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# Between vision and reality: Finnish school leaders' experiences of their own and teachers' roles in the development of co-teaching

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## ABSTRACT

Co-teaching has been brought forth as an inclusive teaching approach in research and in the Finnish core curriculum. The realisation of co-teaching at the school level puts great demands on teachers, but also on school leaders (SLs) who are expected to lead educational change. The aim of the study was to examine how SLs in Finnish schools were co-teaching has been realised experience their own and co-teachers' roles in leading the realisation of co-teaching as an inclusive approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine SLs in Finland. Inductive thematic analysis was used and revealed two overarching themes: SLs as facilitators of co-teaching and teachers as driving forces of co-teaching. The need for a more active and goal-oriented SL role focused on involving the whole school community in developing co-teaching rather than delegating the responsibility to single teachers is discussed through the lens of distributed leadership and earlier research.

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## KEYWORDS

Co-teaching; inclusion; collaboration; school leaders; distributed leadership

## Introduction

The focus of this study is school leaders' (SLs) experiences of their own and teachers' roles in leading the realisation of co-teaching as an inclusive approach in Finnish schools. In recent decades, inclusive education has been the guiding principle in international statements (UNESCO, 1994) and reflected in educational policy documents in most European countries. This means schools are expected to meet the individual needs of all students in regular classrooms (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASNIE], 2014). Collaboration between special education teachers (SETs) and general education teachers (GETs) has been described as a key factor in successful inclusive education (Florian & Linklater, 2010; Friend et al., 2010; Sundqvist, 2021). Thus, teachers can be considered being at the forefront of the implementation and development of inclusive education (Eklund et al., 2021). On the other hand, it is widely known that school leaders (SLs) play a critical role in school changes and are central actors in developing inclusive and collaborative teaching practices (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Dove-Cummings, 2020; EASNIE, 2014; Friend & Barron, 2016; Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010; Oskarsdottir et al., 2020).

Co-teaching, defined as a collaborative partnership between a SET and GET for jointly delivering instruction to a diverse group of students (Friend et al., 2010), is one of the most described inclusive and collaborative approaches in research (Paulsrud & Nilhom, 2020; Sundqvist, 2021). Co-teaching facilitates a redirection of special needs education (SNE) towards the classroom, increases the

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teacher-student ratio, and allows teachers to support all students together (Friend et al., 2010). Despite the huge support for co-teaching in research, it seems difficult to implement in practice (Casserly & Padden, 2018; Friend, 2008). This is true in Finland, a country where co-teaching is emphasised in the core curriculum (Finnish National Agency of Education [FNAE], 2016) and research (Rytivaara, 2012; Rytivaara et al., 2021; Saloviita, 2018; Sundqvist et al., 2019). Identified obstacles to the realisation of co-teaching include co-teachers' lack of common planning time (Kokko et al., 2021; Murawski & Bernhard, 2016; Sirkko et al., 2018; Takala & Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012), unclear or unequal teacher roles, difficulties in finding suitable co-teaching partners (Kokko et al., 2021; Takala & Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012), lack of co-teaching knowledge, and decreased teacher autonomy (Casserly & Padden, 2018). In addition, the lack of support from SLs and the lack of administrative support have been identified as obstacles (Kamens et al., 2013).

Co-teaching is developing in Finnish schools, but is still not strongly established (Saloviita, 2018; Sundqvist et al., 2020). In some schools, co-teaching is frequently used, while in other schools, co-teaching is seldom used or not used at all, the differences can perhaps be explained by disparity in school culture and leadership (Sundqvist et al., 2020). Research regarding SLs' experiences of leadership facilitating co-teaching stays limited. Previous studies have focused on teachers' experiences of the SLs' role (Härkki et al., 2021; Mackey et al., 2017; Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010), or the SLs' experience of their own role, in realisation of inclusive practice and co-teaching (Balyer et al., 2015; Kamens et al., 2013; Mackey et al., 2017). The Finnish SLs are leaders who share and distribute tasks (Taajamo et al., 2014), which makes it relevant to include the SLs' experiences of the teacher's roles in leading the realisation of co-teaching. Thus, the aim of this study is to examine how SLs in Finnish schools where co-teaching has been realised experience their own and co-teachers' roles in leading the realisation of co-teaching as an inclusive approach.

The results can contribute to increased knowledge of leadership that facilitates co-teaching and shed light on how leadership can be improved regarding the realisation of inclusive practices.

