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Research Paper

Consultative roles of early childhood special education teachers: A modeler, an advisor, and a spontaneous practitioner

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the ways in which early childhood special education teachers (ECSETs) perform their consultative work and the prevailing structural factors that are connected to it. The significance and centrality of ECSETs' consultative work have increased as a growing number of ECSETs provide consultative support to other personnel with the aim of enhancing support for children's daily lives in early childhood education and care (ECEC). However, we have limited research-based knowledge about the consultative work done by ECSETs. Therefore, a more comprehensive examination of consultative practices and the factors influencing them is needed. We administered a survey on ECSETs' ($N = 207$) consultative work focusing on ECEC in Finland. Using cluster analysis, we identified three consultative work profiles in ECSETs' practices: a modeler, an advisor, and a spontaneous practitioner. This exploratory study contributes to understanding ECSETs' consultative work, creating potential for further development in this area.

Early childhood is a fundamentally crucial phase of life during which the high-quality education and support that children receive greatly impact their current and future lives. However, providing effective support to children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions requires effective cooperation among all professionals working with children (Ainscow, Farrell, & Tweddie, 2000; Idol, 2006; Ranta, Heiskanen, Heiskanen, & Syrjämäki, 2023). In many countries, one of the key actors in this cooperation is the early childhood special education teacher (ECSET), whose central focus is on strengthening the support children need to learn and to be able to engage in activities. As itinerant and consultative professionals, ECSETs often cooperate with other ECEC professionals (Shepherd, Fowler, McCormick, Wilson, & Morgan, 2016). A key form of their cooperation is consultative work, in which they provide guidance and support to individual staff members or entire teams to help them better support children.

Although researchers have studied ECSETs' work for decades, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom (Dinnebeil, Pretti-Frontczak, & McInerney, 2009; Harris & Klein, 2009; Idol, Paolucci-Whitcomb, & Nevin, 1995), it remains a very timely topic, especially because the type and content of the consultative work and the

role of an ECSET remain unclear (Rantala, Uotinen, & Räikkönen, 2018; Staffans & Sundqvist, 2023; Sundqvist, von Ahlefeldt Nisser, & Ström, 2014; Tervonen, Heiskanen, & Äikäs, 2024). In recent years, as the work of special education teachers has shifted increasingly toward a consultative position, the nature and implementation of consultative work has sparked significant discussion and interest in Nordic countries (see, e.g., Riis Jensen, Molbaek, Secher Schimdt, & Hedegaard, 2022 in Norway; Staffans & Sundqvist 2023 in Finland).

Consultation by ECSETs is a child's legislative right and is therefore widely practiced in Finland. However, the consultative work of ECSETs is not defined at the national level in any way. In Finland, municipalities have autonomous decision-making power regarding the implementation of ECEC legislation, which has led to significant variations in local practices and forms of cooperation between ECSETs and ECEC staff, as well as in the consultative roles and working methods of ECSETs, both between and within municipalities (Staffans & Ström, 2022). Additionally, previous studies have shown that the lack of descriptions and definitions related to consultation, as well as varying working conditions, make it difficult to determine how consultation should be conducted in practice (Heiskanen et al., 2021; Rantala et al., 2018; Staffans

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& Ström, 2022; Syrjämäki & Heiskanen, 2023). These unique contextual premises offer an interesting starting point for studying how ECSETs carry out their consultative work. To support, guide, and improve the consultative work provided by ECSETs in the future, we need a deeper and broader understanding of how this consultative work is performed and what factors are associated with it.

ECEC and support system in Finland

ECEC is an integral part of the Finnish education system, aimed at promoting the growth, development, and learning of children in cooperation with their guardians. It has been shown that participation in ECEC inherently supports a child's overall growth, as high-quality pedagogy fosters children's positive development and well-being (McCoy et al., 2018). In Finland, ECEC is a publicly supported service, and every child has a subjective right to it. ECEC in Finland is organized and regulated by municipalities, which can either provide the services themselves or procure them from private providers. According to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (2018/540), every child participating in ECEC has the right to receive immediate support for challenges in growth, development, and learning according to their needs. The consultative work of ECSETs aims to strengthen pedagogical practices within the child's own group. A fundamental principle is that support is provided as part of regular ECEC activities (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2022).

Finnish ECEC, including support arrangements, is based on the principles of equality, nondiscrimination, appreciation of diversity, inclusion, and community. To achieve these aims, a progressively strengthening and immediately available support system is used in Finnish ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, 2022). There are three levels of support—general, intensified, and special—each consisting of various forms of support, such as pedagogical, structural, and care-related support (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). Since every child has the right to receive adequate support as soon as the need arises, a plan must be promptly developed to provide this support as part of the child's individual ECEC plan (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018/540). As part of this individually tailored support, the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (2018) mandates that ECSET services must be available in each municipality according to children's needs (EDUFI, 2022).

