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# Collaboration for Inclusive Practices: Teaching Staff Perspectives from Finland

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## ABSTRACT

Collaboration between educators is considered to be the key issue when implementing inclusive practices within schools. An open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to extend the current understanding of collaboration between teaching staff. The questionnaire was administrated to 167 classroom teachers, subject teachers, special education teachers and teaching assistants in primary, secondary and special education public schools in Finland. Also, semi-structured interviews with 20 participants were used to deepen the understanding of the elements included in the teaching activity in diverse classrooms. The results indicate coordination, cooperation, and reflective communication as modes of collaborative action in the participants' teaching. By combining the perspectives of the activity theory framework and modes of collaboration, the results illuminate how educators often wished to have collaboration but usually played their traditional positions in the multilayered teaching activity. The implications for preparing educators to enhance reflective collaboration for more effective inclusive practices are discussed.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Collaboration; inclusive education; inclusive practices; special education; teachers; teaching assistants; activity theory

In this study, we took an activity-theoretical perspective to explore the teaching staff's modes of collaboration in the multifaced system of inclusive education. Many factors influence school teachers' activities and opportunities for collaboration within schools (Bjørnsrud & Nilsen, 2019; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). Also, there are several perspectives of practical implications of inclusive education, which lacks a precise definition in the research field (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Haug, 2017; Reindal, 2015). Therefore, the focus is not only on individual access and participation, but also on how sociocultural aspects shape the meaning of inclusive education (Sharma et al., 2012; Schuelka et al., 2019). Cultural-historical activity theory (e.g., Engeström, 2014; Leontjev, 1978) provides a foundation for examining the praxis that recognises the complex, interactional nature of work in schools (Daniels, 2004; Hancock & Miller, 2018). The focus of activity theoretical research has also been on the promotion of meaningful learning experiences for children with a variety of educational needs, particularly those deemed as less able (Cenci et al., 2020; Martinez-Alvarez et al., 2018). The present study expands our recognition of the perspective of teachers and teaching assistants on collaborative actions while supporting students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools.

Several studies have pointed out the need to establish collaborative work among teaching staff on the assumption that it will soften attitudes towards new inclusive opportunities in classrooms

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(Giangreco et al., 2010; Lyons et al., 2016; Savolainen et al., 2012). In this paper, we have defined inclusive education as promotion of education for all, when the purpose is to transform teaching practices into being more co-operative and all teaching groups' skills are advantaged. We have opted for a broad definition of inclusive education, and it concerns all students and marginalised groups, not only those with disabilities (Haug, 2017; Haustätter, 2014).

According to the Sustainable Development Goal and the Education 2030 Framework for Action (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2016), the principles of inclusive education are stated thus: "Inclusion and equity in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda, and we, therefore, commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalisation, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes". We emphasise inclusion as a socially, culturally and materially mediated object-oriented activity and a process evolving in social interactions, involving multiple interrelated actors and practices. The concept of the object, which is central to activity theory (Engeström, 2014), was used in the conceptualisations of SEN students of the actors representing historically distinct activity systems. The object of an activity is constructed and evolves over time, and needs to be continuously reflected upon and reconstructed. In the context of our study, the object refers to the student's and the teachers provision of high quality and inclusive teaching to enhance the SEN student's meaningful learning experiences.

Inclusive practices differ between countries (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Magnusson, 2019; Miles & Singal, 2009). In Finland, it seems that the way forward to greater inclusion is very much a continuation of existing equity-driven policies, which celebrates diversity by seeing varied needs as the norm through the differentiated teaching and proactive support (Chong, 2018). The principles of educational reforms in the Finnish system have been based on equal opportunities for all, early intervention, and the trust of teaching professionals' abilities (Antikainen, 2006; Sahlberg, 2011). Also, the collaborative ways of working in the classrooms have been emphasised in the National Core Curriculum (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2016). However, municipalities have strong autonomy in choosing their own ways to organise support in mainstream schools (Honkasilta et al., 2019). Finnish inclusive practices could be identified as a process in which regular education and special education should become closer in terms of the successful implementation of inclusive practice. This concerns the whole education system in Finland, including the role of special schools, e.g., providing educational support and developing inclusive practices (see UNESCO, 1994). Also, some culturally-bound elements, such as the progress of inclusive ideology, has been quite slow and place more emphasis on preventive actions for students with mild learning needs (Jahnukainen, 2011). Globally and historically, public school teaching has been based on a culture of individualism that has begun to shift towards cultures of professional collaboration (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). The cultural change will inevitably require action by the teaching staff, and customary patterns of practice would change, unlearning the old and the adoption of the new.

