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The Three-tiered Support System and Special Education Teachers' Roles in Swedish-speaking Schools in Finland

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Abstract

In 2010, new amendments regarding special education were made to the Finnish Basic Education Act (642/2010), and they were officially adopted in 2011. The three-tiered support system that was introduced can be considered the Finnish approach to moving education toward a more inclusive system since it emphasises all teachers' responsibility to deliver support within the regular educational setting, representing a new feature in the policy documents. This has brought about new expectations for special education teachers' (SETs') roles. Our research aims to contribute to knowledge about the implementation of the three-tiered support system and SETs' roles in Swedish-speaking schools in Finland. The data were collected using a questionnaire ($N = 158$). The results indicate that the SETs have an important role in the three-tiered support system, both as those with the knowledge and those who share this knowledge. The SETs' role is more evident when it comes to pupils receiving support on the second and third tiers. Although inclusive values are emphasised in the policy documents, the SETs still use most of their time teaching pupils in educational settings that are often relatively segregated (individual or small-group teaching), and for example, co-teaching seems to be a less frequent approach to collaboration.

Keywords: special education teachers, inclusive education, co-teaching, three-tiered support system, questionnaire

Introduction

Like many other countries, Finland has signed international agreements that should affect the arrangements in special education. The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 1993), Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) serve as examples of international commitments to developing society and education in an inclusive direction. Nevertheless, there was an increase in special education in Finland during the first decade of the new millennium (Official Statistics of Finland [OSF], 2018). Ström and Hannus-Gullmets (2015) describe the situation as paradoxical, since the regulations in policy documents encouraged inclusion, whereas their implementation seemed to result in an increase in exclusion. One of the main reasons for the reform in Finnish special education, launched in 2010–2011, was handling this development. The organisation of the special education in Finland that was introduced – the three-tiered support system – was supposed to be able to promote inclusive approaches in school (Pesonen et al., 2015).

Special education teachers (SETs) are key figures in the implementation of the three-tiered support system. The need for changing the role from the use of pull-out teaching strategies toward more collaboration with other teachers in terms of, for example, co-teaching has been pointed out (Lakkala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2016; Swanson, Solis, Ciullo, & McKenna, 2012). In recent years, research has been conducted on both the three-tiered support system and – more specifically – the work of Finnish SETs, providing us with knowledge about the SETs' role and working situation (e.g. Björn, Aro, Koponen, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2016; Lakkala et al., 2016; Pesonen et al., 2015; Takala & Head, 2017; Thuneberg et al., 2014). Nevertheless, there is a lack of research concerning the Swedish-speaking area of Finland, which is in focus in the present study.

Finnish and Swedish are the national languages in Finland; a minority of approximately 5% of the population speaks Swedish (OSF, 2018). The education system is identical for both language groups, with comprehensive school consisting of primary education (age 7–12 years) and lower secondary education (13–16 years). Geographically, the Swedish-speaking population is mainly concentrated along the coastline, in the western and southern parts of Finland. Bigger cities in the area, such as the capital, Helsinki, are bilingual, with a Swedish minority, whereas in the Åland Island and some of the rural areas, up to 95% of the population speaks Swedish (Swedish Assembly in Finland, 2018). Parents can choose whether their children attend a Finnish-speaking or Swedish-speaking school. International comparisons of student achievement, such as PISA, have shown that pupils in Swedish-speaking schools have higher socio-economic status but lower achievement on average than pupils in Finnish-speaking schools do (Brink & Nissinen, 2018). Furthermore, special class and special school placement is less common in Swedish-speaking schools (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018). To provide a background for our study, three important themes are defined and discussed in the next sections, as follows: inclusive education, the three-tiered support system and the role of SETs.

Inclusive Education in Research and Finnish Policy Documents

In research, inclusion has shown to be a somewhat problematic concept, with various definitions (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). However, researchers in the field emphasise that the understanding of inclusion has developed from a focus on pupils with disabilities and their physical placement to a focus on the ability of schools to meet diversity in the classroom and support the social and academic needs of all pupils (Ainscow, 2015; Kiuppis, 2014; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). In other words, the emphasis has shifted from pupils with disabilities to education for all (Kiuppis, 2014). Furthermore, inclusion is regarded as an ongoing process, where barriers to inclusion and the risk of exclusion are constantly being counteracted (Ainscow, 2015; Ainscow et al., 2006).