In Finland, various professional groups work in ECEC centers, including ECSETs, early childhood education teachers (ECETs), ECEC social pedagogues, ECEC nurses, and ECEC center directors. The eligibility requirements for all personnel are quite detailed. Although ECEC adheres to the regulations stipulated in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (840/2018) regarding job qualifications and staffing requirements, the personnel structure, job titles, and education and eligibility requirements vary among municipalities (EDUFI, 2022). For the position of ECSET, candidates must hold the qualification of an ECET (bachelor's degree in educational science) and have completed studies providing professional competence in special education or possess a master's degree in educational science with a specialization in special education. For the position of ECET, besides the minimum of a bachelor's degree in educational science, teachers must have completed studies providing professional competence for tasks in ECEC and pre-primary education. This qualification also allows for teaching in pre-primary education. Currently, individuals eligible for the ECET position can also serve as ECEC center directors. However, after 2030, an additional requirement will be a master's degree in educational science. The eligibility requirement for ECEC social pedagogues is a minimum of a higher education degree in social services and healthcare, which must include at least 60 ECTS credits in studies focused on ECEC. Those eligible for the position of ECEC nurse include practical nurses with three years of training from vocational education in social and health services, often specialized for ECEC.

Consultation and consultative work in education

Consultation, as a specific activity, represents a professional discussion-based activity in which experts (e.g., ECSETs) deliver specialized expertise. However, theoretically and conceptually, consultation has many different variations, and it can be approached from various perspectives (Erchul, & Sheridan, 2008). In the context of education, consultation is typically a problem-solving process between an expert (consultant) and one or more individuals (consultees) in need of support and guidance in their work (Crothers, Hughes, Kolbert, & Schmitt, 2020; Erchul & Sheridan, 2008). The core purpose of consultation in education is to cooperate with the adults surrounding a child to strengthen and improve the support the child receives (Burns, 2004; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). Consultation is also closely linked to the aim of enabling children to receive the necessary support in their everyday environments and peer groups, simultaneously preventing their exclusion from these important life environments (Dinnebeil et al., 2009; Pihlaja, 2022).

Internationally, there are multiple approaches to consultation in education, with the two most prominent approaches being expert-driven and participant-driven consultation (Erchul & Sheridan, 2008; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). Expert-driven consultation is an approach in which the consultant plays a central role in the consultation process, bringing strong expertise and experience to the cooperation and guiding and providing strong recommendations to the consultees (Bergan & Kratochwill, 1990; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). Participant-driven consultation emphasizes active participation and cooperation between consultants and consultees. In this model, consultees play a central role in defining issues, setting goals, and determining the focus of the consultation process (Caplan & Caplan, 1993; Lambert, 2004).

In addition to these two approaches, collaborative consultation has also been introduced in the field of education (Buyse & Wesley, 2004; Idol et al., 1995). Tharp and Wetzel (1969) presented the concept, and subsequent research has suggested that collaborative consultation is a viable option for describing and developing consultations (Buyse & Wesley, 2004; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015; Sundqvist et al., 2014). It is a combination of the two previous approaches and an understanding of consultation as a continuum in which the expert roles of the consultant and consultees alternate. Collaborative consultation emphasizes participation, dialogical interaction, and collaboration between the consultant and the consultees (Idol et al., 1995; Sundqvist et al., 2014). This approach aims to create an equal relationship between the consultant and consultee, where both parties share expertise in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect (Cook & Friend, 2010; Day & Harris, 2002).

Internationally, consultation has long been part of the work of special education teachers, making consultative work one of their central tasks (e.g., Thurston & Kimsey, 1989). Nevertheless, conceptually, there are still many partially overlapping, parallel, and conceptually unclear terms related to the consultation provided by ECSETs, such as consultation, consultation discussion, and consultative work. Puutio and Kykyri (2015) defined the concept of consultative work as distinct from formal consultation. Formal consultation refers to a structured and goal-oriented interaction process. Formal consultation has a clear structure and timeline, and it involves setting objectives, defining problems, developing solutions, and evaluating outcomes. On the other hand, consultative work more generally describes various types of cooperation in which the consultant and consultee explore various perspectives, experiences, and possible actions from the consultee's viewpoint, with the aim of developing their thinking and practical skills. In this study, consultative work is similarly viewed as a broader work modality that extends beyond mere formal consultation, encompassing not only formal consultation discussions but also other forms of consultative work that facilitate the dissemination of expert knowledge in the field. Such forms of consultative work include ECSETs' participation in various joint discussions and meetings, modeling work within

child groups, co-teaching, and observing practical work in child groups followed by discussions with the staff (Heiskanen et al., 2021; Suhonen et al., 2020). Additionally, it can include group-level consultation aimed at developing the pedagogical culture and learning environment, as well as consultation discussions with parents focused on supporting the child (Syrjämäki & Heiskanen, 2023).

The usability of different approaches to consultation should be examined contextually as complementary means of consultation (Sundqvist & Ström, 2015; Sundqvist et al., 2014). Regardless of the approach chosen for consultation, successful consultation and consultative work always require a clear division of work and responsibilities, a shared understanding of the problem and goal, and commitment and time for cooperation from all parties (Albritton & Stein, 2022; Nan et al., 2021; Paju, 2021; Staffans & Sundqvist, 2023). Consultative work also requires good communication, perspective-taking, and decision-making skills from the consultant (Buyse & Wesley, 2004; Harris & Klein, 2009). As both the participants of the consultative cooperation and the issues addressed in it vary, consultations and consultative processes are context-dependent events.

Different roles of an ECSET

In Finland, consultative work relies heavily on the expertise and specialized skills of ECSETs to strengthen the support of children (EDUFI, 2022). ECSETs also play a vital role in coordinating a child's support within ECEC but also in co-operation across services provided by professionals outside ECEC (Äikäs et al., 2023). Additionally, ECSETs can provide special education by teaching children who need special education, either individually or in small groups (EDUFI, 2022).