## **Towards Collaborative Inclusive Practices**

The diversity in mainstream classes calls for collaboration in creating inclusive teaching practices (Ainscow, 2016; Florian et al., 2010; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). Activity theoretical perspective, emphasizing historical embeddedness and multi-voicedness of collective activities and their motives (Engeström, 2014; Engeström & Sannino, 2010; Leontjev, 1978) offers a potentially useful lens for our analysis of forms of collaborative practices in school contexts. In other words, it allows for exploration of the interactions between various parts of social systems in their pursuit of carrying out specific practices. In activity theoretical terms, the sense and meaning of actions are attached to the object of an activity and the motivation for change arises from historically evolved tensions in work settings, such as schools. Among activity-theoretical studies, three modes of collaboration, namely coordination, collaboration and reflective communication have been identified to characterise and analyse how the actors relate to their work activity and its object (Engeström et al.,

2015; Kajamaa & Lahtinen, 2016). In coordination, each participant pursues his or her assigned actions with a specific object. The interaction between the participants determines the roles of the participants and the basic order of expected actions. In cooperation, the participants focus on a temporarily unified object, namely, a shared problem or task; the script is suspended in the interest of finding a solution to the issue at hand. In reflective communication, the participants focus both on a shared object and their interaction, questioning and revising the script, potentially enabling a shift from their (individualistic) situational actions and specific objects toward an expanded, shared object and the transformation of their collective activity.

Inclusive educational practices need to be identified and shared, while drawing attention to ways of working that may be creating barriers to the participation and learning of all students (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Mullholland & O'Connor, 2016). However, enhancing teachers' collaboration towards inclusive practices may not always be straightforward. The studies reveal challenges hindering the teachers' efforts to change their teaching practices, such as a misalignment of the teachers' professional-development motivation and goals and the activities designed and facilitated by their schools (Bal et al., 2018; Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009). For instance, university-based teacher educators, motivated to research and to use research to inform and develop their teaching practices, often experience competing demands between research and teaching (Berg et al., 2016). It is suggested that the collective identification of tensions and the larger underlying societal contradictions enhance the development of teachers' thinking about and their realisation of inclusive teaching practices which are based on the historical conception of inclusion (Cenci et al., 2020; Martinez-Alvarez et al., 2018).

Our previous study showed how Finnish teachers and teaching assistants experience multiple contradictions in their classrooms, including dilemmatic situations concerning how to teach SEN students in classrooms with other students and possible reactions in the class group dynamics (Paju et al., 2018). In the Finnish context, teachers increasingly call for collaboration and co-teaching which are often regarded as positive and beneficial for the students, and for the teachers' professional development (Jäppinen et al., 2016; Lakkala et al., 2016; Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012). Much research has focused on teachers' attitudes (e.g., Avramidis & Norwich, 2010; Boer et al., 2009; Saloviita, 2018) and inadequate professional ability they experienced in teaching SEN students (e.g., Engelbrecht et al., 2013; Paju et al., 2016). However, to our knowledge, research attention has not been directed to identifying the dynamics of collaboration for inclusive practices. Therefore, in this study, we addressed the following research questions:

- (1) How do participants consider elements of the activity system in inclusive practices?
- (2) How are modes of collaboration, namely coordination, cooperation and reflective communication, situated in teaching activity?

Consequently, the contribution of the current activity-theoretical study, is to extend the understanding of the modes of collaboration for inclusive practices between classroom teachers, subject teachers, special education teachers and teaching assistants in the schools of Finland. More specifically, the study illustrates the teachers' and teaching assistants' perspectives and factors that contribute to their practices associated with inclusive education and collaboration.