In the Finnish policy documents, inclusion has been a non-existent word. In the most recent curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education [FNBE], 2016), 20 years after the Salamanca statement, the word *inclusion* was mentioned for the first time but still without a clear definition. The curriculum simply states that the ‘development of basic education is guided by the inclusion principle. The accessibility of education must be ensured’ (p. 19). In addition, it is pointed out that the pupils in need of support should receive the support in their own schools and classes using flexible support methods if the pupil’s best does not require the pupil receive the support in another group (p. 64). This means that, although the inclusion principle is clarified, it is still possible to teach pupils in special classes.

The Three-tiered Support System

In 2010, new amendments to the Finnish Basic Education Act (642/2010) resulted in the implementation of a national strategy consisting of a three-tiered support system implemented in Finnish schools in autumn 2011. The new system replaced a model with two forms of support, namely general and special support. Previously, pupils in need of special support were transferred to special education, which was a kind of parallel system to general education. The aim of the new support system was securing additional help for every pupil and making general education more inclusive. The Finnish support system has much in common with the US Response to Intervention (RTI) framework, but there are also differences between them. For example, the SETs’ role is more apparent in the implementation of the support at all support tiers in Finland than it is in the United States. Furthermore, the Finnish three-tiered system is mainly a framework for structuring and systematising support, whereas the US RTI was primarily intended for diagnosing and preventing learning disabilities (Björn et al., 2016; Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2015). However, voices in the United States and in Finland have claimed that the underlying intention was also to diminish the increasing number of special education students and decrease the costs of special education (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2015). There is ongoing criticism regarding the three-tiered support system, both in Finland and the

United States. The criticism has concerned teachers' experiences of an increase in the bureaucratic burden and fears about pupils with special educational needs (SEN) not receiving enough efficient support (Castro-Villarral, Rodriguez, & Moore, 2014; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Opetusalan Ammattijärjestö, 2017; Pesonen et al., 2015; Swanson et al., 2012).

Core values in the Finnish three-tiered support system are early interventions and early support. The first tier of support – *general support* – provides an easily accessible form of support based on an experienced need. According to the Finnish Basic Education Act (642/2010), the pupil is entitled to support immediately as the need arises. General support is to be considered a temporary support, and there are no official documentation requirements. At the second tier of support – *intensified support* – a pedagogical assessment is required, and a learning plan must be made where the need for support is defined and the support measures are described. The third support tier – *special support* – requires an extensive assessment (pedagogical statement) and formal decision. An individual educational plan (IEP) is made for all pupils within the special support. Pupils who receive their education within the special support can study according to an individualised syllabus in one or more subjects. The support at different tiers largely consists of the same support methods, as follows: solutions related to the learning environment, guidance, differentiation, teacher collaboration, flexible modifying of teaching groups, part-time special education (with co-teaching, small group or individual teaching) or support from the teacher's assistant, whereas special-class teaching is only permitted at the third tier of support (FNBE, 2016).

In autumn 2017, the second tier of support was received by 9.7% of the students in Finnish comprehensive school, whereas 7.7% received support on the third tier (OSF, 2018). There are no statistics from the first support tier. The number of pupils receiving the second and third tiers of support in 2017 were lower in Swedish-speaking speaking schools than they were in Finnish-speaking schools (Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 here]

Furthermore, in Finnish-speaking schools, almost 38% of the pupils at the third support tier, compared with 19% of the pupils in Swedish-speaking schools, were educated in special classes or special schools full time in 2017 (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018).

To prepare schools and teachers for the three-tiered support system, a broad national development project called KELPO was arranged by the Ministry of Education in 2008–2012. Most Finnish municipalities and different teacher groups in schools participated in the development project, receiving in-service training and support for developing practices for teaching diverse pupils; for example, co-teaching was tried in some schools (Lakkala & Thuneberg, 2018). According to Rinkinen and Lindberg (2014), there are differences in the experiences between Swedish- and Finnish-speaking teachers concerning the in-service training in the project, with lower satisfaction among Swedish-speaking teachers. Rinkinen and Lindberg (2014) point out that more training for the teachers may have been needed in the Swedish-speaking areas.

Although the numbers of pupils receiving special support decreased after the implementation of the three-tiered support system, the statistic from 2017 shows that the numbers have again increased slightly. Furthermore, nearly 40% of the pupils receiving special support are still placed full time in a special class (OSF, 2018). Although the statistics do not indicate a substantial development in a more inclusive direction, the Finnish school researchers can note an ongoing change process in schools. After 2011, there has been more collaboration among general teachers (GTs) and SETs in terms of co-teaching, flexible grouping of pupils, discussions and shared responsibility (Lakkala et al., 2016; Pesonen et al., 2015; Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012; Takala & Head, 2017). The reform has led to some changes in the teachers' roles toward extended professionalism, including, for example, more flexibility and cooperation (Thuneberg et al., 2014). However, a matter of concern is that the education for SEN pupils is still based on the logic of integration rather than the logic of inclusion (Paju,

Kajamaa, Pirttimaa, & Kontu, 2018). This can be understood according to Ainscow (2005), for example, who claims that policy-level reforms may contribute to change, but they seldom lead to sustainable changes in schools' thinking and practice.