Both in Finland and abroad, ECSETs work under different job titles and perform various tasks. However, job titles do not always specify work roles. In Finland, municipalities can decide on the job titles they use, and there are no universally applied forms for them. ECSETs may work in roles such as itinerant or regional ECSETs, special education teachers in a particular ECEC center or child group, or in administration and development-focused positions. For comparison, in the United Kingdom, a special education needs coordinator (SENCO) is primarily responsible for coordinating special education but also functions as a special education expert and consultant (Curran & Boddison, 2021). In the United States, as in Finland, a common role of an ECSET is to be itinerant and provide both special education support for individual children and consultative work for multiple groups of children (Dinnebeil, McInerney, & Hale, 2006b). This kind of role for ECSETs is also increasing internationally (Harris & Klein, 2009; Riis Jensen et al., 2022; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017).

In Finland, the diversity in job titles and the lack of clarity in job descriptions and roles have allowed ECSETs to independently plan and organize their work. While this can be positive, for example, in terms of job flexibility, together with the lack of specificity in central regulation, it also leads to regional and individual variations in the content of ECSETs' consultative work (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Dinnebeil, McInerney, & Hale, 2006a; Heiskanen et al., 2021).

Although there is limited research on the actual practices of ECSETs' consultative roles, there is growing interest. Earlier research on the consultative work of ECSETs has focused on how ECSETs themselves describe their consultative role and what issues and challenges they face in their work (Harris & Klein, 2009; Staffans & Ström, 2022; Staffans & Sundqvist, 2023). Sundqvist and Ström (2015) investigated consultation methods and forms among special education teachers in Finnish primary schools, while Staffans and Sundqvist (2023) explored how ECSETs described their consultative role and the practical implementation of the consultative task in ECEC. Staffans and Sundqvist (2023) identified three narratives using qualitative research methods that describe how ECSETs implement their consultative role: (a) frustrated knowledge sharers, (b) adapted and collaborative quick fixers, and (c) satisfied reflection supporters. The *frustrated knowledge sharers* had unwillingly

found themselves in a purely expert role, hoping to engage in more process-oriented consultative work. The staff generally asked them for concrete guidance on supporting individual children, while the ECSETs aimed to foster broader reflective discussions and insightful contemplation. *Adapted and collaborative quick fixers* conducted their consultative work by operating entirely based on the needs of the staff and children, integrating consultative work within their role in child groups, and offering tips and guidance simultaneously. These ECSETs mentioned that consultations were often informal and tended to happen spontaneously. The *satisfied reflection supporters* conducted their consultative work by combining an advisory role with that of a facilitator who provides space for reflection. Their consultation mainly took place during visits, over the phone, or in digital meeting spaces, and they emphasized the importance of shared responsibility between themselves and the teachers.

The qualitative study by Staffans and Sundqvist (2023) with a rather small sample illustrates how ECSETs describe their consultative work in various ways. However, it does not provide information on the distribution of consultative work forms among ECSETs or on possible relations between consultative work and job-related background factors. In this study, we used a larger sample to statistically indicate the ECSET's consultative work profiles and their relations to relevant background factors.

Aim

The purpose of this study was to investigate how ECSETs perform their consultative work in Finland, and how work-related factors are associated with their consultative practices by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do ECSETs perform their consultative work?
2. How are work-related factors associated with the consultative work done by ECSETs?

Method

Data collection and participants

We collected survey data from Finnish ECSETs working in municipal ECEC contexts and providing consultative work as part of their jobs. In Finland, most ECSETs work in publicly funded services in municipalities, and only a few percent of ECSETs work for private ECEC providers (Finnish Official Statistics, 2022). To select municipalities, we utilized Finland's official statistics, which provided a list of all Finnish-speaking municipalities categorized according to the Statistical Municipality Classification (Finnish Official Statistics, 2022). It categorizes municipalities as urban, densely populated, and rural, based on the proportion of their urban population and the population of the largest urban area.

We first included the 10 largest municipalities in Finland in the sample to ensure that the data included the most populated areas. For the largest municipality in Finland, where ECECs are organized under nine areas, we sent the survey to three randomly selected areas to avoid overrepresentation. We also sent the survey to one-fifth of both densely populated and rural municipalities. We made these selections in Excel, arranging municipalities randomly within each category. Starting from the first municipality in each category, we selected every fifth municipality for inclusion in the sample.

We carried out the data collection for this study with an electronic survey using Webropol in two phases between March and August 2022. With the timing of the survey, we aimed to give ECSETs the most realistic opportunity to respond in relation to their workloads. We sent the electronic survey link to the municipal offices with a request to distribute the survey to all ECSETs working in the municipality. We sent the survey to 68 municipalities and received responses from 55 municipalities (81% response rate).

Since the first data collection phase yielded a relatively small number of respondents ($n = 104$), we conducted further data collection by distributing the same survey to the members of the Finnish Early Childhood Special Education Teachers Association. At the time of data collection, the association had a total of 838 members, who constituted about 53% of all (1584) ECSETs working in municipal ECEC in Finland (Finnish Official Statistics, 2022). The respondents received a reminder to complete the survey about 10 days after receiving the initial survey in both phases.

