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Co-Teaching in Northern Rural Finnish Schools

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Abstract

Focusing on a rural municipality in northern Finland, the aim of this study is to investigate educators' thoughts and experiences with co-teaching. The data from 40 teachers were collected via an electronic questionnaire, and a mixed-methods approach was used. In the quantitative responses, the teachers positioned themselves as spokespeople for co-teaching, even though they had little experience with this teaching method. The written responses were condensed into four main themes: requirements, interpretations, inclusion and joy. Various requirements, such as more time for planning, better facilities to teach in and more training, were required before co-teaching could be executed. However, those who had co-taught expressed joy and improved wellbeing at work compared with their time teaching alone. Finally, the various themes of teachers' experiences in relation to co-teaching are discussed.

Keywords: Co-Teaching; Experience; Rural Area; Content Analysis; North Finland

Introduction

Traditionally, Finnish teachers have been independent and free to make their own decisions regarding work-related matters. This autonomy and trust in Finnish teachers' professional skills has made it possible to create a culture of working alone at school; this 'lone-wolf' spirit when it comes to teaching can also be found in many Western countries (Säntti, 2008; Vuorikoski and Räisänen, 2010; Wolgast and Fischer 2017; Woolner, Clark, Laing, Thomas and Tiplady, 2014). The culture of working alone often also means planning instruction and evaluating results alone.

Although work is done independently, with the current changes taking place in Finnish schools, for example in the Finnish Basic Education Act (2010), teachers are receiving new requirements that have been added onto their basic work, which limits teachers' independence, leaving them feeling inadequate (Tsang & Kwong, 2017; Vuorikoski and Räisänen, 2010). One substantial change in the Finnish school system and across Europe is the effort to create schools that are inclusive; the principle of inclusion maintains several issues, for example, that diverse pupils who have different educational needs study in regular classes instead of being in special classes or special schools (Lakkala, Uusiautti and Määttä, 2016; Sundqvist and Lönnqvist, 2016). However, many primary and secondary school teachers are not accustomed to the idea of inclusion and do not have the required experience and competence to properly handle an inclusive classroom (Lopez-Torrijo and Menguel-Andrés, 2015; Haug, 2017).

According to the new requirements put forth in the Finnish Basic Education Act (2010), all teachers must support pupils who need help. The support system is divided into three steps: the first step is called general support, second is intensified support and third is special support. The administrative and structural changes required for using the new three-step support model in Finland can stress and challenge teachers. Oftentimes handling their work alone, teachers try to manage these new requirements, being placed in a situation where they must work in an inclusive environment (Finnish Basic Education Act 2010; Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez and Moore, 2014; Soini *et al.* 2012). Networking and co-operation with various stakeholders are needed to fulfil the demands of inclusion (Jokinen *et al.*, 2013; Finnish National Board of Education 2016; Pratt, 2014), meaning that working alone is not enough. In inclusive schools, multi-professional co-operation plays a key role (Vainikainen *et al.*, 2015).

Co-teaching is one way of unravelling the culture of working alone, giving teachers the possibility of mutual pedagogical support (Ojala, 2017; Pratt, 2014). Various support needs can be responded to more easily when co-teaching (Krammer *et al.*, 2018; Flujit, Bakker and Struyf, 2016). Co-operation and professional support for teachers has been shown to have positive effects, including diminishing work-related stress and raising the quality of the teachers' work (Wolgasst and Fischer, 2017). Consequently, co-teaching presents a

challenge to traditional conceptions of teaching and learning, providing a space for transformation and growth when used in inclusive education. However, changes in education are never smooth and linear. For instance, Fullan (1993) argues that if it is only the formal structures of teaching and learning that are changed, this would not automatically change the norms, habits, skills and beliefs enough to influence the practice of teaching.

Rural schools differ from urban schools as learning environments. The differences are related to the environment, multi-grade classrooms and numbers of teachers and support staff (Pettersson, Ström and Johansen, 2016). Over the last 10 years, several studies on co-teaching in urban schools have been published. The focus of these studies has mainly been on the teachers' attitudes and experiences with co-teaching (e.g., Pratt, 2014; Ricci *et al.*, 2017; Saloviita and Takala, 2010). However, the focus of the present study is on rural schools; here, to fill the gap in the literature on co-teaching in rural schools, we ask if co-teaching is used in these schools and, if so, how it is experienced. In Finland, co-teaching is used more frequently in schools in larger cities than in rural schools (Saloviita, 2018). Therefore, our intention is to contribute to the ongoing discussion of co-teaching by bringing to light the various aspects of co-teaching in educational settings in northern Finnish rural areas. By studying the teachers' experiences, it is possible to get information which helps schools administration to promote co-teaching in rural schools. Teachers' experiences can also be utilised in designing supplementary training. Watkins & Donnelly (2013) argue that a key area of development is that teachers' skills to meet the increasingly diverse needs of learners in classrooms.