For a contextual understanding, the article starts with a description of the Finnish comprehensive school system, following a literature review of leadership facilitating the development of co-teaching and a description of the distributed perspective on leadership. This is followed by a description of the participants, data collection and analysis. Finally, the results are presented and discussed.

### ***The Finnish comprehensive school system***

The Finnish educational system relies on flexible accountability structures and trust in schools, including the autonomy of schools and teachers (Sahlberg, 2015). The foundation of the Finnish educational system is the national core curriculum, which applies to all districts and schools. The core curriculum describes the general goals, core contents, and principles and guidelines for basic education, but it does not offer standardised pedagogical solutions. Finnish school development and curriculum reform relies heavily on educational expertise at the school level (Sahlberg, 2015). Inclusion is emphasised in the Finnish core curriculum and, since 2011, realised through the three-tiered support system in which all teachers are responsible for offering students early support through differentiation in regular classrooms (FNAE, 2016).

Finnish SLs are required to have a master's degree and teaching qualifications as well as adequate teaching experience and a certificate of educational administration. SLs in Finnish comprehensive schools are pedagogical leaders with vast duties that include administrative tasks, organisation of education curriculum work, and support for the development of the school community (FNAE, 2013). The tasks of SLs vary between municipalities and even between schools in the same municipality (Lahtero et al., 2019). Also, teachers in Finland are highly educated: a master's degree is required for these professionals. In addition, teachers in Finland are regarded as autonomous and valued professionals in curriculum development, teaching, and assessment (Niemi et al., 2018). School leadership is usually distributed, meaning that in addition to SLs, there may be management teams of teachers in charge of school leadership (Patojoki et al., 2021).

## ***Leadership facilitating the development of co-teaching***

For the success of co-teaching as an inclusive approach, there is a need for systemic change in schools and school cultures. This will not occur or be sustained without active support and leadership from SLs (Sindelar et al., 2006; Waldron et al., 2011). In earlier studies, teachers, not least SETs, identify support from SLs as central to making collaboration and co-teaching work (Mackey et al., 2017; Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010). A prerequisite for teachers to bring new teaching models into the classroom is feeling knowledgeable and interested about new strategies (Mackey et al., 2017). SLs are responsible for constructing a collaborative school climate and common inclusive language, offering support and encouraging the implementation of new collaborative models, as well as facilitating logistical aspects. In addition, they can ensure that teachers gain sufficient collaborative knowledge and skills (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Friend & Barron, 2016; Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015; Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010; Oskarsdottir et al., 2020) and create teacher teams with compatible teammates (Krammer et al., 2018).

Research on the SL perspective has shown that even though SLs are aware of their crucial role in developing a collaborative school climate, they do not perform this role adequately. They explain this by referring to the heavy workload (Balyer et al., 2015). In a study by Kamens et al. (2013) on the practice of SLs supporting co-teachers from the view of SLs, the results showed that SLs lacked knowledge of co-teaching or SNE processes, and considered the competence of teachers, overall, the SETs, to be critical for the success of co-teaching. Mackey et al. (2017) conducted interviews with SLs and teachers in schools where co-teaching had been realised. The results revealed a need for SLs and teachers to collaborate and share values, beliefs, and understandings to create an effective co-teaching environment. Finally, a recent interview study by Härkki et al. (2021) indicates that even though co-teachers found support from SLs important, their support alone could not explain successful co-teaching. The results revealed teachers have a critical role in school development and can overcome a lack of support from SLs if they are engaged, motivated, and capable of flexible time management.

## ***A distributed perspective on leadership***

Following Spillane (2008) we in this study use distributed leadership as a perspective offering us a theoretical lens for understanding the leadership of Finnish SLs. Distributed leadership is brought forth as a possible leadership in the development of inclusive schools (Oskarsdottir et al., 2020).

According to Spillane (2008), distributed perspective on leadership means the SL involves more stakeholders as informal leaders in developing and improving processes, searching for the causes of problems, and designing solutions and implementation. Distributed leadership provides for a higher level of group problem-solving and higher rates of effective decisions. Therefore, it is a leadership perspective that encourages collaboration, knowledge sharing, and consistent interactions.