The Role of Special Education Teachers in the Three-tiered Support System

There are two categories of SETs in Finland, namely special class teachers (SCTs), who work almost exclusively on the special support tier, and part-time special teachers (STs), who support pupils at every tier of the three-tiered support system (Ström & Hannus-Gullmets, 2015; Takala, Pirttimaa, & Törmänen, 2009). Like all Finnish teachers, the SETs have to obtain a master's degree in education (300 ECTS), including 60–120 ECTS specific studies for SETs (Regulation on the Requirements of Employment of Staff in the Educational System, 1998). There is one Swedish-speaking university offering studies for SETs. The core of the studies is the same regardless of the teaching language: It focusses on learning difficulties, but it also involves inclusion, communication, consultation and collaboration (Sundqvist et al., 2014).

Many SCTs work in special classes, but some also work in part-time special education with the same duties as STs (Ström & Hannus-Gullmets, 2015). The role of Finnish SETs is complex. Most of the SETs' working time is used for teaching (Takala, Wickman, Uusitalo-Malmivaara, & Lundström, 2015). The SETs also do background work consisting of, for example, meetings and administrative work, such as writing IEPs, pupils' assessments and designing materials (Björn et al., 2016; Takala et al., 2009).

Ström and Hannus-Gullmets (2015) describe a development of the SETs' role in accordance with the progress of the understanding of inclusive education and the development of the three-tiered system. The role has developed from strongly focussed on individual and small group teaching to a versatile role, including work in multi-professional teams and the role of a change agent ensuring that the three-tiered support system is implemented.

Co-teaching is pointed out in the core curriculum as a possible solution to offer part-time special education (FNBE, 2016). It is becoming more common and appreciated among

Finnish teachers, and it can serve as a method for promoting inclusive education and collaborative processes among different teacher categories (Lakkala et al., 2016; Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012; Takala & Head, 2017). According to Saloviita (2018), co-teaching is practiced on a weekly basis by 62% of the SETs in Finnish comprehensive schools. In contrast, part-time special education arranged as individual or small group teaching is still common (Rytivaara, Pulkkinen, & Takala, 2012), a type of support that is often looked on as segregating, although positive effects have been identified via research on the learning outcomes (e.g. Panula, 2013).

The three-tiered system in Finland contains no specific guidelines, such as on the intensity, duration or content of the support (Björn et al., 2016). Therefore, the responsibility for implementation rests with the professionals. This means that the role and work of SETs can differ broadly from school to school.

The Present Study

The results presented in this article are part of a research project aiming to contribute to new knowledge about the implementation of the three-tiered support system and the SETs'¹ roles in Swedish-speaking schools in Finland. Two research questions serve as the starting point for this article, as follows:

1. What are the SETs' roles during the transition-process between different tiers of support and in the implementation of the support?
2. In what types of educational settings do the SETs implement the support, and does the educational setting differ in relation to certain school- and teacher-related independent variables?

The concept of the transition process refers to the process whereby the support to a certain pupil is transferred from one tier of support to another.

Method

¹ Special education teachers (SETs) refers to both special teachers (STs) working in part-time special education and special class teachers (SCTs).

The study was conducted in Swedish-speaking comprehensive schools in Finland. The empirical data consist of quantitative data from a web questionnaire SETs received and answered in autumn 2017. The aim was to reach out to all SETs in Swedish-speaking schools in Finland. The respondents were found by using information from the websites of municipalities and schools in the Swedish-speaking areas (247 schools). Additional information was received from the heads of basic education in the municipalities, or if any lack of clarity remained, straight from the principals of the schools. Finally, the survey was sent out to 395 possible respondents. The questionnaire was modified from Paloniemi, Kärnä, Pulkkinen and Björn's (2018) survey, which has been used in Finnish schools. It consists of closed-ended questions, Likert-type scales and open-ended questions.