After both data collections were completed, the final number of participants was 207, representing 13% of all ECSETs working in municipal ECEC. Placing the respondents on a map indicated that they were relatively evenly distributed throughout Finland. The number of responding ECSETs in each region also corresponded well with the municipality classifications, suggesting that the data represent Finland well in this respect. All the respondents provided consultative work as part of their jobs. The survey included a list of various job titles describing the work of ECSETs, known to be in use by Finnish ECSETs. The majority of respondents (95.1%) worked across multiple child groups under different job titles, while the rest worked within a single child group (4.3%) or in administrative positions (0.5%). Of the respondents, 98% were women and 65% fell within the 40–60-year age range.

The study did not require an ethical pre-assessment, and all phases of the research adhered to the ethical principles established by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019). Research permits were appropriately obtained for the municipalities that required them. Only one municipality declined to forward the research invitation to its ECSETs. All the participants in the study were adults and were provided with information about the study's objectives and data protection practices. They were also informed that participation was voluntary. All the participants, except one, gave their consent to participate in the study. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymous responses.

Survey

As we were interested in the consultative work of ECSETs, in the introduction of the survey, we described the aim of the study and asked the recipients to participate only if they did consultative work in their jobs. The questions in the questionnaire were chosen based on earlier research findings and the survey data available at the time concerning the work of Finnish ECSETs, with a focus on the consultative work conducted by special education teachers (Eskelinen, Paananen, Suhonen, & Aljoki, 2018; Heiskanen et al., 2021; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015; Staffans & Ström, 2022). After developing the questionnaire, we evaluated its functionality in collaboration with ECSETs working in the field. Based on their feedback, we made modifications to the questionnaire before its distribution, aiming to ensure clarity in both the items and the questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two main parts—the first part collected background information from respondents, and the second part consisted of six sets of questions addressing various aspects of the consultative work provided by ECSETs. The aspects covered were consultation competence and training received, amount and nature of consultative work, forms of consultative work, objectives of consultative work and related expectations, consultation process and indicators of success, and consultation discussions and their practical implementation. This study focuses on the questions in sets 1–4. Sets 5 and 6 were not utilized in this study.

For Set 1 (consultation competence and training received), the questions directly addressed the current consultative skills of ECSETs and the importance of consultation in their work, for example, “What kind of training have you received for providing consultative support in ECEC?” The questions were both multiple-choice and ordinal scale questions. The response options ranged from 1 = “not at all important” to 6 = “extremely important.”

Under Set 2 (amount and nature of consultative work), there were

two different types of questions. The other type was ordinal scale questions, which ranged from 1 = “less than once a month/does not appear at all/not at all” to 6 = “every day/appears every day/very much,” as exemplified by the question “To what extent do the following key characteristics of consultative work appear in your work on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 6 (very much)?” In one question, the respondents were asked to assess and allocate their entire working time according to the following answer options: “How is your consultative work distributed among the following professional groups? Estimate the percentage for each professional group so that the total sum is 100% (you can also respond with 0%).”

For Set 3 (forms of consultative work), there was a question about the previous working day in which the respondents evaluated which forms of consultative work and how much they had used on their previous working day as follows: “Recall now your previous workday (if your previous workday was spent in training, or was otherwise unusual, consider the day before that). Which of the following forms of consultative work did you use, and how much of your total work time spent on consultative work did they occupy? Estimate the percentage of your total work time spent on consultation for each item so that the combined total is approximately 100%.” ECSETs could also select “none of these” as an option insofar as they performed duties in other kinds of consultative work. We used this question in the cluster analysis. Additionally, in this set, there was an ordinal scale question: “Which of these forms of consultative work do you generally use the most in your job? Evaluate the following forms of consultative work from 1 (use the least) to 6 (use the most).”

For Set 4 (objectives of consultative work and related expectations), there were ordinal scale questions: “Evaluate how common the following objectives of consultative support and guidance are in your work. Use the scale from 1 (very rare) to 6 (very common).”

Data analysis and statistical methods

To analyze the data, we used the IBM SPSS Statistics 28 program. For the first research question, “How do ECSETs perform their consultative work?”, we adopted a person-centered approach to understand how ECSETs profile themselves in relation to consultative work. In general, a person-oriented approach allows a researcher to identify differences between and within individuals (Rosato & Baer, 2012). In other words, we studied individuals according to their individual characteristics. The primary goal of person-oriented research is to group individuals into categories, each category containing individuals who are similar to each other but different from individuals in other categories (von Eye & Bogat, 2006). Due to the exploratory nature of the study, we selected K-means cluster analysis as the method for identifying the categories of respondents.

For the cluster analysis, we used the scale “previous working day,” which included five variables: (a) consultation discussions with ECEC personnel on pedagogical competence enhancement or handling issues related to children's support, (b) immediate sharing of information through corridor discussions, (c) support and guide the work of ECEC personnel by modeling and co-teaching in educational situations, (d) observe or work with a child group, responding to individual questions face-to-face or, for example, via email, and (e) consultation discussions with parents. These variables of the “previous working day” represent different forms of consultative work Finnish ECSETs were identified to commonly perform in the developmental phase, especially in the discussions with the practicing ECSETs. We standardized variables to mean 0 and standard deviation 1, making the variables comparable.