## Methods

We applied the model of an activity system as a theoretical-methodological tool in this exploratory study (Engeström, 2014) for analysing the structure of the teaching and learning activity of SEN students in a mainstream context. Additionally, we used the categorisation of forms of interaction to analyse collaborative actions in the teaching activity (Engeström et al., 2015). Combining the data generated from questionnaires and interviews provided an insightful understanding of the current topic (see Creswell & Plano, 2007). The results of the questionnaire raised questions and directed us

to find out more and to carry out interviews with teachers and teaching assistants, to deepen our insights of the inclusive and collaborative practices.

**Data and Data Collection**

The data comprise the results of the open-ended questions in a questionnaire addressed to teachers and teaching assistants, complemented with semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers, subject teachers, special education teachers and teaching assistants (Table 1). The data from questionnaires were gathered from a typical medium-size city of 40,000 residents. All 20 schools in this city participated in our study. Interviews were conducted with 30 teachers and teaching assistants at five other schools from other regions of Finland. Even though the differences between Finnish schools are among the smallest in the OECD, due to Finland’s focus on equity instead of choice and competition among schools (Sellar & Lingard, 2013), we wanted to interview participants from across Finland to increase the diversity of the data. We chose purposeful sampling to represent the views of different levels of schools and teaching groups. Accordingly, we wanted to ensure that different kinds of teaching arrangements in schools are presented.

In the data collection, we first used the questionnaire, which was drafted using the Special Education Coordinator (SENCO) activity in Britain (e.g., Soan, 2010). This questionnaire was condensed and adapted for Finnish circumstances by the first author to cover the main issues of teaching SEN students. The 186 respondents were from 14 primary schools, three secondary schools and three special education public schools. Of the 243 questionnaires distributed to the teaching staff in this city, 186 were returned, representing a 77 per cent response rate. Eight participants did not provide information about their teaching groups and were therefore excluded from the analysis. We also excluded the respondent group “other degree” because its representatives had various combinations of qualifications and were not qualified teachers. A total of 167 responses were analysed for this study. The respondents were mostly female, and over 40 years of age.

The questionnaire included background questions (age, gender, job title, and qualifications), 18 Likert-type items (see Paju et al., 2016 for results) and three open-ended questions: (1) When / if new special support students come to my group, in what areas do you feel successful? (2) When / if new SEN students come to your group, what worries you the most? (3) Why do these things worry you? We decided to include open-ended questions as these are important because they do not constrain the respondents’ answer choices (Schonlau & Couper, 2016).

The questionnaire was then sent to the school principal, who agreed to coordinate its distribution. The coordinator delivered the printed questionnaires in envelopes to the other principals, who distributed questionnaires to the teachers in their respective schools within the city. The teachers were given two weeks to respond, after which the principals returned the completed forms in sealed envelopes to the coordinator, who submitted them to the researchers.

The interviews took place in each participant’s school and were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The length of individual interviews was approximately 30 min within the range of 20–40 min. All the participants had worked in a school for more than two years. The semi-structured interviews consisted of questions regarding the same issues as in the open-ended questions of the questionnaire, namely successes and concerns related to teaching SEN students. In the interviews,

**Table 1.** The Numbers of Respondents in Primary Schools (PS), Secondary Schools (SeS) and Special Schools (SpS).

	Questionnaires (n = 167)			Interviews (n = 30)		
	PS	SeS	SpS	PS	SeS	SpS
Degree						
Classroom teacher	58			7		
Special education teacher	12	6	11	5	1	3
Subject teacher	5	30		1	6	
Teaching assistant	21		24	5	1	1

participants were asked to describe situations that were successful or were of concern in their classroom to find out what kind of inclusive and collaborative practices were addressed and the participants' perceptions of these.

### **Data Analysis**

In the data analysis, ATLAS.TI qualitative data analysis software was used for coding the open-ended questions from the questionnaire and for analysing the interviews. First, the questionnaire data were analysed. The responses ranged from single utterances to two or three sentences. We analysed the data using the activity system model consisting of six elements, namely subjects, object (of the collective activity), mediating artefacts (between subjects and objects), rules, divisions of labour and community (Engeström, 2014). Each of the participants' responses from the questionnaires were coded in terms of these elements.