Spillane (2006) and Scribner et al. (2007) argue that a distributed leadership perspective can be seen in the interactions and relationships between leaders and employees. The probability for people to make correct decisions aligned with their leader's intentions is more likely if the leader and employees maintain interaction with each other (Juuti, 2013). According to Harris and Muijs (2004), SLs are responsible for ensuring that informal leaders (teachers) get the opportunity and support to lead when their abilities are needed to make changes or innovate. Teachers' professional development may be supported by the distribution of leadership tasks, which can contribute to the development of their teaching and learning (Brasof, 2017; King & Stevenson, 2017). SLs have also validated the meaningfulness in distributed leadership for teacher development, and recognised the importance of encouraging teachers to become more involved in leadership processes (Dinham et al., 2018).

Case studies of leadership practice conducted by Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) concluded that strong SLs who are committed to inclusive values are crucial to encouraging, promoting, and

supporting collaboration in their continuous interaction with teachers, as well as promoting opportunities for teachers to collaborate with one another. The SLs they met were capable of being autocratic when faced with decisions impacting inclusive education. The authors emphasise the importance of distributed leadership and participative decision-making.

## Method

The current study is part of a larger research project [title of project] aiming to investigate co-teaching from different perspectives – of SLs, teachers and students – in schools where co-teaching has been realised. To capture the SLs' experiences of their role and teachers' roles in leading the development of co-teaching as an inclusive approach, a qualitative semi-structured interview study was conducted.

### Participants and participant recruitment

The participants in this study are SL's in Finnish primary schools, where Swedish is the medium of instruction, in different regions in Finland. School sizes ranged from 70 to 380 students. Information about the SLs is presented in [Table 1](#).

The selection of participants was based on strategic selection, meaning that SLs at primary schools where co-teaching has been initiated were asked to participate. This study is limited to Grades 1–6 because Finnish studies have shown co-teaching is more established in lower grades (Saloviita, 2018). To contact schools where co-teaching has been realised, the first author utilised social media and previous school contacts. Many schools that were contacted initially expressed that they had co-teaching, but after further discussion about collaboration between GETs and SETs, it turned out the school did not have that type of collaborative teaching. The inclusion criterion was that schools should have started with co-teaching and continued to use the teaching model for at least a few hours per week.

### Data collection

Data for this study was collected by the first author in Autumn 2020 through semi-structured interviews with SLs in Finnish primary schools. Before the data collection started, a pilot study was conducted. Small changes concerning the interview questions were made based on the pilot study. Nine SLs (one male, eight females) from different schools were interviewed. Due to the pandemic, five of the interviews were conducted via Zoom, while the other four were conducted at the SL's school face-to-face. At this time, it was already common meeting online and therefore the different approaches have not affected the results. Regardless of the approach, the interviews were about the same length and contained the same amount of information.

**Table 1.** Information on the participating SLs.

SL	Work experience (years)	Experience as an SL (years)	Number of students	Weekly teaching obligation (h)	Studies in SNE
Anna	15	13	345	6	5 credits
Julia	27	9	87	17	5 credits
Laura	20	2,5	317	5–7	5 credits
Linda	38	17	540 (1–9) <sup>a</sup>	4	5 credits
Maria	20	5	181	12	25 credits
Paula	16,5	30	300	5	5 credits
Sara	37	8,5	260	11	Only short courses
Sofia	25	15	250	9	Only short courses
Tina	25,5	15,5	688 (1–9) <sup>a</sup>	0	5 credits

<sup>a</sup>Schools grade 1–9. The other schools are grade 1–6.

The interview guide focused on three themes: (a) teacher roles and collaboration (e.g., How do you experience the role of the SET and the GET in the development of an inclusive school? How does the collaboration between SETs and GETs look in your school?); (b) SLs' role in the realisation of co-teaching (e.g., What do you put into the concept of co-teaching? In what way can you, as an SL, support the realisation and development of co-teaching?); and (c) opportunities and challenges in developing co-teaching (e.g., What made co-teaching possible in your school? Is there anything you would like to improve regarding co-teaching in your school?). The interviews were approximately 60 min long and all interviews were recorded to allow for transcription completed by the first author. The interviews resulted in a total of 127 pages (Times New Roman, line spacing 1,5).

The study was conducted according to Finnish ethical research principles with human participants (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2019). Participants were informed of the research project and participation was voluntary. The schools and SLs were given fictitious names during transcription. To protect the only male participant, he was given a female name.