For the second question, “How are work-related factors associated with the consultative work done by ECSETs?”, we used chi-square tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Chi-square tests were used to examine differences in the descriptive background variables of the clusters. For the variables where assumptions (all expected frequencies > 1) were unmet, we confirmed the validity of the analysis using the

Monte Carlo test. We utilized Cramer’s V to measure the strength of the associations between these categorical variables. Cramer’s V takes values between 0 and 1, with a higher value indicating a stronger association. We then performed a one-way ANOVA with the cluster solution as a grouping variable. In this study, the dependent variables were factors related to consultative work, such as the goals of consultative work, associated expectations, and the distribution of consultative work among other staff members and the initiator. We used partial eta squared (η^2) as an estimate of the effect size. It indicates the extent of the variance the profile groups ($\eta^2 > 0.01$ indicates a small, $\eta^2 > 0.06$ medium, and $\eta^2 > 0.14$ a large effect) explain (Cohen, 1988). In addition, we employed Tukey’s post hoc tests for pairwise comparisons.

Results

All ECSETs reported engaging in consultative work. The majority reported engaging in consultative work every day (58%) or several days a week (39.1%); therefore, these factors did not cause statistically significant differences between the groups, despite being tested through intergroup comparison. However, the ways in which they conducted their consultative work in practice and in its forms varied. Consequently, we identified three distinct cluster profiles for ECSETs in relation to the consultative work they performed. The cluster analysis relied on the scale measuring “previous working day” to examine the distribution of ECSETs’ consultative work across five consultative work forms during the previous working day. Table 1 presents the average percentages of the various forms of consultative work and the time spent on consultative work as a percentage of the total working time.

Three Consultative Profiles: Modelers, Advisors, and Spontaneous Practitioners

We examined two-, three-, and four-cluster solutions. The two-cluster model did not reveal clear differences between groups, while in the four-cluster model, two of the groups were clearly too small. After conducting content and external assessments, we selected a three-cluster solution (Table 2), where the group sizes were appropriate, and the content examination seemed justified based on previous research and empirical observations from the field. The first cluster (called “modelers”) consisted of ECSETs ($n = 92, 44.4\%$) who reported conducting their consultative work more likely through pedagogical modeling, observation, and co-teaching in a child group. In the second cluster (“advisors”), ECSETs ($n = 81, 39.1\%$) utilized separate formal consultation discussions and responded to individual questions as their way of conducting consultative work. The third cluster (“spontaneous practitioners”; $n = 34, 16.4\%$) comprised ECSETs whose consultative work was predominantly spontaneous and occurring in the moment.

The results indicated that “advisors” differed from both “modelers” and “spontaneous practitioners” in terms of the number of children in their work area. ($X^2(10, N = 207) = 20.44, p = 0.03, \text{Cramer’s } V = 0.22$). ECSETs who were responsible for a large number of children were more likely to act as advisors than other cluster profile groups. On the other hand, ECSETs with fewer children in their work area were more likely to

Table 1
Forms of consultative work on the previous workday and the total consultative working time spent on them (in %).

Form of consultative work	M	SD
Pedagogical competence-enhancing formal consultation discussion	29.4	15.3
Instantaneous sharing of information, corridor conversations	18.0	13.0
Supporting and guiding work by modeling and co-teaching in a child group	28.6	18.7
Responding to individual questions in person or via email	12.4	9.3
Consultation discussion with parents	7.7	9.8
None of the above	3.0	10.0

Total 100%, $N = 207$

Table 2
Standardized cluster centers.

Consultative work forms during the previous working day	Cluster centers		
	Modeler ($n = 92$)	Advisor ($n = 81$)	Spontaneous practitioner ($n = 34$)
Pedagogical, competence-enhancing formal consultation discussion on supporting children with the ECEC personnel	-0.47	0.74	-0.49
Instantaneous sharing of information, corridor conversations	-0.32	-0.31	1.61
Supporting and guiding work by modeling and co-teaching in a child group	0.83	-0.73	-0.51
Responding to individual questions in person or via email	-0.29	0.24	0.21
Consultation discussion with parents	-0.29	0.50	-0.40

$n = 207$.

act as modelers performing their consultative work through modeling, co-teaching, and observing work practices within a child group (see Table 3).

An examination of the municipality category indicated that in rural municipalities, ECSETs were more likely to act as spontaneous practitioners than those in large or densely populated municipalities ($X^2(4, N = 202) = 13.3, p = 0.01, \text{Cramer’s } V = 0.18$) (see Table 4).

We performed a one-way ANOVA to evaluate the differences between cluster profiles regarding the goals set by ECSETs for their consultative work and the expectations they received from ECEC staff regarding their consultative work. The cluster profiles significantly differed from each other in terms of the goals related to strengthening support for individual children and responding to challenging educational and teaching situations (Table 5). “Advisors” reported setting the goals of strengthening support for individual children and responding to challenging educational and teaching situations more frequently than “modelers” ($p = 0.04$). The effect size was small or nearly medium for both variables (Table 5).

