Nilholm, 2011; Evaldsson & Velasquez, 2012; Hjärne & Säljö, 2008). Additionally, the number of prescriptions made for ADHD drugs for children continues to increase in Sweden (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2017b). However, the policy documents state that special needs support should be provided to these students in mainstream schools (Giota & Emanuelsson, 2011). Another reason could be that there were more special educators in the Swedish sample than in the Finnish sample, and again, we thus require further research involving a larger data set.

The most common ways of supporting pupils with challenges regarding reading and writing and mathematics were individualised tasks and exams, allowing more time and tailored exercises.

Cooperation with various stakeholders was not common in such cases, although it was often used in addressing behavioural challenges. In Finland, the most common means of supporting behavioural challenges was *positive social support and discussions*, while in Sweden, it was *individualisation* (which was second in the Finnish data).

The positive approach could represent a counter reaction to seeing a problem in a child, as in the case of the medical model (see Reindal, 2010). Positive pedagogy is also something that has recently been written about and studied a great deal (Seligman, 2011; Uusitalo-Malmivaara & Lehto, 2016). It could be seen as a new, modern and politically acceptable way to talk about, and to approach, behavioural challenges.

Training for Inclusion

The majority of teachers in both countries identified in-service training needs related to behavioural challenges. In addition, the Swedish teachers wanted training to support language development, while the Finnish teachers needed training in working with emotional challenges. With regards to inclusion, support in Sweden was more often provided to pupils in the classroom, while the Finnish teachers reported more education being delivered in small groups outside the classroom. The results show that teachers in both Finland and Sweden have the means necessary to support their pupils' learning. However, while the Swedish teachers assigned more responsibility to all teachers, the Finnish respondents assigned more responsibility to special teachers. Interestingly, co-teaching as a means of providing support was rarely mentioned, even though it appears to be an effective way to support pupils (Rytivaara, 2012). A similar meagre use of co-teaching has been reported elsewhere (see Kilanowski-Press, Foote, & Rinaldo, 2010). In addition, peer assistance with learning was not mentioned, which is interesting, since this has also previously been found to be beneficial (Bowman-Perrot, Davis, Vannest, & Williams, 2013; Dion, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2007; Winokur, Cobb, & Dugan, 2007).

Limitations

Although the findings support the view that Finnish and Swedish teachers have ways of supporting pupils with special needs, the present study has a number of limitations that must be borne in mind. First, the study was based on a limited sample of teachers in both countries. The overall response rate was low, so more extensive data are needed to confirm these findings. In addition, as the

teachers were all volunteers, there may have been some bias in the data, while a district-wide cohort of teachers would provide more significant insights. There were also more special educators in the Swedish sample than in the Finnish sample. The categories used here may not be replicated in a large-scale study. The results offer a general view of support needs and the available methods of support, but their specific pertinence at the primary and/or secondary levels remains unclear, and further research involving more respondents is thus needed. As the questionnaire was a little long, it may have reduced the teachers' motivation to respond. However, the results do resemble those obtained elsewhere (Andreou et al., 2015; Shippen et al., 2011), while the credibility and dependability of the qualitative analysis can be assumed to be high, since several researchers read the data independently (see also Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Conclusion

The four values of inclusion – valuing learner diversity, supporting all learners, working with others and personal professional development (Watkins & Donnelly, 2016) – were present in the data, albeit not strongly. Both the Finnish and Swedish teachers had skills and knowledge to support the learning of pupils with SEN, although tools to support participation were less frequently mentioned (see also Morningstar et al., 2015). Yet, those with special education training had the most skills. In our study, individualisation was seen to be one of the core issues in terms of providing support. The teachers made significant use of it; they gave more time, individual instruction and tailor-made tasks in order to help pupils achieve their goals. This seems positive, since individualisation can contribute to equity. However, individualisation can also have negative impacts. It can lead to lower knowledge standards, to unclear goals and to a lack of evaluation (Francia, 2013). We also understand the focus on individualisation to be an effect of the neo-liberal trend of measuring individual students' results and thereby drawing conclusions about how different schools, and even countries, perform (Apple, 2004; Author, 2016; Ball, 2003).

Looking at the approaches to supporting mathematics and reading and writing, the focus was mainly on academic issues, with only a few isolated remarks about discussions with pupils or offering praise. However, these types of support were more commonly used in addressing behavioural issues. The teachers in our study reported struggling with behaviour-related issues. To achieve success in school, excellent teaching is needed. One element of this is a high rate of performance-specific praise for students (Hattie, 2009), while another is cooperation (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016). Botha and Kourkoutas (2016) recommended a model they

characterised as a community of practice, which includes all stakeholders and emphasises their cooperation in providing a school for all. Similar results were reported by Pijl (2010), who noted that teachers working in teams with experienced staff members seems to represent a good solution for supporting SEN pupils. At the beginning of this article, we claimed that class and subject teachers are not very well trained in terms of supporting pupils, since such support has generally been considered to be the remit of special educators. However, several methods of support were found. Therefore, it appears that pupils in Finland and in Sweden receive at least some support in class.

The **small** differences between the Finnish and Swedish teachers' ways of supporting pupils may, in part, derive from their positions within the school. In Finnish schools, the special teacher holds considerable status (Author, 2017), and other teachers commonly lean on their expertise and delegate support issues to them. **However, in this small data set, they can be seen as examples of special educators' work. In order to identify clear differences, more data and mixed methods, such as observation and interviews, might be needed.** Our data show that individual teachers do provide support to pupils. However, no systematic use of support programmes or cooperative procedures for supporting pupils was reported. In Finland, special teachers could take part in classes more often, and all teachers could cooperate more. In both countries, organisational support requires further development. Support for pupils exists, but it requires development in both countries. Nevertheless, the present findings highlight several ways of supporting pupils that are found in all the teachers' repertoires in both countries.

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Authors' Note

The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the University of xxx, University of xxx, xxx University or xxx University.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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