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Towards inclusive teaching: Finnish teachers' justifications for co-teaching

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Towards inclusive teaching: Finnish teachers' justifications for co-teaching

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Abstract

The Finnish school system is associated with the provision of inclusive values, such as equality and equal opportunity for all. In recent years, the pupils attending regular schools have become more heterogeneous and the number of pupils in need of support has grown. This study examines teachers' perceptions of when the implementation of co-teaching is justified and when it is not justified. Co-teaching, which means teaching together with another teacher, is one way to organise pedagogical support in the general education group. Although several studies have reported the benefits and challenges of co-teaching, researchers have not reached an agreement on the situations where teachers see co-teaching as justified. Most Finnish teachers have a positive attitude towards co-teaching, yet its degree of implementation is low. The data have been collected from primary education teachers ($N = 432$) in Finland and analysed in a data-driven manner adopting a grounded theory approach. The results of the research show that the teachers' arguments for implementing co-teaching are contradictory. Moreover, their attitudes towards inclusion are reflected in their perceptions of co-teaching. The justifications for co-teaching are the benefits gained through collaboration and the support for education. Most differences in opinions occur when pupils in need of various kinds of special support are integrated into the general education group.

Keywords: co-teaching, inclusion, special education, education policy, grounded theory

Introduction

The number of pupils in need of pedagogical support in general education schools has continued to grow over the last ten years in Finland (Official Statistics of Finland, 2021). The same trend has been observed internationally as well (Ricci and Fingon, 2018). Teaching groups in primary classes have become increasingly heterogeneous, which has challenged the work of teachers and affected teaching practices (Laine, 2016; Tirri, 2014). Although, by international comparison, the Finnish education system has managed to maintain the differences concerning pupils' competence, signs of a development of inequality can still be seen. The numbers of pupils with a need for support and the most successful students are growing, and their skills are diversifying. Furthermore, within the largest cities, there are clear differences between schools in terms of the skills of pupils since primary education (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2020). It is also worth noting that the differences in the skills between Finnish girls and boys in favour of girls are the largest among the OECD countries (Leino *et al.*, 2019).

Although equality in education in Finland is a strong goal, the latest neoliberal education policy has created a paradox in which the effectiveness of education, the teaching of well-performing individuals and competition between schools have grown to question the implementation of inclusion (Ketovuori and Pihlaja, 2016; Rinne *et al.*, 2018; Silvennoinen *et al.*, 2016). The threat of growing socioeconomic and ethnic disparities is also a reality in Finland (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018). This is especially true in the largest cities and regions with the highest levels of immigration (Bernelius, 2013; Lempinen, 2018; Välijärvi, 2019). In Finland, younger pupils are always admitted to the nearest school. In order to avoid schools with a high number of immigrant pupils, parents have, for example, started to move to another school district. According to Härkönen and Sirniö (2020), the link between family background and school choices has strengthened. Educated parents more often admit their children to a school of their choice, whereas less educated families either do not have that choice or do not employ it and admit their children to the nearest school.

Finnish school policy from the inclusion perspective

Inclusion can be defined as a global process of establishing equality and eliminating social exclusion. The idea of inclusive education is to reduce exclusion in education and society at large (Watkins and Donnelly, 2014). According to Florian and Beaton (2018), inclusive education is an approach to teaching and learning that attends to individual differences between pupils but avoids marginalisation. Definitions of inclusion vary and are influenced by the different cultural customs and practices in each country (Ainscow and Miles, 2009; Haug, 2017; Ketovuori and Pihlaja, 2016; Lauchlan and Greig, 2015; Nilholm, 2006). In this study, inclusion means education for all pupils, not just for pupils with SEN, as inclusion is often interpreted (Booth, 2011; Hausstätter, 2014; Nilholm, 2019; UNESCO, 1994). The inclusive ideology is consistent with the Finnish legislation (Basic Education Act 628/1998; Non-Discrimination Act 1325/2014; Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities 27/2016) and the goals of the curriculum, highlighting the right of all pupils to receive education despite differences (National Board of Education, 2016; Saloviita, 2018; Saloviita and Schaffus, 2016). While inclusive values are the guiding principles of basic education in Finland, its implementation is not at all. This is

because the current local school principle allows municipalities to arrange teaching for pupils with SEN also in separate small groups or special schools (Ström and Sundqvist, 2021). In Finland, more than 90% of pupils with SEN study 80 % of the school day in a special group, while in European countries more than 60 % of pupils with SEN study in inclusive arrangements (Ström and Sundqvist, 2021).