Additionally, the comparison between the clusters regarding the expectations they received from ECEC staff about their consultative work showed statistically significant differences between the clusters concerning the identification and assessment of children’s support needs, supporting the smooth functioning of ECEC staff teamwork, and supporting the well-being of ECEC staff (Table 6). Spontaneous practitioners were more likely to report receiving fewer requests from staff regarding the assessment and identification of individual children’s support needs compared to advisors ($p = 0.03$) and modelers ($p = 0.03$). Spontaneous practitioners also reported receiving statistically significantly fewer requests from staff regarding supporting the smooth functioning of ECEC staff’s teamwork ($p = 0.04$) and supporting the well-being of ECEC staff ($p = 0.004$) compared to advisors. The effect size was small or nearly medium for each variable (Table 6).

Table 3
Number of children in the work area by cluster profiles.

Number of children in the work area	Modeler		Advisor		Spontaneous practitioner		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Below 100	11	12.0	10	12.3	6	17.6	27	13
100–199	39	42.4 ^T	18	22.2 ^A	10	29.4	67	32.4
200–299	33	35.9	30	37.0	13	38.2	76	36.7
300–399	4	4.3	8	9.9	4	11.8	16	7.7
400–499	0	0.0 ^A	5	6.2 ^T	0	0.0 ^A	5	2.4
Over 500	5	5.4	10	12.3 ^T	1	2.9 ^A	16	7.7

Note. A = expected smaller proportion, adjusted standardized residual < -2. T = expected larger proportion, adjusted standardized residual > 2.

Table 4
Municipality category by cluster profiles.

Municipality category	Modeler		Advisor		Spontaneous practitioner		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Urban municipalities	69	75.8	61	77.2	20	62.5	150	74.3
Densely populated municipalities	16	17.6	12	15.2	3	9.4	31	15.3
Rural municipalities	6	6.6	6	7.6	9	28.1 ^T	21	10.4

Note. A = expected smaller proportion, adjusted standardized residual < -2. T = expected larger proportion, adjusted standardized residual > 2.

Table 5
ECSETs' goals for consultative work.

Consultation goals	Modeler (Mo)	Advisor (Ad)	Spontaneous practitioner (Sp)	F	η ²	Post hoc
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)			
Assessing and identifying the support needs of individual children	5.67 (0.63)	5.74 (0.57)	5.53 (0.70)	1.40	0.01	Ns
Planning support measures for the child	5.55 (0.75)	5.74 (0.61)	5.62 (0.55)	1.70	0.02	Ns
Strengthening the support provided to individual children	5.15 (0.95)	5.51 (0.73)	5.35 (0.69)	3.96*	0.04	Ad > Mo*
Observing and evaluating pedagogical practices in an ECEC unit	5.04 (0.90)	4.94 (0.87)	5.00 (1.04)	0.29	0.003	Ns
Enhancing the pedagogical competence of the personnel	4.58 (1.06)	4.64 (0.95)	4.65 (1.15)	0.11	.001	Ns
Addressing challenging educational and teaching situations	5.02 (0.91)	5.35 (0.78)	5.00 (0.89)	3.65*	0.04	Ad > Mo*
Supporting the smooth functioning of teamwork among ECEC personnel	3.74 (1.19)	3.95 (1.22)	3.56 (1.11)	1.46	0.01	Ns
Promoting the well-being of ECEC personnel	3.82 (1.17)	3.88 (1.27)	3.38 (1.18)	2.12	0.02	Ns
Providing additional personnel resources	3.50 (1.64)	3.33 (1.48)	3.35 (1.76)	0.26	0.003	Ns

Note.
* p < 0.05,
**p < 0.01; ns = non-significant.

Finally, we examined the differences between the cluster profiles regarding how ECSETs distributed their consultative work among different professional groups and who most often initiated consultative support for ECSETs (Table 7). Spontaneous practitioners were more likely than advisors to initiate and receive more consultative work with ECEC nurses. The responses from the modelers closely resembled those

of spontaneous practitioners regarding these aspects.

Most ECSETs across all cluster profiles considered their consultative work either very important (78.7%) or important (16.4%). However, it is noteworthy that despite recognizing the importance of consultative work as one of their main duties, only 34.8% reported having received training in consultative work as part of their pre-service education, and only 15.9% reported having participated in-service training on consultative work. Overall, 63.8% of the ECSETs reported that they had not received any training in consultative work. The cluster groups did not differ significantly from each other regarding the consultation training received.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate how ECSETs perform their consultative work and how work-related factors are associated with their consultative work practices. We identified three profiles of ECSETs in consultative work: Modelers, Advisors, and Spontaneous practitioners. While these profiles shared many similarities in their approach to consultative work, they differed in the emphasis placed on various forms of consultative work.

Overall, ECSET consultative work was found to be broadly similar in nature, with all three profiles utilizing various forms of consultative work to some extent. However, the profiles differed in how they emphasized specific forms of consultative work. This reflects the diverse and dynamic environments in which ECSETs operate, where consultative tasks are shaped by unique circumstances. Modelers aimed to guide staff by demonstrating various ways of working directly with children in groups, modeling and co-teaching, and observing and discussing staff practices more than other groups. Advisors, on the other hand, focused more on guiding staff through separate formal consultation discussions without direct involvement in child groups. Spontaneous practitioners appeared to emphasize quick solutions in their consultative work, such as corridor conversations and instantaneous information sharing.