Co-teaching

The general definition of co-teaching is a situation where two or more teachers plan a lesson, teach and evaluate the pupils together. In addition, the teaching takes place in the same class and space; it is a collaboration between two equal partners, most often two teachers, but other combinations exist (Flujit *et al.*, 2016; Strogilos and Stefanidis 2015). Several models of co-teaching exist, and the methods used for adapting these models vary. Often, the resources at school, as well as the needs of pupils, define the form of co-teaching that is taken (Malinen and Palmu, 2017; Bešić *et al.*, 2016). In this sense, co-teaching means that a special teacher and class or subject teacher work together in a class that has pupils who have special needs; here, the special educator takes the role of an assistant. However, this is only sometimes a functional role because a qualified teacher seldom wants to only be an assistant (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson and McCulley, 2012; Friend *et al.*, 2010). Co-teaching can also happen between two class or subject teachers, or the partner can be a therapist or an expert in a different but related field (Friend *et al.*, 2010). Superior results, for example, in pupils' reading readiness have been discovered when the teacher's partner is a social worker or therapist (Andersen, Beuchert-Pedersen, Skyt Nielsen, and Kjærgaard, 2014).

It is easier to respond to the pupil's various demands when several teachers work together in one classroom (Krammer *et al.*, 2018). Co-operative working habits have been successful in promoting learning and diminishing the segregation of pupils (Strogilos, Stefanidis and Tragoulia, 2016). Bešić *et al.* (2016) note that teachers have trouble relinquishing the traditional one-teacher-in-class model; however, the authors mention that a teacher's time and experiences with co-teaching can change his or her attitude and hence create positive collaboration (also Shin *et al.*, 2016; Walter-Thomas, 1997).

When two teachers work together in a regular class, a good number is around 20–25 pupils. This teacher–pupil ratio has been shown to lead to better learning results (Krammer *et al.* 2018; Berger, 2014; Deering, 2015; Roberson, 2015; Tremblay, 2013) and can develop the pupils' socio-emotional skills (Strogilos and Stefanidis, 2015.; Tsiouli and Soulis, 2015.; Friend *et al.*, 2010). Co-teaching can improve participation and interaction, and it can diminish deviant behaviour as well (Strogilos and Avramidis, 2014).

Nevertheless, challenges exist. The most common challenge that teachers face is the lack of planning time (e.g., Strogilos, Stefanidis and Tragoulia, 2016; Shin *et al.*, 2016; Scruggs & Mastopieri, 2017; Ricci, Zetlin and Osipova, 2017; Saloviita and Takala, 2010). Other problematic aspects of co-teaching are personality clashes, differences in epistemologies or power imbalances (Chanmugam and Gerlach, 2013; Ferguson and Wilson, 2011; Tobin, 2014).

Rural schools and teaching

Because we focus on co-teaching in rural schools, what a rural school is must first be defined; however, in Nordic countries, a clear and simple definition of rural schools does not exist (Pettersson, Ström and Johansen, 2016). Statistically, culturally, geographically and psychologically, a rural area can be defined in several ways (Hargreaves, Kvalsund and Galton, 2009). In the current research, we used a definition that includes three types of rural municipalities: *rural municipalities*, *core rural municipalities* and *sparsely populated rural areas*. Rural municipalities can be defined as being close to urban areas, having some agricultural and other business aspects and having highly diverse markets nearby. Core rural municipalities are important municipalities for primary production, which includes pig farming, greenhouse cultivation and poultry farming. Core rural municipalities are situated close to several medium-to-large-sized centres. Most sparsely populated rural municipalities are found in eastern or northern Finland. It is these sparsely populated rural municipalities that suffer the most from the cycle of poor development: young people move away, services disappear, and the economy dwindles (Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 2006). The structure of the school network reflects changes in society. Finnish educational system in the future is likely to continue to reduce the school network and increase the unit size of schools (Kalaoja and Pietarinen, 2009). These areas also suffer the lack of everyday special education

services (Pettersson, Ström and Johansen, 2016). The municipality where this research was conducted was a sparsely populated rural area where the lack of special education services of some schools was a reality.

When evaluated against urban schools, the quality of rural schools has often been considered weak (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2009). However, according to studies by the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA), students' learning results, as well as the level of teaching, is quite similar in rural and urban Finnish schools (Vainikainen, 2016). Consequently, there are also no significant differences in the learning results between rural and urban schools. This result is different from many other countries, where urban schools often have a higher quality of education and hence perform better than rural schools (Pettersson, 2017; Vetterranta *et al.*, 2016).