Over the past two decades, Finland has invested in the development of a comprehensive school system that promotes inclusion (Lakkala and Thuneberg, 2018; Sahlberg, 2021). The structure of special education in Finnish schools changed in the 2010s when a three-step support system was launched (Law amending the Basic Education Act 642/2010). In this system, the division between special education and general education was removed, and since 2010 pupils have been entitled to either general, intensified or special support in education. The purpose of the amendment was to strengthen the implementation of the local school principle, which is to organise students' support in the teaching group that would also be provided to them without the need for support (Lintuvuori *et al.*, 2017). With the three-step support system, all Finnish schools must be developed in accordance with the principle of inclusion. Some schools have created separate groups for pupils who need intensified or special support, while some schools have started to implement co-teaching. This reform is still being implemented, and municipalities differ from each other in how it is being implemented (see for example, Lintuvuori, 2019). Inclusive education within schools has been a challenge in Finland because we have been following special school traditions to this day. In addition, an increasing number of pupils need intensified or special support (see for example, OSF, 2011, 2020) for schooling. Based on previous research, Finnish teachers have a positive attitude towards co-teaching and see several benefits in it (Takala and Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012; Kokko, Takala and Muukkonen, 2020), but its implementation is low. The purpose of this study is to fill the gap in the studies concerning teachers' justifications why they co-teach or not.

Pupils in need of support are now increasingly studying in mainstream classes (Lakkala *et al.*, 2016), and the implementation of pedagogical support has become part of every teacher's work (Thuneberg *et al.*, 2013). Teachers play a crucial role in implementing inclusive education, meaning high-quality and suitable education for all (De Boer *et al.*, 2010). High-quality education and adequate support in comprehensive schools have promoted better learning results (Hotulainen *et al.*, 2020). Pedagogical solutions need to be based on addressing individual needs and ensuring equality in and quality of teaching (Tervasmäki and Tomperi, 2018). Current changes have required teachers to devise new ways of teaching. The competence of an individual teacher may not be sufficient to teach increasingly heterogeneous groups of pupils (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2018; Lauchlan and Greig, 2015; Välijärvi, 2017). According to the Evaluation Report of the Teacher Education Forum (FINEEC, 2018), sufficient competence of teachers in meeting and teaching different pupils is one of the main challenges of teaching. Hence, to promote a more inclusive school, teachers need adequate resources, skills and functional methods (Kokko, Takala and Pihlaja, 2021; Saloviita, 2020). Implementing co-teaching is one way to provide support and promote inclusion in a heterogeneous class, for example, together with a special teacher and a classroom teacher (Kokko, Takala and Muukkonen, 2020). Co-teaching brings

more resources to the classroom and, as such, makes room for more possibilities than teaching alone. This article explores co-teaching as one way to promote and implement inclusion.

Co-teaching and its Benefits and Challenges

Co-teaching is one way of teaching in diverse groups (Friend *et al.*, 2010; Scruggs and Mastropieri, 2017), and it is defined as teaching carried out in collaboration with two or more teachers (Fluijt *et al.*, 2016; Friend *et al.*, 2010; Friend and Cook, 2014; Murawski, 2008; Villa *et al.*, 2013). In co-teaching, teachers share their competence in planning, implementing and evaluating teaching together (Friend *et al.*, 2010). Co-teaching enables a wide range of teaching arrangements, selected on the basis of teaching content and the needs of support for student groups (*ibid.*). When teaching together, teacher roles vary depending on the method of implementation and the needs of student support (Chitiyo and Brinda, 2018). The most common models for implementing co-teaching are: one teaches and the other observes, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching and teaming (Friend *et al.*, 2010).

Even though co-teaching has achieved positive outcomes (Morgan, 2016; Scruggs *et al.*, 2007; Villa *et al.*, 2013), teachers have also reported the challenges associated with it (Casserly and Padden, 2018; Chitiyo, 2017). When there is more than one teacher in the class, it is easier to meet *all* the needs of the pupils (Krammer *et al.*, 2018). Employing co-teaching, such as having a special and a regular teacher at the same time in the classroom (Kokko, Takala and Muukkonen, 2020), would enable support to a wide range of pupils.

Previous studies have reported several benefits of co-teaching. Multiple teachers in a classroom respond to students' support needs better than only one teacher can (Krammer *et al.*, 2018). Implementing co-teaching can reduce segregation (Strogilos *et al.*, 2016), improve students' socioemotional and interaction skills (Friend *et al.*, 2010; Strogilos and Stefanidis, 2015) and reduce students' challenging behaviours (Strogilos and Avramidis, 2016). In the study of Takala and Uusitalo-Malmivaara (2012), teachers felt that co-teaching allowed students to have more time with the teachers. In addition, co-teaching allowed individual students to gain the extra support and help they may need without being treated differently (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011).