The questionnaire consisted of 51 questions, with 10 concerning teacher background information and 9 dealing with information about the school. In addition, the participants answered a total of 32 questions organised into three groups, as follows: *a) work tasks and role*, *b) collaboration with others* and *c) the three-tiered support system*. For this study, two questions from group *a* have been analysed. The first question deals with whether the SETs regularly teach pupils at different support tiers in terms of co-teaching, flexible grouping, small-group teaching and individual teaching. This was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 was labelled 'I never teach in this way' and 5 was labelled 'I often teach in this way'. The other question in this group deal with the amount of time (%) the respondents spend teaching in terms of individual teaching, co-teaching, small-group teaching and special class teaching. In addition, three questions from group *c* have been analysed, as follows: Whose knowledge is most emphasised in the transition-process from one tier of support to another? Who is responsible for the documentation during the transition process? Who is most often responsible for the daily implementation of the support? The respondents could choose between different response alternatives (see Table 3 and Figure 1). The questions analysed for the purpose with this study is exemplified in the appendix.

Participants

We received answers from 158 SETs, which means that the response rate was about 40%. The respondents worked in different regions in the Swedish parts of Finland and at different school levels. Most of the respondents (103) worked as STs, 32 worked as SCTs and 23 reported that they worked as part-time teachers with SET duties². Some of the demographic data are presented in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Analysis

The data were analysed using descriptive analysis, with a focus on percentages and frequencies. In addition, we have analysed group differences concerning how much of their working time (%) the participants used for individual teaching, co-teaching, small-group teaching and special class teaching. Since the data were based on a small sample and were not normally distributed, we used the Mann–Whitney *U*-test and Kruskal–Wallis non-parametric test when looking at the group differences.

Results

The description of the results is divided into two sections addressing the research questions. First, we present the results connected to the SETs' role in the transition-process and implementation of the support. Second, we present results on how much of their working time the SETs use to teach pupils in different types of educational settings.

Roles in the Transition Process and Daily Implementation of Support

The results regarding whose knowledge is emphasised during the transition process, as well as responsibility for different documents connected to the second (intensified support) and third (special support) tiers is summarised in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 here]

² In the analysis, the part-time teachers with SET duties have been included with the STs. Thus, both part-time teachers with SET duties and special teachers belong to the variable 'STs'.

As can be seen in Table 3, the teachers' (both the GTs' and SETs') knowledge was emphasised more than, for example, the principal's or other professionals' knowledge, especially during the transition from general to intensified support. The most common answer is that the SET's knowledge together with another teacher's knowledge is most emphasised. Furthermore, the results show that the emphasis on the GT's knowledge strongly decreases, while an increase concerning the emphasis on the SET's knowledge, as well as other professionals' knowledge, can be discerned during the transition from intensified to special support.

The frequencies summarised in Table 3 show that the responsibilities for the Pedagogical Assessment during the transition from general to intensified support are quite similarly distributed between the GT and SET. The most common answer is that the SET is responsible for this documentation in tandem with a GT. This was also the case for the Learning Plan for pupils receiving intensified support. Regarding the documentation connected to the special support, the SET's role was more explicit. Most respondents answered that the SET is responsible for the Pedagogical Statement. Furthermore, a great majority reported that the SET is responsible for the IEP. Only a few the respondents answered that the GT is responsible for the Pedagogical Statement and IEP. Regarding the responsibility for the daily practical implementation of the support for pupils at different tiers, the results show that the SET's responsibility for the implementation increases, while the GTs responsibility decreases, at the intensified and special tiers of support. (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

As observed in Figure 1, most of the respondents reported that the GT is usually responsible for the implementation of support for pupils receiving general support. Concerning pupils receiving intensified support, the GT's responsibility decreases, while the SET's responsibility increases. However, most respondents answered that the SET together with a GT is responsible for the implementation of support at the intensified tier. In terms of pupils receiving special support, most respondents answered that the SET has responsibility for the

implementation. The teacher assistant (TA) as responsible for the implementation of the support appeared only at the tier of special support, and at this tier, only 2% of the respondents put the TA in a responsibility position.

The SET's Implementation of Support in Different Educational Settings

The frequencies of respondents answering that they use co-teaching, flexible grouping, small-group teaching and individual teaching often (5) or quite often (4) are illustrated in Figure 2.

[Insert Figure 2 near here]

According to the results, small-group teaching is the most common form of organising the support, followed by flexible grouping and individual teaching. It is more common to organise the support as individual teaching to pupils at a higher tier of support. Flexible grouping is most common on the first support tier, while co-teaching is the less used way of organising the support at all tiers.