All three profile groups shared similar goals for their consultative work in many respects. The expectations for their consultative work were also partly similar among the profile groups. Although, examining the profile groups from a broader perspective gave ECSETs different roles in relation to the staff. ECSETs reported that ECEC staff expected less support from Spontaneous practitioners in identifying and assessing children's individual support needs and in supporting the well-being of ECEC staff than they did from Advisors and Modelers. However, Spontaneous practitioners appeared to be more present among the entire ECEC staff, as they both provided and received more requests for consultative support from ECEC nurses compared to other groups.

The goals set for Advisors' consultative work emphasized their role as experts in resolving individual child problems more than in other groups. Advisors themselves reported that staff expected them to provide solutions. Otherwise, the priorities for conducting consultative work were similar across the profile groups, despite varying practical emphases. This is entirely understandable, as consultative work should inherently aim for a common goal that leads to strengthening the support a child receives within their own peer group (Albritton & Stein, 2022; Dinnebeil et al., 2009; Paju, 2021; Pihlaja, 2022; Staffans & Sundqvist, 2023; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). These three profiles demonstrate that the consultative work performed by ECSETs is highly diverse overall. By identifying both the similarities and differences in the practices of ECSETs' consultative work, this study enhances our understanding of the many factors that must be considered when discussing consultative work in ECEC.

While being a quantitative study, this study's results have some similarities with the narrative study of Staffans and Sundqvist (2023), in which ECSETs are described in their consultative work as *reflective supporters*, *frustrated knowledge sharers* and *adapted and collaborative quick fixers*. The descriptions of consultative work by *reflective supporters* included elements similar to those found in the consultative work of

Table 6
Personnel’s expectations of ECSETs’ consultative work by cluster profiles.

Personnel’s expectations of consultation	Modeler (Mo)	Advisor (Ad)	Spontaneous practitioner (Sp)	F	η^2	Post hoc
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)			
Assessing and identifying the support needs of individual children	5.80 (0.48)	5.80 (0.46)	5.50 (0.80)	3.87*	0.04	Sp < Ad* Sp < Mo*
Planning support measures for the child	5.50 (0.73)	5.70 (0.55)	5.60 (0.61)	1.73	0.02	Ns
Strengthening the support provided to individual children	5.40 (0.85)	5.50 (0.73)	5.50 (0.71)	1.30	0.01	Ns
Enhancing the pedagogical competence of the personnel	4.00 (1.15)	4.40 (1.20)	4.00 (1.25)	2.10	0.02	Ns
Addressing challenging educational and teaching situations	5.60 (0.80)	5.60 (0.70)	5.70 (0.54)	0.08	0.001	Ns
Supporting the smooth functioning of teamwork among ECEC personnel	3.40 (1.30)	3.70 (1.22)	3.10 (1.35)	3.15*	0.03	Sp < Ad*
Promoting the well-being of ECEC personnel	3.51 (1.39)	3.80 (1.32)	2.90 (1.28)	5.18**	0.05	Sp < Ad**
Providing additional personnel resources	4.70 (1.50)	4.60 (1.59)	4.40 (1.78)	0.40	0.004	Ns

Note.
* $p < 0.05$,
** $p < 0.01$; ns = non-significant.

Table 7
Distribution of consultative work with different professional groups and consultative work initiatives from different professional groups (in %) by cluster profiles.

Variable	Professional group	Modeler (Mo)	Advisor (Ad)	Spontaneous practitioner (Sp)	F	η^2	Post hoc
Distribution of consultative work among different professional groups	ECEC center director	8.0 (6.3)	10.3 (8.6)	9.2 (9.0)	1.92	0.02	ns
	ECSET	5.7 (6.2)	7.6 (6.8)	6.6 (5.9)	1.82	0.02	ns
	ECET	47.3 (14.3)	46.9 (15.1)	42.2 (13.3)	1.63	0.02	ns
	ECEC nurse	24.9 (10.0)	19.8 (9.7)	26.0 (11.1)	7.24**	0.07	Sp >
	Family day care provider	1.9 (4.2)	2.0 (4.4)	3.0 (4.8)	0.84	0.01	Ad**
	Parents	12.0 (7.4)	13.1 (9.8)	13.4 (6.6)	0.49	0.005	ns
							ns
							ns
Who usually initiates the consultative work	ECEC director	1.0 (2.2)	2.7 (8.2)	2.8 (4.6)	2.53	0.03	ns
	ECEC center director	13.3 (11.0)	13.2 (12.4)	14.8 (12.2)	0.24	0.002	ns
	ECSET	23.0 (19.8)	23.0 (21.0)	19.7 (20.7)	0.37	0.004	ns
	ECET	43.4 (18.8)	42.5 (20.1)	35.7 (17.2)	2.11	0.02	ns
	ECEC nurse	13.3 (11.6)	10.0 (8.0)	17.7 (14.3)	5.99**	0.06	Ad <
	Family day care provider	1.1 (2.4)	1.4 (2.9)	2.2 (4.5)	1.76	0.02	Sp**
	Parents	5.2 (6.1)	7.2 (5.4)	7.1 (5.9)	3.05*	0.03	ns
							ns
Total (%)		100	100	100			

Note. * $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.

Modelers in this study. The results of both studies emphasized reflective discussions and working with children as a central part of the consultative work. On the other hand, *frustrated knowledge sharers* described their work as focused on providing information and addressing the problems of individual children, like Advisors in our study. The *collaborative quick fixers* were mirrored by our study’s Spontaneous practitioners, as both engaged in fairly informal spontaneous consultative work that provided tips and support accessible to the entire staff, not just the teachers.