The size of the school also affects teachers' work. The learning environment and number of pupils in rural schools often differs from urban schools. Rural schools have several combined classes, such as grades 1 and 2 in one classroom environment; there are also fewer teachers, and the special teacher is not present every day, which is an additional challenge when teachers need help supporting pupils (Kalaoja and Pietarinen, 2009; Pettersson and Ström, 2017; Pettersson, Ström and Johansen, 2016).

Aims and framework of the study

The current study was conducted in seven schools within one sparsely populated rural municipality in northern Finland; the main aim was to study teachers' experiences with co-teaching. The research questions were as follows:

- 1) *What kinds of experiences do teachers in rural municipalities have with co-teaching?*
- 2) *What kinds of issues do teachers raise about co-teaching?*

The studied municipality has one secondary school and six primary schools. Four of the primary schools are small village schools, having three to four teachers and less than 80 pupils. Special education is provided by peripatetic special teachers who move among several schools throughout the week. If the village is so small that it does not have its own school, the pupils are transported to bigger centres. All schools involved in the present research are considered rural schools.

Together, the studied municipality has 80 teachers, of which 35 are teaching at the secondary stage and 45 are primary teachers. The number of pupils per school ranges from 47 to 319, and the number of teachers per school ranges from three to 27. Two schools have special classes, and together, 10 special class teachers work there. The municipality has two

peripatetic teachers, both of whom visit the three schools throughout the week. One school has two special teachers only for that school, and in this case, it is typical that the special teacher is not available every day.

Permission for the research was received from the educational authorities in this municipality. Anonymity was guaranteed, and each teacher decided independently about participation. Teachers received information via e-mail, as well as a link to the questionnaire. Participation which was voluntary.

Method

The data were collected via an electronic questionnaire (see appendix), which included both qualitative and quantitative questions. The questionnaire was sent to all the teachers (N=80) in the municipality, and one reminder e-mail was sent. Altogether, 40 teachers responded. The closed multiple-choice questions (10) asked about the teachers' experiences with co-teaching and giving support to pupils. The open-ended questions (3) asked for more details about co-teaching and their experiences with it. Additionally, there was space for free writing. The age, gender, education, length of working years and education level were asked in the background questions (7). The questions were based on the definition of co-teaching (Flujit *et al.*, 2016; Strogilos and Stefanidis 2015) and earlier research of co-teaching in Finland, where some of the challenges and main benefits of co-teaching were raised (Takala and Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012).

Participants

The responding teachers were mainly female (32), with eight male respondents. The participants' mean age was 48 years (sd 8.7). From the respondents, 22 taught in primary education, 17 taught in secondary education, and one teacher taught in both. Their professional degrees varied: 12 were class teachers, 13 subject teachers, five special teachers, five teachers with both class and subject teacher qualification and five with special teacher and other teacher qualifications. However, the positions that the teachers worked at the time of the data collection were a bit different than what they had been trained to (Table 2). The teachers were quite experienced, with the mean number of working years at 18 (sd 9.3).

Current position	N
class teacher	17
subject teacher	12
special teacher	11

Table 1: *In what position do you work this year at school?*

Methodology

We used a qualitative approach with some quantitative elements. The closed questions were analysed using frequencies and chi-square analyses, as well as non-parametric methods (Kendall's tau). The open responses were analysed using a content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Kondracki and Wellman, 2002); this method was chosen because we wanted to examine the teachers' written responses on the topic of co-teaching. However, we are familiar with the problems that a content analysis may have; it is possible to lose the data's diversity when compressing it. To address this, we attempted to give space for the items, which can be lost, items which are kind of becoming (see also St.Pierre and Jackson, 2014). Two researchers read the data several times and searched for common themes; they also scanned the data to look for smaller issues and sub-themes. All the themes were then discussed together. The themes were compressed independently into main themes, which were again discussed. The main themes covered the dominant issues the teachers wrote about. The third researcher read the final analysis and commented on it. The four main themes (Table 2) are discussed in the results.

Results

The results that respond to the first research question about the teachers' experiences with and use of co-teaching are reported using a quantitative analysis.

What kind of experiences do teachers in a rural municipality have with co-teaching?

Most of the participating teachers had experiences using co-teaching, and only six teachers said they had never co-taught.

Teachers' roles

In the studied rural community, the roles that teachers chose when co-teaching varied. The questionnaire had six possibilities, and the seventh was '*some other role, what?*' The main role when co-teaching was as an equal teacher (20 mentions). The second role was as a main teacher (13 mentions). The third role was being an assistant (five mentions).