The respondents also reported the working time in percentages they used for co-teaching, individual teaching, small-group teaching where pupils work with the same topic and materials, small-group teaching where pupils work with different topics and materials and special class teaching. These results also show that the SETs use most of their time for different types of small-group teaching and only a minimum of their time for co-teaching (Table 3).

No statistically significant differences were found between SETs working in different regions, age groups or working experience groups. The Mann–Whitney U -test indicated that there were statistically significant differences between how much of their working time SETs in small schools (<120 pupils) and SETs in bigger schools (120+ pupils) use to teach pupils in different types of educational settings. SETs working in small schools implement the support more often as individual teaching than SETs working in bigger schools do, $U = 1230.50$, $p = .000$. In contrast, SETs in small schools use less of their time for special class teaching than SETs in bigger schools do, $U = 1865.50$, $p = .024$.

The Kruskal–Wallis test indicated that there are statistically significant differences

between how SETs in primary schools, mixed schools and secondary schools implement special educational support. SETs in primary schools and mixed schools reported that they use more time for individual teaching than SETs in secondary schools did, $\chi^2(2) = 20.41, p = .000$. The means, standard deviations and medians for SETs working at different school levels and SETs working in small or bigger schools are reported in Table 4.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Discussion

The aim of this study was to contribute to new knowledge about the implementation of the three-tiered support system and the SETs' roles in Swedish-speaking schools in Finland. The results indicate that the SET has an important role in the transition process and in the implementation of support, especially at the third tier. Although the SETs teach pupils in different educational settings, they still often seem to choose to implement the support through the pull-out model.

The SETs' Roles Differ at Different Tiers of Support

Earlier research conducted in Finnish-speaking schools indicated that the new support system has led to more teacher collaboration, such as shared responsibility and co-teaching (Lakkala et al., 2017; Pesonen et al., 2015; Saloviitta, 2018; Takala & Head, 2017). Furthermore, the SETs' prominent role in the three-tiered support system has been highlighted (Björn et al., 2016). The results from this study indicate that the SETs have an important role in the three-tiered support system, both as the ones whose knowledge is emphasised and those who share the knowledge and responsibility with other teachers. During the transition-process, the role of the SET is most apparent when it comes to the transition from intensified to special support. Shared knowledge as well as shared documentation responsibility between the SET and GTs is more evident in the transition between general and intensified support. However, the teacher responsible for the documentation seems to vary between schools at the intensified tier of

support. Thus, the SET's role can be considered as vaguer at this tier than the role at the third tier of support.

The pattern is similar when daily implementation of support is considered. The role of the SETs is most evident when it comes to the implementation of special support, while the implementation of intensified support is often a shared responsibility between the SET and GT. GTs seem to have a major responsibility for pupils' receiving general support. These results are in line with the Finnish policy documents that identify support in the pupils' teaching group as the most important way of supporting pupils receiving general support (FNBE, 2016). In addition, the results harmonise with Björn et al. (2016) and Jahnukianen and Itkonen (2015), who suggest that SETs are involved in all tiers of support but mostly deliver individualised instruction at the third tier of support.

Small-group Teaching Dominates the SETs' Teaching Roles

The SETs in Swedish-speaking schools organise the teaching in different educational settings. However, they still use most of their time teaching in small groups or teaching pupils individually. Co-teaching, which is considered to be an inclusive way of organising support (Lakkala et al., 2016; Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012; Takala & Head, 2017), still seems to be a rather uncommon way of working among the SETs in this study. According to the results, the SETs use 13% of their teaching time for co-teaching. There are now differences between SETs in different age groups and regions or those working in different types of schools when it comes to the use of co-teaching. Only a fifth of the SETs reported using co-teaching often or quite often at each support tier. This could be compared with results conducted in Finnish-speaking schools, where a majority of SETs co-teach on a weekly basis (Saloviita, 2018). However, the results from this study also indicate flexible grouping, which is also considered to be an inclusive teaching method (Thuneberg et al., 2014), is frequently used by several of the SETs.