## Analysis

The data were initially analysed based on the inductive and semantic thematic analytical approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013), aiming to generate a data-driven analysis from the bottom up, not guided by any particular scientific paradigm. The six phases for thematic analysis, described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns, guided the researcher in the analysis.

In the first phase, *familiarising yourself with the data*, the first author transcribed the interviews into written form. The collected data were transcribed verbatim using a Microsoft Word document. The first author read the transcripts thoroughly several times. After this, *initial codes were generated*. Complete coding was used by highlighting keywords and potential patterns in each transcribed interview. In the third phase, *searching for themes*, the first author read through the coded and collated data set and sorted the different codes into broader themes. At this stage, the two other authors read through the transcripts, compared them with the codes and broader themes, and found alternative relevant themes. The authors discussed the upcoming themes and agreed on preliminary candidate themes.

In the following phase, *reviewing themes*, the candidate themes were reviewed by the authors in relation to the coded and collated data. Overlapping themes were combined into larger entities or redefined. The first author re-read the entire data set to be certain the themes were relevant and check that nothing had been missed in earlier stages. Finally, all the authors *defined and named themes*. In Table 2, the analytical process is exemplified.

The collated data resulted in two overarching themes including three themes each. The report was written in an inductive and semantic manner attempting to capture the participant's experiences without being shaped by existing theory. However, to better understand the meaning of SLs' experiences, the themes were finally interpreted through the lens of a distributed leadership perspective and earlier research. These final overall analytic conclusions are reported in the discussion section.

The trustworthiness of the study was achieved using peer debriefing between the first author and two other authors during the search for themes. In addition, the themes were compared with the transcripts and redefined until the researchers agreed the themes gave a correct and fair picture of the data.

## Results

The results are structured according to two overarching themes: (1) *the SL as a facilitator of co-teaching*; and (2) *teachers as driving forces of co-teaching*. Within both of these overarching

**Table 2.** The thematic analysis process.

Transcript Extracts	Code	Theme	Overarching Theme
“Try to cut down on something else in our schedule and give space for co-teaching because I think it’s important.	Prioritise because co-teaching is important	Structural and relational room for action	The SL as a Facilitator of Co-teaching
“All teachers can co-teach with someone and therefore we try to find and pair those who we know can collaborate”	Pairing those who can collaborate		
“In classes where we have scheduled time for co-teaching, the co-teaching works really well.”	Schedule co-teaching		
“I have to be able to say that this is what we do in our house. Although I probably also know that it is questioned. Some type of discussion must be held”.	Clarity of expectations	Balance between clear expectations and freedom of action	
	Discussions with the teachers		
“It is about giving them some freedom. Frames, yes, but like free hands as to what is best for your team, or for you as a teacher. I have tried to encourage them to try”.	Freedom to make own decisions within some kind of frames		
	Encourage teachers to try		

themes, three themes that capture the SLs’ experiences of their own role and teachers’ roles in leading the realisation of co-teaching as an inclusive practice are revealed.

***The SL as a facilitator of co-teaching***

The first overarching theme is characterised by the SLs experiences of their own role as making co-teaching practically possible for teachers to implement without forcing the teachers, rather supporting those who are willing to try. It involves three themes: the role of SLs in balancing clear expectations and freedom of action, offering structural and relational room for action, and having competence and being supportive.



### ***Balance between clear expectations and freedom of action***

The first theme is characterised by clarity in leadership, but with respect for teachers' autonomy in determining how to collaborate and develop inclusion in practice. Thus, the data encapsulates both the view of SLs' responsibility for constructing a collaborative school climate and a view of teachers as autonomous professionals. The SLs expressed the importance of providing guidelines and frameworks for collaboration and, if necessary, "pushing" teachers to collaborate. Within the given framework, SLs also need to have confidence in teachers' capacity and give them freedom to design their ideal type of collaboration. SLs mentioned it is important to be distinct in their leadership regarding co-teaching. They referred to the curriculum (FNAE, 2016), where co-teaching is highlighted as a form of teaching based on the three-tiered support system and inclusive values. The SLs expressed that the starting point should always be students being taught together as far as possible, but they also mentioned there are situations when one or more students can benefit from individual support outside the classroom.

In addition, the SLs believed it is not possible to force teachers to co-teach, and primarily present co-teaching to teachers who they imagine will dare to try. SLs require collaboration between teachers, but when it comes to co-teaching, the interviews revealed SLs are not that explicit. "I should be clearer about what matters. At the same time, I have given confidence to the teachers to build a collaboration" (Paula).