As in previous international studies on co-teaching (Chitiyo, 2017; Friend *et al.*, 2010; Panscofar and Petroff, 2016; Solis *et al.*, 2012), Finnish teachers have felt that the biggest challenge in co-teaching is the lack of planning time (Kokko, Takala and Muukkonen, 2020). Other significant challenges included a lack of effective co-teaching models and finding a suitable teaching partner to teach with (Kokko, Takala and Muukkonen, 2020; Takala and Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012; Pratt, 2014). In addition, the characteristics of a school, such as its routines and systems, availability of resources and competing priorities have also been mentioned as obstacles (Chitiyo, 2017).

Most of the teachers who have used co-teaching find it useful in many ways from the perspectives of both the student and the teacher (Kokko, Takala and Muukkonen, 2020; Takala and Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012; Rytivaara, 2012). Although the exposure to co-teaching possibilities has been increasing since the end of the 2010s (Simola, 2020), its implementation rates have remained constant since 2010 (Kokko, Takala and Muukkonen, 2020). Based on previous studies, it is known that the

school's operating culture and structure can hinder teachers' collaboration (Chitiyo, 2017). In addition, it is known that the tradition of teaching and coping alone persists among Finnish teachers. The freedom and willingness to cope with every situation alone is rooted in the profession of a teacher and raises the threshold for seeking support from other members of the work community (Väljärvi, 2017, 2019). Finnish teachers' work is not under external control, as in many other countries. Although teachers welcome co-teaching (Kokko, Takala and Muukkonen, 2020), there always exists a contradiction between views and implementation. To understand this gap, this study examines how teachers justify the implementation of co-teaching as well as how they find it disadvantageous.

Method

Data and Participants

The data for this study came from the 'Supporting together!' project financed by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. The data was collected via an electronic questionnaire from teachers (N = 694) in one big southern city and one larger northern city and in smaller municipalities around these cities in the spring of 2018. The questionnaire included 19 questions about co-teaching, of which two open-ended questions were used in this study: when co-teaching is justified and when it is not. This study was based on 432 teacher responses to implementing co-teaching (Table 1). In this study, the answers to open-ended questions constituted 39 pages of teachers' responses. Those teachers who had no experience with co-teaching were excluded from the study in order to obtain information based on the teachers' experience. The questionnaire included definitions of different forms of co-teaching.

Table 1: Background information of the teachers (N = 432)

	Teacher			Gender			Age					Teaching experience (years)		
	<i>CT</i>	<i>ST</i>	<i>SNT</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>O</i>	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60 + over	0–10	11–20	over 20
<i>N</i>	172	146	114	340	90	2	40	109	154	116	13	134	152	146
%	40	34	26	79	21	0	9	25	36	27	3	31	35	34

CT = classroom teacher, ST = subject teacher, SNT = special need teacher, F= female, M = male, O = other

Methodological Choices and Data Analysis

The analysis of teachers' views was rooted in a constructivist paradigm and was shaped by the epistemological belief that individuals make meanings of their experiences differently; therefore, they construct their own unique perspectives of the world. Methodologically, this research adapts grounded theory (GT) with inductive orientation to the data (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In our study, constructive elements are rooted in Charmaz's ideas of flexibility and lean on the "assumption that social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed..." (Charmaz, 2014, p.14). Since there was no existing model delineating the process of teachers' justification of co-teaching, it was necessary to develop a model in order to ascertain which factors influence teachers' decisions to co-teach.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), GT allows researchers to find new nuances to things that are already well described. GT provides a systematic way of reducing a large body of data into a concise

conceptual framework that can describe or explain a phenomenon. The research and the existing theories of co-teaching lack an explanation of how teachers justify their decisions to teach together or not. We approached the data through a GT framework and focused on generating empirical explanations grounded from the data. The aim was to understand the realities of participants involved in the phenomenon (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

According to Strauss and Corbin (1994), researchers bring with them their experience and readability, which have a clear advantage in the analysis process. Therefore, the results are contextual, and subjectivity is present in a study by Charmaz (2014). The subjective understanding was reflected by three researchers—all experts in special education—when the study was conducted. To bolster the trustworthiness of our work, all authors assisted in the analysis, which was a fruitful process and eventually aided with consistency and reliability throughout the coding process. In order to maintain theoretical sensitivity, we started coding the material without strict predetermined classes (see Glaser, 1992) and were open to participants' meanings and actions (Charmaz, 2014). We kept memos while analysing the data, which also helped us discuss the meanings and compare them to our earlier understandings and data (ibid.).