This finding gives rise to a crucial question: Why are the SETs in Swedish-speaking schools keeping up the pull-out model when research (Lakkala et al., 2016; Saloviita, 2018)

and Finnish policy documents (FNBE, 2016) emphasise collaboration, preferably in the form of co-teaching? Considering the national statistics, the Swedish-speaking schools seem to be more inclusive than the Finnish-speaking ones are, with fewer pupils in the third support tier and fewer pupils educated in special classes or special schools (FNBE, 2017). This means that some pupils who would receive education in a special class or special school in a Finnish-speaking context are included in mainstream classes and schools in a Swedish-speaking setting. A possible explanation for the slow progress toward an increasing use of co-teaching can be that SETs in Swedish-speaking schools support pupils with severe difficulties in mainstream schools, and thus, find it necessary to offer them individual instructions through the use of small-group and one-to-one teaching. Perhaps SETs find co-teaching less effective, especially for pupils in the third tier of support. Part-time special education provided outside the ordinary class has proven to provide good learning outcomes (Panula, 2013). The question is still whether and how co-teaching can be used to meet the needs of pupils with vast difficulties (Björn et al., 2015). However, even though small-group teaching or individual teaching can be considered necessary for pupils receiving special support, it is surprising that the SETs in Swedish-speaking schools do not use co-teaching more often to support pupils at the first and second support tiers.

According to Rinkinen and Lindberg (2014), there were initial differences between Swedish- and Finnish-speaking teachers, with lower satisfaction among Swedish speaking teachers concerning the possibility for professional development in the early years of the three-tiered support system. Thus, another possible explanation for the low amount of time spent co-teaching by SETs in Swedish-speaking schools may also have to do with lack of in-service training and knowledge.

Implications and Future Research

Whether changes in policy documents lead to sustainable changes has been questioned by researchers both inside and outside the Finnish context (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow & Sandill,

2010; Fullan, 2006; Pesonen et al., 2015; Thuneberg et al., 2014). Based on the results from this study, the three-tiered support system does not seem to have had a significant impact on the SETs' teaching methods in the schools with Swedish as the language of instruction.

Pesonen et al. (2015) claimed that Finnish schools that had participated in long-term development projects had more capacity to reform their special education. Furthermore, Lakkala and Thuneberg (2018) noticed that in-service-training affected teachers' attitudes regarding the use of inclusive education methods. One implication from this study is that even though the three-tiered support system has been implemented in a decade there is still a need for long-term development projects in Swedish-speaking schools. Since co-teaching seems to be more implemented in the Finnish-speaking areas experiences from these schools could be shared. The three-tiered system has made extensive demands of the SETs, who are expected to support pupils, but at the same time, to support GTs and ensure that the three-tiered support system is implemented (Ström & Hannus-Gullmets, 2015). The question of how to change the SETs' working methods toward more inclusive education, especially at the first and second tier of support, is a question of how to change attitudes, values, responsibilities and teaching methods among all teachers in school. Despite being in a key-position, in the three-tiered support system, the SET cannot bear the responsibility for a change toward more inclusive methods alone. The SET's vague role at the second tier should be discussed and clarified. In addition, school leadership needs to support changes.

The results from this study should also be complemented with qualitative research at the school level, such as action research. There is an evident need for a deeper examination of how SETs can collaborate effectively with GTs regarding both the vast documentation-process and the implementation of support. Furthermore, the question concerning how and if co-teaching can be used as an efficient support to pupils at different support tier should be further examined.

This study has limitations. The response rate was only 40%. Although a low response rate is common when an electronic questionnaire is used, the results should be interpreted with

this in mind. One reason for the low response rate is the length of the questionnaire, including several detailed questions at the beginning. Since this type of questionnaire has not been implemented previously in a Swedish-speaking context in Finland, the researchers found it necessary to focus on several aspects in the questionnaire. The results still give a unique insight into the contemporary special education and SETs' roles in Swedish-speaking schools. It also contributes to the discussion regarding the need for focussing on other factors for change in the development of an inclusive school than the necessary changes in policy documents.

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Table 1. Pupils (%) receiving second and third tier of support according to school language year 2017 (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018)

Support level	% all pupils	% pupils in FiS	% pupils in SwS
Tier 2	9.7	9.8	9.3
Tier 3	7.7	7.9	5.4
Tier 2 + 3	17.4	17.6	14.7

Note: FiS = Finnish-speaking schools SwS=Swedish speaking schools

Table 2. Demographic data of participants ($N = 158$)

Demographic variable	<i>N</i>	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Women	144	91.1
Men	11	7.0
Data missing	3	1.9
<i>Age group</i>		
Under 29 years	19	12.0
30–39 years	35	22.2
40–50 years	54	34.2
50+ years	45	28.5
Data missing	5	3.1
<i>Type of SET</i>		
Special teacher	103	65.2
Special class teacher	32	20.3
Part-time teacher with SET duties	23	14.5
<i>Education</i>		
Qualified SET	147	93.0
Not qualified	11	7.0
<i>SET working experience</i>		
1–5 years	48	30.5
6–12 years	52	32.9
13–20 years	35	22.1
21–34 years	20	12.6
Data missing	3	1.9
<i>Region</i>		
South Finland (Uusimaa)	58	36.7
Southwest Finland	16	10.1
Ostrobothnia	69	43.7
Åland Island	14	8.9
Language Islands	1	0.6
<i>School level</i>		
Primary school	93	58.9
Secondary school	51	32.3
Mixed schools	11	0
Data missing	3	1.9
<i>School size</i>		
>120 students	38	24.0
120+ students	117	74.1
Missing	3	1.9