It should be noted that structural factors are significant for the implementation of consultative work. The results showed that among work-related factors, municipality type and the number of children in the work area are associated with the different consultative work profiles of ECSETs. Modelers and Advisors primarily work outside rural areas, while about one-third of Spontaneous practitioners operate in rural areas. Modelers have fewer children in their work areas than Advisors, while Advisors are responsible for larger numbers of children compared to other groups. In contrast, Spontaneous practitioners exhibit greater variation in the number of children in their work areas than other profile groups. In earlier studies, ECSETs have also reported that the time available and the number of children needing support in their work areas are related to their work (Rantala et al., 2018; Staffans & Sundqvist, 2023; Syrjämäki & Heiskanen, 2023; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). This study demonstrates that certain structural factors are particularly associated with how ECSETs carry out their consultative

work (see also Staffans & Ström [2022] regarding Swedish-speaking ECSETs in Finland).

Additionally, this study showed that although ECSETs perform a substantial amount of consultative work, most of them have not received any specific training for it. Since the participants in this study generally had minimal training in consultative work, the study did not provide insights into the associations between training in consultative work and the implementation of ECSETs’ consultative practices. However, the lack of consultative training among ECSETs is important, as ECSETs’ expertise is relied upon and leveraged in consultative work, and consultative skills are crucial for its success. Several studies have emphasized the importance of various interaction skills and consultative expertise in achieving positive outcomes (e.g., Buysse & Wesley, 2004; Harris & Klein, 2009). In addition, previous studies have also highlighted that consultative work is often neglected in both pre-service and in-service training of special education teachers, despite known concerns about ECSETs’ limited consultative skills (e.g., Buysse & Wesley, 2004; Paloniemi, Pulkkinen, Kärnä, & Björn, 2021). Special education teacher education programs have traditionally focused more on knowledge and skills directly related to teaching children (e.g., Dinnebeil et al., 2009), which is problematic, as the work of ECSETs increasingly involves consultative tasks.

In this study, we conceptualized the consultative roles of ECSETs as consultative work, distinguishing this from formal consultation discussions. ECSETs’ consultative work includes not only the possibility of

formal consultation discussions but also other forms of consultative work that facilitate the dissemination of expert knowledge in the field. The consultative work of ECSETs is not solely based on individual consultation discussions but also utilizes other methods, such as modeling and providing practical guidance of disseminating professional knowledge.

Based on this and previous research (e.g., Staffans & Sundqvist, 2023), we now have a good understanding of what ECSETs' consultative work practically entails in Finland. However, we still do not know why ECSETs perform their work in these ways, to what extent these identified work practices are appropriate or effective, and how interaction in consultation situations contributes to the success of the consultation. To avoid arbitrary outcomes in the consultative work conducted by ECSETs, it is important to understand that just as consultation should have a common goal that binds all participants (Albritton & Stein, 2022), there should also be sufficient expertise and a culture of mutual agreement, where clear goals are set for the consultative work and appropriate roles are defined for the participants (Buysse & Wesley, 2004; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Nelson, Lindeman, & Stroup-Rentier, 2011; Shepherd et al., 2016; Staffans & Ström, 2022; Staffans & Sundqvist, 2023; Sundqvist et al., 2014).

Limitations

This research has some limitations. First, although a large sample ECSETs from different parts of Finland participated in the study, it is possible that the sample does not represent all ECSETs in Finland. Second, no validated questionnaires were available, so the one used was made for the study, and we cannot be entirely certain about the comprehensiveness of the survey. Being so, it is possible that the profile groups differ from each other on aspects not covered with our questionnaire. Third, considering the number of statistical analyses conducted, it is possible that some of the statistically significant findings reflect type 1 error. Fourth, as a methodological choice, we decided to use ECSETs' previous typical workday as the basis for the cluster analysis, with the aim of obtaining an easily memorable "sample" that focused specifically on the time spent on consultation and the content of consultative work. However, we cannot be certain how comprehensively this sample represents the entirety of ECSETs' consultative work.

Conclusion

This study explored the forms of consultative work conducted by ECSETs, as well as the contextual structures that influence this work. Consultative work is carried out in various ways, partly shaped by structural factors. Therefore, it is likely that there is no universally optimal method for providing consultation. There is a need to develop situation-specific consultation models for the field of ECEC. This would help ensure that the consultative work conducted is research-based and includes a clear process structure.

The lack of consultation training undoubtedly poses challenges for the practical implementation of consultative work. More training on consultation is needed both in the ECSETs' pre-service training programs and in-service training. The training programs should also include methods for developing structures for consultative work. Moreover, strengthening consultation expertise would provide tools for fostering commitment and a shared understanding of consultative work, which are cornerstones of successful consultative efforts.

This and previous studies leave open a crucial question: how does consultative work impact the support provided to children? The primary goal of consultation is to improve staff working methods to better serve the needs of children. Therefore, the key outcome variables in the research on consultation models are at the children's level.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Chat GPT for the initial checking of the correctness of language usage. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication. Finally, the language was reviewed by a professional language editor.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Erika Jokimies: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Noora Heiskanen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Hannu Savolainen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Software, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Vesa Närhi:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation.

Declaration of competing interest

We have no conflicts of interests to disclose.

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Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2024.11.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2024.11.005).

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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