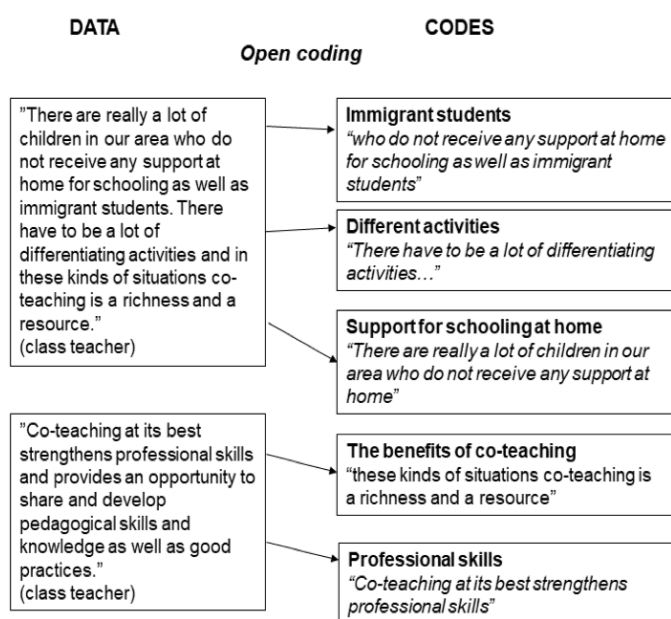


Figure 1: Example of open coding process

All data were analysed using the qualitative analysis software, NVivo 12, which enabled management, grouping and quantification of the data. In this study, the coding frame covered 85 % of all material. We chose Strauss and Corbin's three-step coding method, which consists of 1) open coding, 2) axial coding and 3) selective coding steps (Appendix 1). In the first step, we followed an inductive approach, analysing the data with a detailed line-by-line analysis to generate initial classes with their properties and dimensions and to tentatively suggest relationships among these first-level classes (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). During open coding or the stage that is close to initial coding, as Charmaz (2014) describes the beginning of analysing, we were sensitive to reading the text and understanding the connotations of the written responses (see Chun *et al.*, 2019). Through the open coding, we found 199

first-level classes linked to justifying the elements of co-teaching and 202 first-level classes not justifying co-teaching.

When open coding fractured our data being ‘provisional, comparative and grounded in the data’ (Charmaz, 2014, p.117), axial coding was used to integrate first-level classes. In axial coding, the classified basic data rise to higher-level concepts that characterised concepts created for open coding (Chun *et al.*, 2019). A continuous comparison of the similarities and differences found in the data was carried out by identifying and labelling important words or groups of words. During the analysis and coding of the data, we compared the codes to the data and constructed the reality.

To continue our analysis, the similarities and differences from the classes in axial coding were studied. Axial coding comes close to the idea of focused coding in our analysis (Charmaz, 2014). In axial coding, we concentrated on the first-level classes and reflected on what they meant and what kind of differences and similarities were found. The three most common justifications found in axial coding in favour of co-teaching were differentiation (99), the suitability of co-teaching all kinds of classes (46) and flexible grouping (16). The most common reasoning against co-teaching were the students with behavioural disorders in the group (33), restless pupils in the classroom (30) and the observation that some students need a smaller group (26). Gradually, as the analysis progressed, the above-mentioned concepts built larger classes. In axial coding, 22 classes (e.g. differentiation and flexible groupings) were formed justifying the implementation of co-teaching, with 19 classes (e.g. if there are students with behavioural disorders and restless pupils in the classroom) against co-teaching implementation.

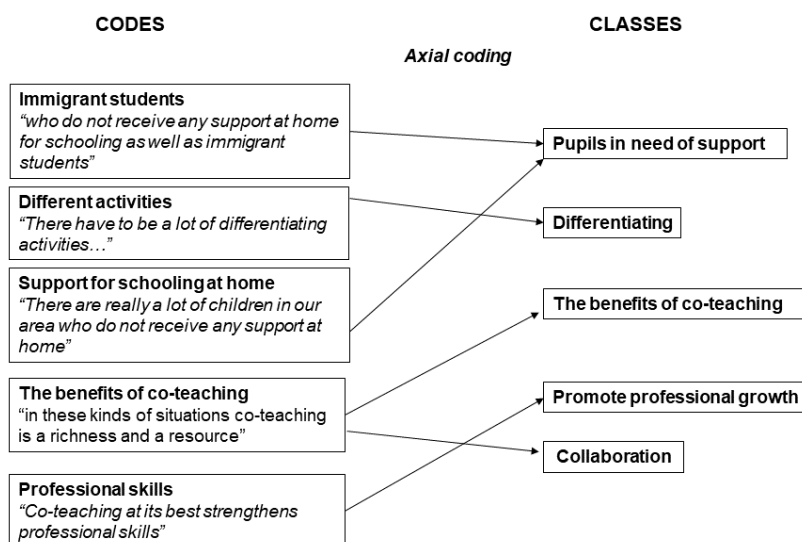


Figure 2: Example of axial coding

The coding process is shown in Appendix 1. When utilising the GT process (Charmaz, 2006), categorisation was a fluid process, and the categories were merged or broken apart as needed as the analysis progressed. Moreover, as we read the answers of participants from both southern and northern Finland, we found that the same themes repeated in the responses from the teachers. Also, we found the same themes appearing within the responses from each group of teachers (classroom, subject and