Some SLs mentioned they use the recruitment process to inform teachers about school guidelines in terms of collaboration and co-teaching. They consider it part of their duty to clarify the issue at an early stage, so teachers interested in working at the school are aware of expectations regarding inclusive teaching approaches.

I experience that the teacher role has changed regarding how we should work, and I think we are strong if we can work together. I definitely think so, because we need to include children and in order for children to be included, they need many adults around them who know what they are doing. (Laura)

### ***Structural and relational room for action***

The second theme captures the leadership of SLs regarding different ways of creating space for co-teaching with functioning teacher teams. As an SL, it is about giving enough time for collaboration, daring to prioritise, creating space for a common vision, and forming teams of people who can grow together.

The SLs expressed the importance of being responsive and spending time creating strong, well-functioning teaching teams as a prerequisite for developing meaningful co-teaching. "All teachers can co-teach with someone and therefore we try to find and pair those who we know can collaborate" (Maria). This includes the puzzle of scheduling, which the SLs emphasised is important to spend time on to increase the probability of succeeding with co-teaching. Some SLs schedule direct co-teaching lessons, while others build a schedule that enables collaboration and co-teaching. "I would say to bravely try. Schedule it so the teachers cannot choose so much" (Laura). "In classes where we have scheduled time for co-teaching, the co-teaching works really well" (Anna).

The SLs also emphasised the importance of creating time for co-planning, as this is a prerequisite for making co-teaching work. "You must create the conditions and show that you think it is important. Only in that way, co-teaching can be successful" (Julia).

According to some SLs, scheduled co-planning is a step they must dare to take. One SL mentioned she was initially afraid of teachers' reactions as she added additional co-planning time to their schedules. However, it later proved to be a welcome feature and instead of creating more stress, the structure led to feelings of security. "Now that I see how we have worked this year and we've all been very satisfied, I feel that what we have thought would create more stress – to structure another meeting – is in fact quite the opposite" (Laura).

Creating structural room involves priorities regarding the use of teacher resources. Co-teaching as a new teaching approach does not necessarily require more resources, but a restructuring of

resources. “When it comes to getting resources for the school, it is important to rethink instead of thinking that you need many new people. Maybe then try with the people you have for creating a new system” (Anna). The SLs mentioned they must sometimes dare to prioritise something away in favour of something that is perceived as more important, thereby reorganising the forces in the teaching staff. “I have to make conscious choices. Maybe something that is not as important, that I dare to put it aside and not always be so splendid and follow everything to the letter” (Julia).

### ***Have competence and be supportive***

The third theme is characterised by the importance of SLs being visible in the college, having versatile skills, and being able to encourage and support teachers in the development of more collaborative working methods. Only one of nine SLs had studied SNE at a more in-depth level than the five credits included in their initial teacher education. Despite this, the SLs mentioned that transparency and knowledge of SNE and pedagogical work is required. The SLs confirmed their experience as a class or subject teacher for several years is a prerequisite for them to support teachers in the development of collaboration and co-teaching. Some of the SLs have teaching included in their working hours so they can be role models for teacher collaboration.

In order to be able to take the discussion about priorities, resource distribution, values, the whole thing, you must of course have an insight into how a class works, you must have an insight into what co-teaching can be. Whom else should these people be able to discuss with when it comes to their work situation or how they should use their time if they cannot do it with the SL? Of course, you need knowledge about it, but I don't think you need to be a specialist in the field. (Tina)

Almost all SLs acknowledged that they must be accessible and responsive. Teachers should experience SLs listening to them and their ideas. They also expressed the importance of creating a work climate where teachers dare to try new ways of working.

I, as an SL, must give them the opportunity to fail as well. It can happen that you notice that this was not good either. In our school, you may try and you get to both succeed and fail. That's how you learn. (Anna)

Almost all SLs emphasised that the well-being of teachers must not be neglected and it is important for SLs to show daily appreciation for the work teachers do. Some of the SLs mentioned they observe lessons or partial lessons on a regular basis. They do this not to control the teaching, but to get better insights into the work of teachers and students as well as the nature of student groups and classroom climate.