Second, the transcribed interviews were transferred from Microsoft Word documents to the ATLAS.TI programme, in which reflections of the quotations were written. After reading and selecting quotations from each interview, three modes of collaboration: coordination, cooperation, and reflective communication (Engeström et al., 2015) were analysed from these. This phase of the analysis provided us with information on how each participant evaluated the proceedings of the teaching activity, and how they viewed their roles in the classrooms.

Two of the authors took the main responsibility for the data analysis. However, during the analysis, all the authors met to discuss and further elaborate the coding, and the correctness of the findings and the interpretations. In the discussions, we were aware of the difficulties of capturing the complex phenomenon under study.

### **Findings**

In this section, we first report the analysis of the activity systems involved in the teaching of SEN students and describe how the participants perceive inclusive practices within their school. Second, we present the three modes of collaboration namely coordination, collaboration, and reflective communication, with illustrative data examples from the participants' interviews in the level of the system of all teaching staff.

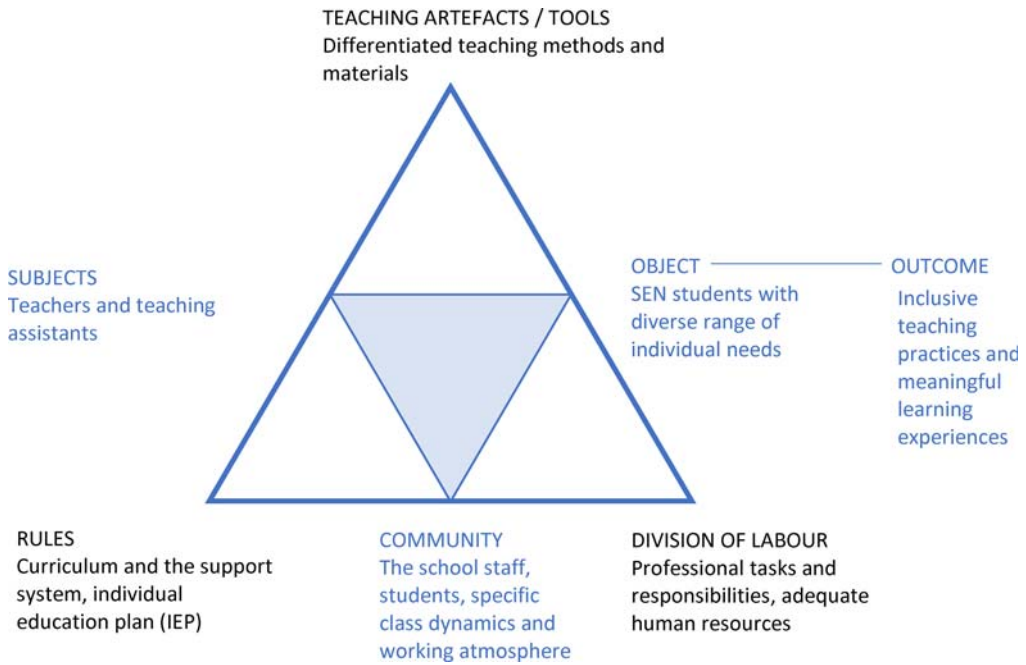
#### **Teaching Activity**

Our findings show that the interaction with the whole class community, SEN students and the teaching staff were central when implementing inclusive practices. Inclusive teaching practices require active engagement of these three parties, to form the basis for a good student-teacher relationship and the positive atmosphere for learning meaningful to the students. However, issues such as the individualised teaching approach, the curriculum guidelines and the lack of human resources complicated the understanding of inclusive practices in practice. Adding to the complexity, the participants hold different conceptualisations of teaching activity, as summarised in the Figure 1.

#### **Subjects**

Classroom teachers at the primary level characterised the importance of them focusing on leading the classroom activities, whereas the subject teachers were more focused on subject matters. Still, both teaching groups highlighted teacher-student interaction as being important, expressed as follows: "I can probably deal with an individual student, I hope that I am a trustworthy adult" (classroom teacher, 8:1). Special education teachers were typically focused on supporting the SEN students and in applying teaching tools (artefacts) designed for this. They were considered to be specialists whose professionalism guarantees the efficient teaching of SEN students. The teaching





**Figure 1.** A system of the teaching activity in this study.

assistants saw themselves as persons standing by the students, mainly in social situations, both in and outside the classroom.