special needs teachers). Thus, the data analysis had reached a saturation point (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

At the end of the analysis, the paradigm model was applied, resulting in two main categories seen as the main justification for implementation or non-implementation of co-teaching. These categories were 1) teachers' collaboration and 2) teaching groups and pupils in need of additional support. In this final step, by selective coding, the contents of the categories and their relationships with each other were extracted. In this phase, the justified and unjustified elements of co-teaching were discussed. Next, these categories were examined in more depth.

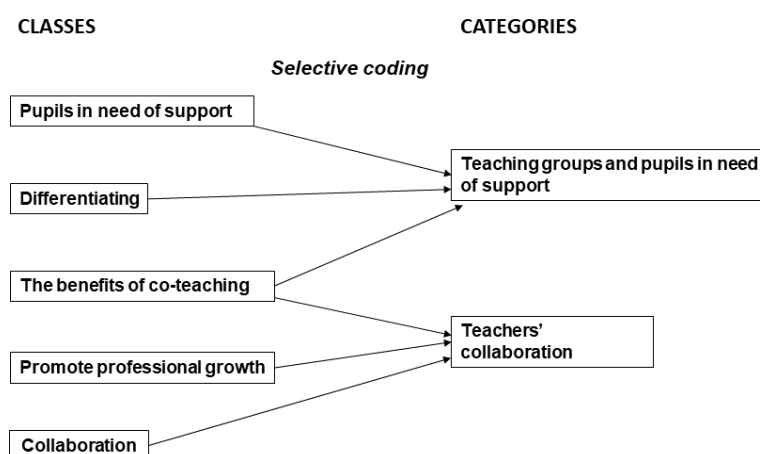


Figure 3: Example of selective coding

When is co-teaching justified and when is it not?

The results could be compressed into two main categories, namely teachers' collaboration and teaching pupils with support needs. Next, we present one main category at a time, first setting out the justification for the implementation of co-teaching and then the reasons for not implementing it in both categories, with the responses contradicting. Both categories included personal issues, such as values, as well as technical issues, such as time allocation. The differences and similarities of the statements in both categories are compared in the summary paragraph.

Teachers' collaboration

Co-teaching was justified when the cooperation between teachers was voluntary and smooth. In successful co-teaching, teachers treat each other equally and respectfully and commit to cooperation, for example, through the use of a common planning time. The implementation of co-teaching is supported by teachers' possibilities to share skills and workload. Co-teaching is seen as a way to develop education and increase the well-being of the whole community. According to the teachers, sharing responsibility eases the workload of both educators. For example, both do not have to do the same things, and each teacher's expertise can be benefitted from, which contributes to the meaningfulness of the work and more time.

“Co-teaching should be used when teachers’ perceptions of pupils, learning, teaching and cooperation are sufficiently similar. Co-teaching can be used to equalise the workload, structure the lesson differently and share, deepen and develop their skills as a teacher. By planning together, the quality of teaching is better, because one’s own choices have to be justified by the other.”
(classroom teacher)

In teachers’ opinions, co-teaching does not seem sensible in a situation where teachers’ perceptions of teaching, the work of education and their basic tenets, like their core values, differ. Most teachers considered finding a suitable co-teaching partner a problem, which was one reason against co-teaching. Teachers reported that co-teaching is challenging if the partner does not have sufficient knowledge and skills to co-teach and the willingness to co-teach and to develop as a teacher. Smooth cooperation is difficult to achieve if teachers do not have time or take time to plan their teaching together; as a result, one of the teachers could always end up as an assistant or a disciplinarian. The presence of a special education teacher in the classroom increased the uncertainty of some teachers about their own teaching competence.

“Teaching together is difficult, if teachers do not have time to plan the lesson together, or if the special needs teacher never takes responsibility for the lesson. I feel that the presence of a special needs teacher causes harm rather than benefit on many occasions. It’s hard for me to focus on teaching when I think about how a special education teacher would want this taught or he’ll start talking to the student at the same time as I teach.” (subject teacher)

The fear of being evaluated by a colleague was strong and a barrier to collaboration. Feeling of competence is important for professional satisfaction, so it was a challenge to break it.