I try as naturally as possible to walk around the school. It is not the case that 'now she comes and you have to stand in line' or something like that. I am often in the classes and just happen to fall in. (Sara)

These are schools where it is also common for teachers to follow each other's lessons to get new ideas. Several SLs mentioned they have urged teachers who were unsure of co-teaching to follow lessons where co-teaching is conducted. Some SLs mentioned that being supportive also means offering continuing education on co-teaching and continuously discussing the teaching approach with teachers.

### ***Teachers as driving forces of co-teaching***

The second overarching theme is characterised by the SLs experiences of the teachers as key actors in both the initiation and realisation of co-teaching. The role of teachers includes three themes: having a common vision and common goals; a willingness to transform teacher autonomy and traditional SNE; as well as, the engagement and flexibility of individual teachers.

### ***Common vision and goals***

The first theme includes the SLs' experiences with the importance of teachers developing a common vision and goals regarding co-teaching. This was expressed in terms of co-teacher consensus

regarding the pedagogical work and treatment of students. Even though the SLs mostly talked about this as an aspect necessary for co-teaching partners, some SLs also mentioned the necessity of developing common visions and goals for co-teaching at the school community level.

Find out whom we are and what we want to do. We do not need to copy someone else's pattern; it may not be suitable for us at all. Together find the path we want to go and know that this is what we strive for. (Laura)

The SLs emphasised that before collaboration starts, co-teachers should discuss their views on knowledge, learning, and human values. In this way, the teachers gain an understanding of each other and can accept that co-teachers do not agree on all issues. This can contribute to developing the teaching profession instead of becoming an obstacle for collaboration. One of the SLs expressed that at an early stage, co-teachers should “lay the cards on the table” (Linda) to avoid misunderstandings and address any differences of opinion more easily in the future.

Another aspect of this theme is the SLs' experiences with co-teachers who take time to reflect not only on individual student learning together, but also group learning. The SLs mentioned that when co-teachers with different competencies reflect and develop common visions, goals, and lesson plans together, it facilitates variety in co-teaching lessons. In addition, some SLs expressed that when teachers co-teach, they learn from each other, share knowledge with each other, and can develop new perspectives.

The way I (as a teacher) have perceived a situation, perhaps the other teacher has not done it at all. The co-teachers discuss and then they may go further in those thoughts than if each of them was sitting alone thinking. (Laura)

The development of common visions and goals at the school community and co-teacher levels is considered to be a necessity for co-teaching partnerships, but also a possibility for professional development that influences student learning.

### ***Transform teacher autonomy and the traditional view on SNE***

The second theme captures the SLs' thoughts regarding challenging the traditional and autonomous teacher role to develop collaboration and inclusive teaching approaches. According to tradition, teachers both plan and handle teaching independently. The SLs said there should be openness and willingness for collaboration between teachers. The SLs further mentioned they believe the threshold for some teachers is high when it comes to co-teaching because the teacher is used to being in control alone. For example, Tina expressed: “A teacher who feels insecure can somehow be afraid to expose herself/himself”.

This theme is about daring to break away from the traditional SET role where the SET selects students from the classroom and teaching takes place in a separate room, individually or in small groups. “On one hand, I think we must somehow dare to scratch a little on that old ... on what the SET's role has been, on what SNE has been, and somehow dare to take that discussion” (Tina). Some SLs mentioned they like to see that SETs' work is based on observations and teaching in the classroom. For example, one of the SLs listed GETs' sense of lost insight when a student in one subject is taught entirely by the SET in a separate space.

Sometimes you hear when the GET who doesn't have the student in certain subjects feels that he/she doesn't really know how the student copes. The student is whole and that's why it is important for the GET to have an insight about the students' work in every subject. (Maria)

This theme also includes SLs' experiences related to co-teaching benefits for students. “Co-teaching supports all students. Everyone has greater opportunities to be seen and to come forward” (Paula). The SLs mentioned that increased teacher density through co-teaching support the learning for all students in the inclusive classroom. When teachers discover the associated benefits for students, it is more likely that they will continue with and develop co-teaching.

According to the SLs, co-planning and parallel work between teachers can be a first step towards the development of co-teaching. Some of the schools have built up the start of school for first-graders in such a way that there are no fixed class divisions. Instead, the students are divided flexibly into different groups and the groups can vary from day to day or week to week. GETs and SETs in year one take care of all students together, which requires cooperation and co-planning. Furthermore, this way of working leads to all adults and students knowing each other. Differentiation in teaching is also facilitated because teachers can support each other; when there are more eyes in the classroom, the teachers can see solutions to challenges that arise more easily. In this way, both the students and teachers become accustomed to collaborating with different individuals. Above all, the SLs noticed the step to start teaching together in the common classroom becomes shorter.