### **Object/Outcome**

A SEN student is seen by all teaching groups as an individual who is entitled to receive meaningful learning experiences at his or her level, and where he/she is accepted and able to learn without been discriminated. The teachers predominantly defined them as: “students with behavioural problems” (classroom teacher, 8:2), and some used expressions such as: “students with learning difficulties, behavioural disorders, etc. in the classroom” (teaching assistant, 3:1). While the SEN student was considered to have unique learning needs that require specific adjustments in teaching, the participants predominantly emphasised the SEN student’s social and communicative skills as central when adapting in the class community.

### **Community**

The teachers reflected the role of group dynamics as a prime factor in enhancing or inhibiting the inclusion of SEN students, expressed in terms such as: “How the class atmosphere changes, how other students feel about him” (subject teacher, 6:2). Whether the atmosphere and the group dynamics were positive or not, the inclusion of diverse learners in the mainstream class usually affected the teacher’s management of the group, such as introducing tensions into the classroom climate and complicating the teaching activity. As successful inclusion efforts, the teachers reported flexible groupings at the elementary level (classroom teachers) and integration into mainstream classes at the secondary level (subject teachers).

### **Tools/Artefacts**

In terms of teaching tools or artefacts, teachers wished to implement the curriculum as efficiently as possible to meet its goals and to serve all learners. Some teachers emphasised teaching methods for the whole group, whereas some illustrated the need for differentiation based on the students



diverse needs, such as: “Can I differentiate enough within the group, which is the level of achievement of the SEN student” (subject teacher, 6:1). Also, different tools, materials and tasks were used, depending on each teacher’s interests. The lack of adequate teaching arrangements and tools designed to address the challenges related to students’ misbehaviour were the most commonly raised issue by all teaching groups.

### **Rules**

Official teaching guidelines included in the curriculum and individual education plan (IEP) were mentioned as guiding rules for the teaching activity. The question the teachers were puzzled about was how strictly they should follow the national curriculum, as demonstrated in the following excerpt: “SEN students have their IEP. However, we follow the goals of the general curriculum” (special education teacher, 7:1). The goals the teachers set for SEN students seemed incoherent in both regular classes and special education involving severely disabled students.

### **Division of Labor**

Based on their professional responsibilities, the classroom teachers and subject teachers highlighted the importance of special education teachers or teaching assistants helping in their classrooms and emphasised the importance of “cooperation with a special needs teacher” (subject teacher, 6:3). Classroom teachers and subject teachers commented on the lack of support resources, such as the involvement of teaching assistants and special educators in the classes. Special education teachers and teaching assistants raised the issue of acceptance by mainstream teachers of teaching SEN students as: “the attitude/acceptance of subject teachers is sometimes challenging” (special education teacher, 7:2).

Our results show that all teaching groups emphasise the importance of meeting the students’ needs, even though their focus varied from content-based goals (subject teachers) to group managing issues (classroom teachers). However, on the basis of the questionnaire data, contradictory views were found. For example, when the question is to take care of SEN students, this is considered to belong to the area of expertise of special education teachers. The results also illuminated the fact that when student learning needs are multifaceted, it is hard to generate cohesive learning situations for all students, in line with the curriculum objectives. The historically evolved roles of the teaching groups and the fragment the division of labour among them complicates the activity and makes change efforts challenging.

### **The Modes of Collaboration**

The findings of our analysis of the modes of collaboration, namely coordination, collaboration, and reflective communication, manifested in the participants’ interviews are described here. These will deepen the understanding about the elements included in the teaching activity in diverse classrooms.