Summary of Teacher Collaboration

Willingness to teach together and the time needed for planning were mentioned as essential when implementing co-teaching. If teachers do not have enough time to plan, co-teaching is not justified (cf. Kokko, Takala and Muukkonen, 2020; Kokko, Takala and Pihlaja, 2021; Chitiyo, 2017; Panscofar and Petroff, 2016). The willingness to collaborate as a co-teacher can be based on several different reasons, such as promoting or preventing a topic (cf. Tuomela and Mäkelä, 2011). Indeed, collaboration is typically engaged in as a result of the perceived mutual benefits (cf. Kokko, Takala and Pihlaja, 2021; Colman *et al.*, 2008; Hallamaa, 2017).

Equality, respect of colleagues and commitment to inclusive teaching were mentioned as elements supporting the use of co-teaching (cf. Kokko, Takala and Pihlaja, 2021; Hallamaa, 2017). These are all essential values in inclusive education, as are appreciation of student diversity, collaboration and sufficient teacher competence (cf. Watkins and Donnelly, 2014). It is possible that teachers with a positive outlook on inclusion are more likely to be interested in collaboration, or inclusive teaching can steer teachers in this direction. Increasing co-teaching with the combination of a special education teacher and a general education teacher can reduce the transfer of students to special groups and support an inclusive way of organising teaching. Although the majority of Finnish teachers consider co-teaching to be an evolving and successful method, the instances of co-teaching have not increased over the last ten years (Kokko, Takala and Muukkonen, 2020). Teachers’ differing values were seen as

an obstacle to co-teaching. This argument brings forth the imbalance between teachers' autonomy and the shared value base in the Finnish education system.

The long-lasting tradition to teach alone (Väljärvi, 2017) is still seen by some participants as the best way to educate. Teachers have had the power to decide how to teach in their own classroom. These teachers did not welcome special teachers into their classrooms, for they were perceived as evaluators.

“When a special needs teacher comes to my class, I feel like he's going to judge me as a teacher. It causes extra stress on me.” (subject teacher)

This new kind of sharing-based culture is not always welcomed, since it brings changes to the power dynamic (Kokko, Takala and Pihlaja, 2021; Väljärvi, 2017). Changes in the power dynamic can hinder building trust, but the trust grows when the views of everyone are taken into account (Hallamaa, 2017). Collaboration is always about sharing and mutual trust (Villa *et al.*, 2013). The key factors for successful collaboration are the recognition of self- and others' agency as well as equality and reciprocity. This means that one lends space to the other but does not control the other (Hallamaa, 2017).

Teaching groups and pupils in need of support

One justification for co-teaching was that it is an effective method for teaching large and heterogeneous groups when there are major differences in pupils' skill levels. It was seen as a suitable system to implement in all school subjects, but it was especially mentioned as useful in mathematics and native language and foreign language classes, as pupils' skill levels vary a lot in these subjects. Co-teaching allows teachers to take advantage of a school's different facilities, classify pupils into different and flexible groups and utilise different teaching methods. The presence of more than one teacher in the classroom was seen to improve peaceful working conditions. Using groups for pedagogical reasons and providing more personalised small group lessons can help improve learning as well as peace in the classroom.

Co-teaching can offer pupils the opportunity to participate in both small group as well as big group education; small groups respond to some pupils' needs for support in a peaceful environment. In addition, according to teachers, from some pupils' point of view, when support is brought into the mainstream classroom, it is less stigmatising. Co-teaching enables the support of a special education teacher for a wider range of pupils, preventing learning difficulties from escalating. For example, if pupils do not receive support from home for their schooling, they need more support at school. Co-teaching is seen as an especially beneficial way to organise teaching if there are pupils with behavioural disorders in the group. One of the teachers can continue teaching while the other focuses on calming the students.

“To increase inclusion, all teachers must be ready to collaborate and co-plan. In my opinion, the best forms of work are team teaching and flexible groupings, which bring support to the students in the classroom. At the same time, it is possible to support other pupils before the problems become bigger and to develop class practices that better support all students.” (classroom teacher)

In teachers' opinions, co-teaching cannot be justified if the teaching space is too small, because there can be too much noise when two teachers are teaching different lessons within the same small space.

According to some teachers, if there are no pupils in need of support in the mainstream classroom, co-teaching does not seem sensible. Moreover, some teachers suggested a segregated variant of this, expressing that pupils in need of support are better taught in their own special classes.