### *The individual teacher's engagement and flexibility*

The third theme includes the SLs' reflections on the individual teacher's approach to co-teaching, trustworthiness, and personal compatibility. The SLs mentioned that individual teachers at their schools have started co-teaching, which has aroused curiosity among their colleagues and led to other teachers in the school also starting to teach together. One of the SLs shared an experience with a GET who was at first negative about teaching with the SET, but after hearing positive experiences from colleagues, chose to try it. Today, the same teacher co-teaches regularly and finds it rewarding for both students and teachers.

Some take more time to get comfortable with the situation, but if I think of a recent case with many years of experience, how satisfied the teacher is that there is finally special help available, despite the fact that the teacher has previously been, not afraid of others, but very happy enough to be in one's own bubble. Now notice the benefits. (Sara)

The SLs referred to the individual teacher's enthusiasm and interest in co-teaching. The realisation of co-teaching is thus dependent on the individual teacher's initiative and not so much controlled by management.

Co-teaching is very easily forgotten and one easily falls back to what was previously normal. It is important to constantly remind and bring up these things. It's a long period before it's really in the walls. There is a lot of work behind it. We have an enthusiast and if she should be gone ... I actually don't know. I think it will not disappear completely; the change will probably remain but maybe not at the same level. (Paula)

The initiative to co-teach has mostly been taken by SETs and some of the SLs believe it is often young, newly graduated SETs who promote co-teaching as an inclusive form of teaching in schools. "Two of our SETs are new, and I think they come from their education with the idea that co-teaching is natural" (Sofia). However, some SLs emphasised that the age of the teachers does not matter. They said it is more about personal compatibility between teachers, and whether or not they find each other and want to collaborate. Personal compatibility is something the SLs strongly emphasised. Teachers who have similar values and student views are more likely to thrive together and co-teach.

It has to do with personal compatibility. This is why it is important to agree on how the collaboration should work – that you actually see the students and don't start pulling them in different directions. There must be an agreement there and a consensus on how it should work. (Tina)

On the other hand, the majority of the SLs believed that everyone can learn to teach together and it is more about being open to co-teaching. "It requires an openness and will from both teachers – to be able to collaborate with the students' best interests in mind" (Maria). The SLs mentioned the importance of letting go and trusting your co-teaching partners' teaching skills even though they may teach in a different way. Without trust, it can easily happen that one partner, usually the SET, only gets an assistant role in the classroom.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how SLs in schools where co-teaching has been realised experience their own and co-teachers' roles in leading the development of co-teaching as an inclusive approach. In this section, we discuss the overarching themes separately and interpret the results in the lens of a distributed leadership perspective, as well as earlier research on co-teaching to better understand the meaning of SLs' experiences.

### *The SL as a facilitator of co-teaching as inclusive practice*

Researchers have pointed out that SLs have a crucial role to play in the development of inclusive schools (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Oskarsdottir et al., 2020) as well as teacher collaboration and co-teaching as an inclusive teaching approach (Dove-Cummings, 2020; Kamens et al., 2013; Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015). According to the results in this study, the SLs in schools where co-teaching has been realised consider co-teaching as a valuable teaching approach supporting inclusive education and all students learning. They are aware of the necessity to be goal-oriented leaders, offering clear expectations and practical possibilities for collaboration, and continuously pushing and supporting teachers to break free from traditional teaching models. This is in line with earlier research emphasising the SL's responsibility for constructing a collaborative school climate and facilitating logistical aspects, such as scheduling common planning time (Friend & Barron, 2016; Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015). Furthermore, the results can be understood in light of distributed leadership where SLs support collaboration, interact with teachers, and encourage them to become more involved in co-teaching (Dinham et al., 2018; Scribner et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006). Despite the SLs' awareness of their responsibility regarding constructing an inclusive and collaborative school climate and facilitating logistical aspects, the results reveal a gap between vision and reality: some of the SLs expressed they could be clearer about what they expect from teachers and dare to prioritise how the human resources in their schools are used. They expressed that SLs should also be clearer about how they want SNE to be developed, but at the same time, emphasised that it is important to trust the capacity of teachers to develop teaching models they believe in. This means the SLs must balance between clear expectations and freedom of action based on the autonomy that Finnish teachers have (Niemi et al., 2018).