Table 3. Respondents' answers concerning roles during the transition from general to intensified support and from intensified to special support

Transition level	Group	N	%
<i>Transition general to intensified support: knowledge emphasizing</i>	GT	36	23.4
	SET	20	13.0
	SET + GT	86	55.8
	Principal	1	0.6
	Other prof.	4	2.6
	Can't say	7	4.4
<i>Transition intensified to special support: knowledge emphasizing</i>	GT	3	1.9
	SET	38	24.1
	SET + GT	48	43.0
	Principal	3	1.9
	Other prof.	33	20.9
	Can't say	7	4.4
<i>Transition general to intensified support: Pedagogical assessment</i>	GT	51	33.1
	SET	46	29.9
	SET + GT	56	36.4
	Other	0	0.0
	Can't say	1	0.6
<i>Intensified support: Learning Plan</i>	GT	34	22.0
	SET	53	34.4
	SET + GT	65	42.2
	Other	0	0.0
	Can't say	1	1.3
<i>Transition intensified to special support: Pedagogical Statement</i>	GT	7	4.4
	SET	101	65.7
	SET + GT	41	26.6
	Other	1	0.6
	Can't say	5	2.6
<i>Special support: Individual Educational Plan (IEP)</i>	GT	7	4.5
	SET	107	69.5
	SET + GT	32	20.8
	Other	5	3.3
	Can't say	3	1.9

Note: GT= general teacher, SET = special education teacher, Other prof. = other professional (for example school psychologist)

Table 4. Distribution of teaching time (%) in different educational settings in relation to type of school

Educational setting	School	Mean	Std	Median
<i>Special class teaching (%)</i>	Primary	7.9	24.5	.0
	Secondary	16.3	34.0	.0
	Mixed	5.6	18.1	.0
	>120	2.9	16.2	.0
	<120	12.9	30.3	.0
<i>Small group teaching same theme (%)</i>	Primary	28.4	23.1	25.0
	Secondary	30.1	27.9	25.0
	Mixed	32.3	23.8	30.0
	>120	27.4	22.7	20.0
	120–	29.9	25.4	30.0
<i>Small group teaching different theme (%)</i>	Primary	24.2	23.4	20.0
	Secondary	22.1	27.4	15.0
	Mixed	22.3	16.0	20.0
	>120	19.6	21.6	12.5
	<120	24.6	25.0	20.0
<i>Individual teaching (%)</i>	Primary	26.	22.3	20.0
	Secondary	13.4	21.2	8.0
	Mixed	26.6	17.3	20.0
	>120	34.1	23.6	40.0
	<120	17.7	20.3	10.0
<i>Co-teaching (%)</i>	Primary	11.8	11.0	10.0
	Secondary	12.3	13.6	10.0
	Mixed	13.5	10.3	20.00
	>120	14.9	12.0	10.0
	<120	11.2	11.6	10.0

N: Primary = 93, SET Secondary = 51, SET Mixed = 11; SET school >120 = 38, SET school <120 = 118
 Note: Mixed = primary + secondary schools