“Student groups are usually large in co-teaching classes, so it is not worth ruining the work of the whole group because of a few pupils who are unable to concentrate or otherwise interfere all the time and ruin the work of others. Pupils like this are better taught in special classes.” (classroom teacher)

Teachers also mentioned that the differences between pupils in the mainstream and the special classes are often huge; thus, co-teaching does not seem plausible in that setting. The teachers' doubts concerned mainly pupils who had significant learning difficulties, mental health problems, emotional or behavioural challenges and problems with concentration and attention. Pupils with behavioural difficulties were mentioned as the most challenging aspect when implementing co-teaching in a mainstream class. The teachers believed that if there are challenges in achieving peace to work in a classroom (i.e. some students are repeatedly interfering with the teaching), these pupils should be taught separately, and that segregating the pupils in need of support is a better option.

Summary of teaching groups and students in need of special support

Many participants highlighted co-teaching as an effective way to teach when there are diverse needs in a classroom (cf. Friend, 2010; Hang and Rabren, 2009; Lehane and Senior, 2019), while others thought that pupils with special needs should be transferred to a separate classroom. Teachers who justified co-teaching gave a wider range of reasons, considering not only learning but also many other elements of the school culture. They suggested, for example, that co-teaching enables the use of different teaching methods and allows for the use of flexible groups. Furthermore, in small group activities, co-teaching allowed for a facilitated response to pupils' needs in supporting them and in having more individual interaction. The most controversial issue in their justifications for co-teaching was pupils with social, emotional and behavioural challenges. Co-teaching was justified or unjustified when there were pupils with these challenges in a class. There is a history of teachers experiencing problems with pupils having behavioural difficulties, even in special education (Atjonen, 2011; Kuula, 2000; Seppovaara, 1998). Hence, although the segregation model is still used even in Finnish compulsory education, the principle of inclusion needs further development (National Board of Education, 2016).

Those who opposed the implementation of co-teaching felt that pupils in need of support interfere with the learning of others, are too different for the rest of the class and need more methods and time for learning; therefore, they should be taught separately. Do these arguments reflect inadequate practices or attitudes towards special needs and disabled students? According to Saloviita (2020), Finnish teachers do not have sufficient skills to teach pupils who need different kinds of support (see also Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2018). Instead of teaching knowledge and skills to teachers, it is also important that the teachers become aware of their own values and attitudes as well as the value base of Finnish education (cf. World Health Organization, 2011). It seems that teachers' attitudes

towards inclusion impact their attitudes towards co-teaching, as co-teaching is commonly used as a teaching method to increase inclusion (cf. Chitiyo, 2017).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to increase the knowledge and understanding of teachers' justifications for and against co-teaching in an inclusive framework. Inclusion seemed to both attract teachers to as well as push away from co-teaching. The results show that teachers take a different stance on the implementation of co-teaching with conflicting ideologies to education and its values. It seems that the attitude towards inclusion as well as the attitudes on various special needs have an effect. The results of this study align with the results of previous studies (cf. Kokko, Takala and Muukkonen, 2020; Takala and Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012) that some teachers have found many benefits of collaboration in the form of co-teaching; as a result, they advocate co-teaching. Similarly, to the results of previous studies (Chitiyo, 2017; Panscofar and Petroff, 2016; Solis *et al.*, 2012), our results also show that although some teachers use co-teaching, some have concerns about implementing it in practice. In addition, the results of this study show that the choice concerning co-teaching is partly based on teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards inclusion, partly on traditional work culture and on personal values, fears and often feelings of inadequacy. Instead of supporting students in mainstream classes, there is still a culture of exclusion. As noted by Hakala and Leivo (2015), the development of inclusive education has been slow in Finnish schools (see also Saloviita, 2020).

Many reasons to co-teach or not to co-teach were linked either to pupils' needs, to teachers' professional skills or to resources. As in previous studies, (Chitiyo, 2017; Chitiyo and Brinda, 2018), co-teaching was seen as a way to help teachers better instruct heterogeneous groups, or the heterogeneity of pupils in the classroom was seen as a downside. Some teachers preferred teaching pupils with special needs in a segregated way and place and felt that integrating teaching groups was unnecessary. Others wanted to keep all students in their reference group also when co-teaching. In the evaluation by the FINEEC (2018), one current challenge in teachers' work is their competence in meeting diverse students. The rejection of co-teaching may be due to a lack of teachers' skills and self-confidence to meet and teach pupils in need of support (Savolainen *et al.*, 2020; Yada and Savolainen, 2019) or missing resources, like teaching assistants in class (Sundqvist and Lönnqvist, 2016).