#### **Coordination**

In our study, coordination appeared to be the dominant form of collaboration. The teachers then carried out tasks that were coordinated so that each actor had their responsibility and own script of the teaching activity. However, while embracing the individualised teaching approach, the teachers felt that while successfully utilising certain teaching artefacts, at the same time, it was difficult to handle all the teaching by themselves. Being able to focus more on the students’ interests instead of following the curriculum rules seemed impossible while conducting teaching without support. The teachers reflected on how the students had not really changed over their work history, but issues such as infrastructural changes and digitalisation had greatly changed their practice, as described in the following quote:

Students haven't changed but other things, like paperwork, multidisciplinary learning modules, digitalisation, have. I like those things, but there are so many things that I need to do. The most important is the time for discussion with and listening to students. I miss being able to concentrate on such moments in the teacher's work. (Classroom teacher, 23:7)

Even though help from the other teachers was needed, the analysis showed that it was also problematic for the classroom teachers and subject teachers that there were other teachers or teaching assistants in the classroom, who do not know each student in the class. The following excerpt demonstrating this:

If there are big groups with many students with exceptional needs, a lot of students with insufficient Finnish language skills, it is particularly tricky. At the moment, there is a big group, and then various assistants and teachers are in and out of the door for one lesson at a time. (Classroom teacher, 28:10)

A special education teacher and a Finnish-as-a-second-language teacher in this study were responsible for working with individual students. At the same time, the subject teacher or classroom teacher was teaching the rest of the class. Without collective planning and an awareness of shared goals of the joint activity, teachers perceived that their work as a co-teacher was difficult. The following excerpt demonstrates the need for knowledge sharing: "There is not always time for joint planning. And if there was, then the simultaneous teacher would be able to be proactive during lessons." (subject teacher, 6:12). Classroom teachers and subject teachers were mostly responsible for their class or content area. However, they hoped for increased reflective communication about the SEN student's needs, but also they wished to develop teaching artefacts:

I have evolved to manage alone. To enhance cooperation, I have been planning a meeting at which there would be a language teacher, a subject teacher, and then I would want there always to be two adults in the classroom. It is a dialogue in which perspectives are expressed on how the other one thinks in a certain situations. (Classroom teacher, 26:5)

Special education class teachers co-operated according to the idea of integration when the SEN student takes part in specific lessons in a regular class. In the following excerpt, a special education class teacher describes the integration attempts with the mainstream class: "I managed to arrange the integration lessons with the general class this spring. Last autumn, we failed to draw up timetables suitable for integration, but now we have an opportunity to co-operate with the regular education group" (special education class teacher, 22:9).

There were differences in the level of collaboration, depending on whether a teaching assistant was working in a special class or a mainstream class. The teaching assistants' role as a collaboration partner was rarely mentioned in the general teachers' interviews. Instead, they were considered to be a valuable resource in helping with the classroom work. Overall, the participant found that they did not share a common understanding of the students' needs. It is challenging for them to engage in meaningful activities because the situational factors at their schools were arranged to support the traditional way of working as an independent teacher.

### **Cooperation**

In the cooperation mode, the interaction was focused on cooperation between a classroom teacher and a subject teacher with special education teachers or so-called resource teachers. The cooperation focusing a specific situations, such as a shared problem or task and trying to find a solution to the issue at hand as fast as possible, to support the SEN students learning in the classroom. Next, a classroom teacher describes the impressive experience of such cooperation with a special education teacher. Instead of teaching individual SEN students in separate settings, the special education teacher modified this so that it could inclusively benefit all students:

One year, I had an excellent co-worker, a special education teacher. A whole new world opened up for me because she came here with me to plan the lesson together. She came to class, for example, to give a reading. She said everyone benefits with the specific method she used. (Classroom teacher, 26:4)

However, some special education teachers described the experiences of not-so-successful cooperation, even though both educators were willing to co-operate. The next quote illustrates the importance of reflective discussion of the whole teaching activity: “To make cooperation work, you must be able to respect others professionally. Then, we were thinking so differently concerning group management and organising lessons, that it was challenging to do it together” (special education teacher, 35:6).