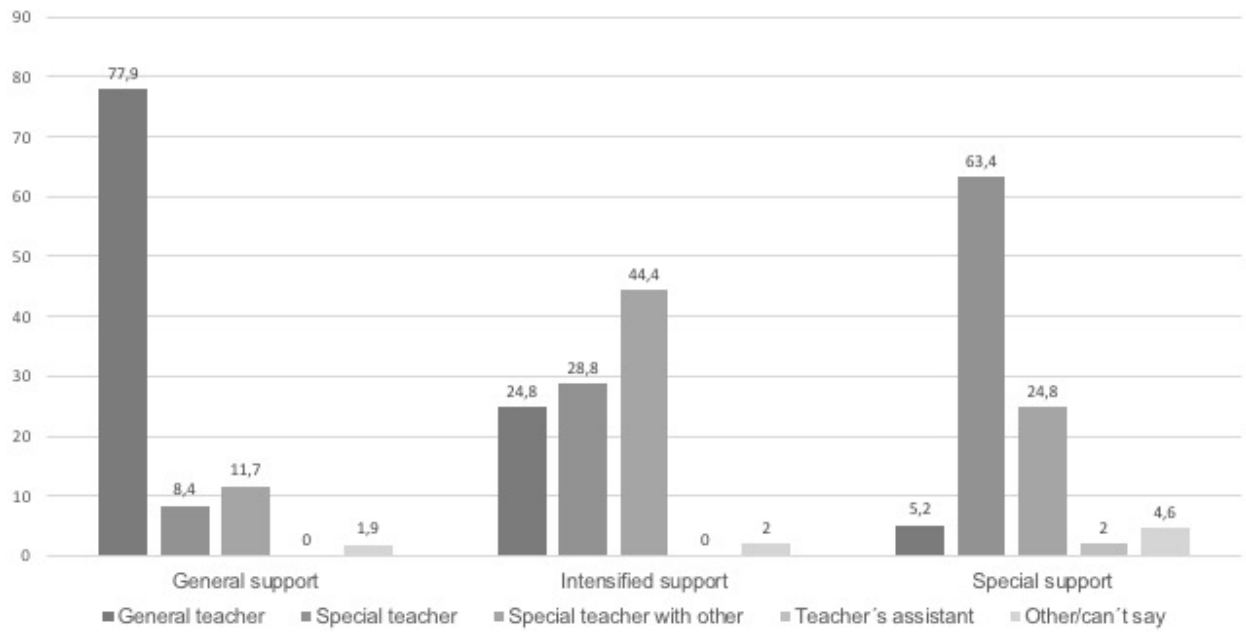


Figure 1. Respondents' answers (%) concerning responsibility for the implementation of support at different support tiers

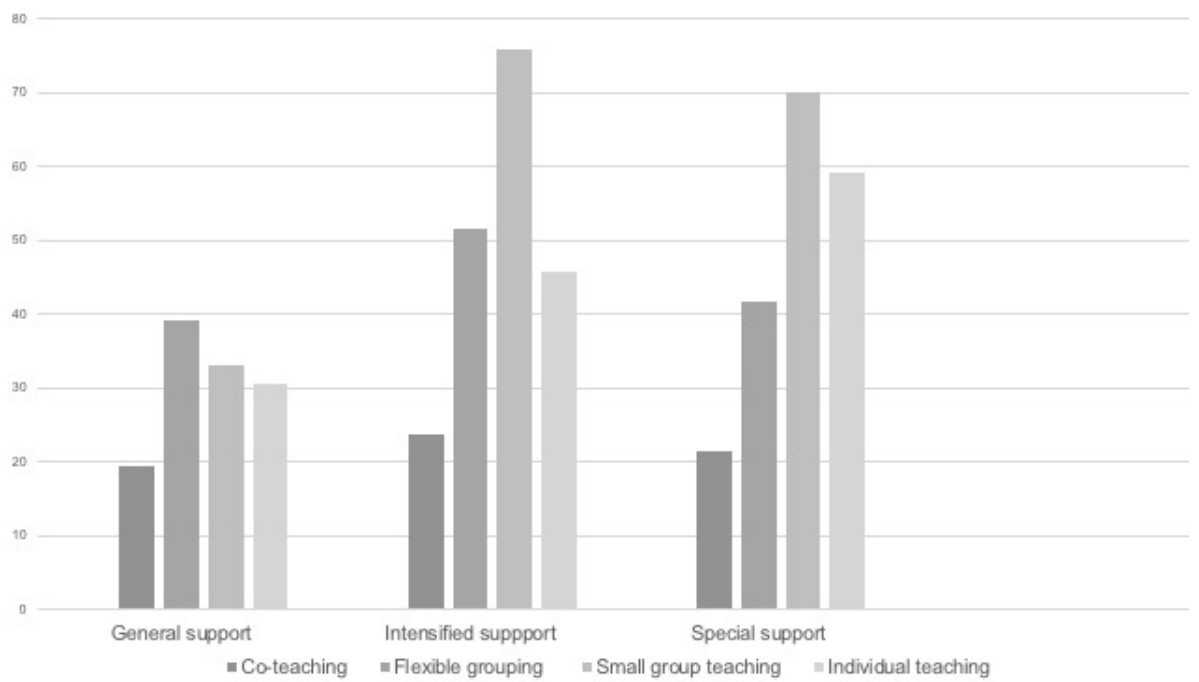


Figure 2. Respondents (%) who often or quite often teach pupils at different tiers of support in different educational settings