It has also been indicated that teachers' perceptions of a suitable educational environment for students with different disabilities depend on the type and severity of the disability (Yada and Savolainen, 2019). In this study, teachers mentioned that the pupils with hyperactivity and behavioural difficulties are the most challenging to instruct. The working conditions are better and more peaceful in classes where co-teaching is employed (Takala and Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012). Teachers' perceptions of their own competence in relation to teaching pupils with SEN can be increased through education and by achieving positive experiences of teaching these pupils (Savolainen *et al.*, 2020). Due to this, teachers' provision of education needs to focus more on inclusive values and inclusive education practices (cf. Watkinson and Donnelly, 2014). These positive experiences can be reinforced in teachers' daily work by implementing co-teaching with another teacher (cf. Kokko, Takala and Muukkonen, 2020). Teachers'

different competences increase the meaningfulness of the collaboration and expand the opportunity for participants to learn from each other. Through collaboration, responsibility is also divided between both teachers, which supports coping and wellbeing at work (cf. Friend, 2010; Shin *et al.*, 2016).

As in previous studies (Chitiyo, 2017; Friend *et al.*, 2010), teachers in this study asserted that it was not sensible to implement co-teaching if there was a conflict between the two teachers' values in education. Nevertheless, the Core Curriculum (CC) includes a joint value base in Finnish compulsory education. All schools and teachers are obliged to follow the CC where the central values are equality, participation and community (see National Board of Education, 2016), which equate with inclusive values.

Previous studies have shown that collaboration promotes higher-quality teaching (Krammer *et al.*, 2018; Mastropieri and McDuffie, 2007; Morgan, 2016; Villa *et al.*, 2013). Nevertheless, teachers, as professionals, are accustomed to working alone in Finland and have been able to decide relatively how they implement their teaching. All teachers do not want to change this tradition and share teaching responsibilities. This may also be a reason to oppose co-teaching (Chitiyo, 2017; Murawski and Swanson, 2001). The challenges related to the implementation of co-teaching can be reduced by increasing and sharing information about its various applications in schools. Co-teaching is not just about teaching large groups but about allowing flexible groups (Friend *et al.*, 2010). In addition, the training of all teachers should include adequate special education skills and knowledge (cf. Savolainen *et al.*, 2020).

Instead of pursuing similar competencies, it is important to notice that different competencies can add value to teaching. Co-teaching contributes to the development of one's own teaching, because the presence of another teacher in the classroom makes the teacher consciously reflect on their behaviour and manner of instruction (Zwart *et al.*, 2008). Combining teachers' work and resources can increase teachers' knowledge, their peace of mind and the quality of their teaching (Ahtiainen *et al.*, 2011; Friend *et al.*, 2010; Murawski, 2008), while reducing their workload (Chitiyo, 2017).

The sample used in this study consisted of teachers with different educational backgrounds and work experiences (Table 1). However, most teachers had over ten years of teaching experience, which should enable them to adequately assess the potential benefits and challenges of co-teaching. No teacher group was overrepresented or underrepresented, which improved the study's ecological validity (Schmuckler, 2010). In addition, this study corroborates the results of previous studies (Chitiyo, 2017; Panscofar and Petroff, 2016; Rytivaara, 2012; Solis *et al.*, 2012) on the benefits and challenges of co-teaching.

There are limitations in this study. Although the data is large, which is not usually the case in a qualitative research, the results of this study cannot be generalised to every school in Finland or to other countries. Instead, the results give an overview of the state of co-teaching in Finnish schools based on teachers' perceptions. Due to this, the transferability of results from the context of Finnish basic education must be treated carefully. Also, the choice of method affects the results. There are several methods to analyse qualitative data. Qualitative research opens an understanding of perceptions from both participants' views and the researchers' interpretation. This material could also have been analysed

using content analysis. It could have brought out different nuances and details. The application of grounded theory as an inductive approach provided an open analysis of teachers' perceptions, and the analysis of the results was interpreted based on the researchers' knowledge of the field.

Future research must highlight students' experiences of co-teaching. In addition, the impact of co-teaching on learning outcomes and in responding to the needs of support are relevant. From the point of view of the results of this study, it would also be useful to further explore the effect of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Also, the education culture of each school should be studied from this perspective. The official statistics of special education in Finland in the last five years (OFS, 2015–2020) indicate that support for learning and schooling is not sufficiently directed to every pupil. As a result, the education system should be able to better support the students who need it. Co-teaching needs to be used and studied more rigorously, as it is one of the strategies to implement inclusion. Furthermore, studies regarding other strategies, like consultation or differentiation, are needed (Saloviita, 2020). As our results show, there is a lot of argument to justify co-teaching. We suggest that it should be strongly integrated into teacher education in the future.

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Appendix 1: Example of the coding process