Previous research indicates the importance of SLs having knowledge in co-teaching (Murawski & Bernhard, 2016; Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010). The SLs in the current study have teaching experience that they regard as valuable in supporting teachers and they are aware of the importance of discussing co-teaching and SNE in the school community, though they lack knowledge and experience of co-teaching. Perhaps this lack of knowledge prevents SLs from being clear in their expectations when it comes to inclusive practices. Not only would teachers benefit from more continuing education regarding inclusive practice and co-teaching, but also the SLs. Both SLs and teachers, especially SETs, are important actors when it comes to developing inclusive practices through collaboration.

### *Teachers as driving actors in co-teaching as inclusive practice*

Common visions and goals are brought forth as central aspects for developing co-teaching. The results reveal that SLs experience this as an important aspect for co-teachers, but not the whole school community. This can be understood as a lack of responsibility from the SL. Distributed leadership is more about SLs delegating the responsibility for school change to teachers than actively interacting with and involving teachers as informal leaders in developing inclusive practice. As Juuti (2013) mentions, it is more likely for people to make correct decisions in line with a leader's intentions if the leader and employees maintain interaction with each other. Only one of the SLs in the current study had initiated co-teaching in their school. In this school, co-teaching was used

frequently by several teachers. In the other eight schools, co-teaching had been initiated by the teachers, in most cases by newly qualified SETs. Thus, the results indicate that teacher interest and engagement in co-teaching is crucial for the realisation and maintenance of co-teaching, while the SL's role is more about supporting the initiative of teachers. Overall, the role of SETs is emphasised by SLs in this study, as it has been in earlier research focusing on SLs' views on co-teaching (Kamens et al., 2013). According to the SLs, co-teaching would not be a reality in target schools without the engagement and interest of individual teachers in developing SNE. This is in line with earlier research by Härkki et al. (2021), where the results revealed teachers can overcome a lack of school development support from the SL if they are engaged, motivated, and flexible. The results raise the question of what co-teaching looks like in schools where the interest and enthusiasm of the individual teacher does not exist, and whether this can be explained by Finnish teachers being relatively autonomous.

Co-teaching is mentioned in Finnish policy documents (FNAE, 2016) and emphasised in research regarding inclusive practices (Friend et al., 2010). Despite this, it is still not strongly established in Finnish schools (Saloviita, 2018; Sundqvist et al., 2020). The results indicate this can perhaps be explained by SLs delegating the responsibility to develop SNE to teachers, especially SETs. Ainscow and Sandill (2010) have claimed there is a risk that distributed leadership results in the delegation of work tasks. This risk should be taken into consideration when it comes to developing inclusive school culture. SLs need to set clear educational goals, build a shared vision in the school community, and have close collaboration with teachers. Distributed leadership, especially if it results in delegation, is not enough to develop inclusiveness in schools. To succeed in developing co-teaching, SLs should have a clear, inclusive vision and insight into daily pedagogical activities, and involve all teachers in inclusive processes. However, distributed leadership as a process does not exclude the need for formal leadership structures. SLs have a key role in promoting and maintaining inclusive culture and structures of responsibility aligned with the practices and processes of distributed leadership (Harris, 2008; Spillane, 2006).

## Conclusions and limitations

In conclusion, the results of this study revealed that individual teachers' engagement has been central in the realisation of co-teaching. Even though SLs support the realisation of co-teaching and consider it as a promising inclusive approach, their role could be more distinct and less delegated. The responsibility to realise co-teaching cannot rely on the interest and engagement of individual teachers alone. The initiation and realisation of co-teaching as an inclusive approach is an ongoing process that should be led by the SL and continuously taken into consideration through discussion in the school community. This means SLs need insight into daily pedagogical activities and knowledge of inclusive practices to support the realisation of co-teaching. They also need to collaborate closely with teachers to set common goals for the development of SNE and co-teaching.

One limitation of this study is the small sample, with only nine SLs being interviewed. The reason for this was the low number of schools in Finland where Swedish is the medium of instruction and where co-teaching is conducted. Another limitation is that the data do not include the perspective of teachers regarding the SL's and teachers' roles leading the realisation of co-teaching. In addition, the schools the SLs represent was in different stages of the co-teaching process.

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