In special education classes, a teaching assistant was seen more like a co-worker, more concentrating on evaluation in an object-oriented way. Instead of collaborating with general education staff, their focus was primarily on teaching activity in the respective special education class as demonstrated in the next quote:

I feel that right now, we have pretty good group spirit among the teaching staff. We do a lot of work on it. We go through the issues of children and how we can do what is good at our job. How we treat children. And then we have a lot of discussions about coping. (Special education class teacher, 8:1)

According to the teaching assistants, their tasks were related to students’ needs and supporting them, to manage the classroom. Some of the teaching assistant’s answers also reflected emergent collaboration, manifested as increased responsibility for pedagogical decisions based on the guidelines made by the teacher, especially in special classes or co-teaching classes. This was highlighted especially when the teaching assistants were designated to work with a particular child:

After all, I have specific tasks which we have discussed with the special education class teacher; supporting students, to make them do something. In social relations and, encouragement, keeping order ... that’s what it is, of course, but then, I may comment there if the teacher says something or goes on with it. (Teaching assistant, 36:1)

One of the special education teachers was focused on modifying teaching artefacts based on the individual needs of the SEN students. This teacher acknowledged her competence and hold a strong professional identity, perceiving all students as discussion partners in the classroom situations. Because of these strengths, her approach to teaching showed signs of going beyond the task-oriented, coordination type of mode:

The classroom teacher leads the lesson he/she has planned, and then I help them with it. It may be a bit of an assistant’s role, but I don’t feel that way. I believe that they will remain involved in the work, I apply tools if needed, I will explain more if needed, I will step back a little bit if they do not understand something. We talk a lot about those students and their problems, of course. (Special education teacher, 34:5)

As indicated in these teachers’ and teaching assistants’ comments, they perceived cooperation in terms of situated tasks and also wider issues, such as joint planning and an awareness of shared goals of the teaching activity with the other teachers. However, they were also aware of the complexities of the community often hindering cooperation and acknowledged that they should adapt their teaching practices to better meet SEN student needs.

### ***Reflective Communication***

In reflective communication, the educators focused both on their interaction, questioning and revising their practices, in other words they reconceptualised the object of their activity. Three classroom teachers and one special education class teacher can be identified as professionals utilising reflective communication. These teachers seemed most confident and satisfied with their work. All of them were experienced and willing to collaborate with the others in their respective workplaces. They identified the school culture and the principal as key factors supporting the collaboration. These teachers also highlighted that shared teaching responsibilities enhanced reflective communication as described next:

The most excellent resource in this collaborative system is a feeling of adequacy, you always have two other adults who know the child’s backgrounds and things. And if you have challenging children or parents, then

you can alternately share that load. Or if I carry that load, it will be easier to disassemble it when you don't explain all the background information or what has happened earlier. (Special education class teacher, 35:5)

In a co-teaching class, two classroom teachers typically shared two mainstream classes and co-taught full-time and had mixed groups. These teachers had expressed their interest in collaborating more intensively. With the support of the principal, they had designed their collaborative teaching activity by combining two mainstream classes. These teachers felt that sharing the responsibility at all levels of the teaching activity helped them in their daily activity. Together they could do more, and they felt empowered. The participants also highlighted the shared responsibility and the fair division of the workload for positively influencing their wellbeing. Also, the confident feeling about the fact that the colleague knows the students personally and is available all the time was necessary for handling complicated situations, described as, "all this communication between the parents and the pedagogical reflection, I feel more confident when my colleague is beside me" (classroom teacher, 25:4).

These educators explained that teamwork also makes it possible to face the students individually while someone else was taking care of the others at the same time. The significant issue for selective communication with the students was defined as being fully available for an individual student: "They demand more presence. You have to think about how to give it to them. For others, being more besides and communicating, and more for others when you have to teach more individually" (classroom teacher, 29:29).

To sum up, we examined the teaching staff's views of collaborative modes in teaching activity to gain an understanding of teachers' and teaching assistants' perceptions of inclusive, collaborative practices. Based on our findings, teachers and teaching assistants highlight the motivation to share the teaching activity responsibilities is a crucial factor for successful collaboration. Transitions from coordinated work to cooperation and to reflective communication requires not only transformation efforts carried out by the individual educators but also a shared vision about the inclusive future activity, and system-level changes in the school practices.

## Discussion

In this article, we unravelled educators' perceptions of inclusive practices, and their modes of collaboration in teaching SEN students. Activity theory, and specifically the activity system model was utilised to analyse the specific elements included in the teaching activity. The findings present inclusive teaching as a complex phenomenon, involving tensions and unpredictable and uncertain situations. The teaching staff's orientations towards the the object of their collective activity, the SEN student, are based on their professional knowledge-based abilities and competence. In most cases, the support of a special education teacher was considered crucial in teaching SEN students, a finding echoing with previous research (Engelbrecht et al., 2013; Paju et al., 2016). From an activity-theoretical perspective, it is thus essential to make visible the customary practices, the diverse tasks, objects of activity and the various tensions in the teaching activity, to move away from situational, coordination modes of collaboration, and to find ways to develop reflective communication over time.

In line with previous research, (Grenier, 2010; Vangrieken et al., 2015), we found that teachers take individual responsibility for the teaching activity, but their high degree of traditionally shaped independent work may also hinder collaboration. Teachers have a strong commitment to the subject matter of their teaching, which also appears to be an obstacle for organisational development in that it limits collaborative practices (Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014). We agree with Moore (2018), who suggested in her activity-theoretical study, that educators must have developed cultural awareness so that they value diversity and the relevance of culturally responsive pedagogies.

In terms of teaching assistants, Sharma and Salend (2016) reported that teaching assistants are expected to take instructional, classroom management and socialisation roles in their teaching and

interaction with students. Teaching assistants contribution to the collaboration was perceived important as they could respond to the challenges of differentiated teaching and support the students in social situations.

Our findings indicate that some of the challenges derive from historical reasons and the strict division of labour and the historical boundaries between the subject teachers, classroom teachers and special education teachers, and the teaching assistants. Subject teachers often have scattered timetables as they teach only one or two subjects to each class. Also, special education teachers in the mainstream schools are responsible for many, so in practice, they only visit specific classrooms during lessons. Classroom teachers and special education class teachers have a more permanent daily schedule, especially when they are teaching their classes mostly by themselves. For that reason, it is vital to plan the daily schedule and the teaching practices to make room for collaboration in teaching.

Our findings suggest that teaching staff value a multi-professional view, but carry out their divided tasks and individual responsibilities. Similar results to these were reported by Mullholland and O'Connor (2016) stating that while teachers are increasingly aware of the value of collaboration, its implementation is mainly aspirational. Their study showed how many of the challenges relate to issues such as time constraints, ad hoc planning, and limited professional development opportunities. As Florian (2008) suggests, teachers need to learn new strategies for working with one another. In what follows, instead of situational cooperation between the parties, our results call for continuous reflective communication efforts between the professionals, toward a culture of collaboration (see Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2017).

## Conclusions

Our study adds new knowledge to the scarce literature applying activity theory to the study of the inclusion of SEN students. The study advances the present-day understanding of the significance of collaboration and cultural change between different teacher groups to promote inclusive education in mainstream classrooms. From the activity-theoretical perspective, inclusive teaching practices can be understood when interpreted against their history and the functioning of the entire educational system. Classroom interactions are situated in and framed by the local institutional culture and organisation of the school, including the curriculum and the support system implementation. In comparison with other countries, Finnish teachers have a high degree of autonomy in their teaching work (Sahlberg, 2011), and autonomous teachers are highly trusted and respected (Tirri, 2014). However, autonomy should not equal teaching alone and managing classrooms with high student diversity by oneself. In terms of leadership, schools need to invest in enhancing educators' collaboration during and after school hours.

There are limitations to this study that require careful consideration. First, activity theory is only one approach for exploring the work of educators working with SEN students. We depicted variation between teaching groups as well as within a single participant's perceptions, reflecting the complexity of the learning situations and the reality that educators and the students are not a homogeneous group. Second, the activity-theoretical framework was initially designed for studying interactive group discussions, and its fit for our analysis of responses to open-ended questions in a survey can be debated. However, Pearson (2009) successfully used the activity system model for coding the data and found it advantageous for classifying the responses. Therefore, an investigation into teacher-interaction for instance in team meetings in their school context might reveal different perspectives on collaboration.

For future research, the individual teachers' subject positions could be investigated to acquire a more nuanced understanding of forms of collaboration to improve inclusive teaching practices. This exploratory study could be used as the foundation for an observational study of the teachers' and teaching assistants' planning meetings and joint execution of inclusive practices and collaboration. We also encourage educators and researchers to analyse collaborative practices to promote

further discussion and development. We propose that the training of future teachers should include innovative efforts and tools to creating a culture of inclusive collaboration in schools.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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