How the teachers discussed co-teaching as carried out varied a great deal. From the options on the questionnaire, most teachers (N=25/40) chose the alternative: '*We plan, execute and evaluate teaching together with another teacher*'. The second most popular option (7/40) was '*We plan and execute teaching together with another teacher*'. This is very positive because it includes the essential elements of teaching. However, the open-ended responses gave another perspective to this seemingly positive trait of co-teaching; it appears the boundaries of co-teaching were stretched.

When evaluating co-teaching, it is essential that the evaluator has some experience with the process and structure of co-teaching. Our respondents had a modest level of experience with

co-teaching. On a 5-point scale, most (21/40) had some experience with co-teaching, but only three had a lot of or quite a lot of experience using co-teaching. The special educators had the most experience, and the subject teachers had the least. However, in this small data sample, no statistical difference could be found, even with the non-parametric methods used.

Benefits and challenges in co-teaching

According to the teachers, co-teaching was considered quite beneficial for the *pupils*: The alternative '*quite a few benefit from it*' (19) received the most choices. The second most popular alternative was '*some benefit from it*' (11). No one chose the alternative '*nobody benefits from it*'. We also asked if the *teachers* benefit from co-teaching. The alternatives '*benefit a lot*' (15) and '*benefit*' (20) were chosen the most. No one chose the option '*do not benefit*'.

The biggest challenge that the teachers noted was finding the time to plan lessons (27), finding suitable facilities to execute co-teaching (27) and finding a partner to co-teach with (27). This result was calculated by compressing the bottom or top two option choices of a 5-point Likert scale (1=*is problematic* + 2=*is a bit problematic* to '*problematic*' as well as 4=*not so problematic* + 5=*not problematic* to '*not problematic*'). If we look at the ends of the scale (numbers 1 and 5), without compressing the data, the most problematic issue was a lack of planning time (14 mentions).

We gave the respondents eight alternatives for what type of situation co-teaching is best suited for. The three most chosen alternatives were the following: co-teaching is best suited for individualising teaching (32), sharing professional skills (20) and making learning more effective (16). Interestingly, only three teachers chose the option that co-teaching helps teachers get to know their pupils better.

Finally, we gave a continuum for the evaluation of co-teaching, ranging from '*an excellent form of teaching*' to '*waste of time*'. From these extremes, most choices fell in the middle, with '*co-teaching is a developing form of teaching*' (30) ranking second. No one said co-teaching is a waste of time, three said it is an excellent form of teaching.

When using the teachers' age, experience or education as variables in the statistical analysis, no significant differences were found. The only significant result was related to the grade level: co-teaching was more common ($\chi^2(4) = 9.56, p < .05$) at the primary than secondary stage (see also, Saloviita, 2018).

What kind of issues do teachers raise about co-teaching?

Together, four main themes were present after compressing all the discovered themes. These four themes were present in both positive and negative forms and are as follows:

requirements, interpretations, inclusion and joy. Each main theme had subthemes that were present in several of the teachers' responses (See Table 2).

Main themes:	Requirements	Interpretations	Inclusion	Joy
Subcategories of the main themes:	Facilities, suitable colleagues, training	Using assistants as teachers, teaching groups separately	Wellbeing of pupils, individualization, selection of pupils (anti-inclusion)	Enthusiasm, sharing, teachers' wellbeing, joy

Table 2: Main themes in the data

Following the teachers' personal number, the text includes quotes with the following abbreviations: CT – Class teacher, SuT – Subject teacher and ST – Special teacher. In addition, the teachers are divided according to working years: Nov = novice teachers (1 to 10 years), Mid = middle-career teachers (11 to 20 years) and Exp = experienced teachers (21 to 35 years). Each theme is presented below.

Requirements

The theme *requirements* consists of the issues that must be addressed before any co-teaching can start. One of the main requirements includes a suitable partner, one whose personality fits with the teacher's personality. Also, the facilities, such as the size of the classroom, was a requirement and sometimes even a barrier when the classrooms were too small to accommodate bigger groups. In addition, the teachers pointed out that the head of the school was important, mentioning possible negative attitudes from their leaders as barriers that can hinder the start of co-teaching. Teachers wanted better frameworks for co-teaching, such as tailor-made schedules, before starting. However, it seemed that teachers were aware of the importance of co-operation, at least in theory, and reservations were expressed cautiously. The following are some quotes in relation to this:

'The attitudes of the administrative leader as well as the head of the school have a big impact. Labelling pupils with special needs as well as segregating thoughts diminish only when these people change their attitudes toward inclusion positive. When that happens, teachers can also change their attitudes' (ST 13, Exp).

'...To co-teach demands another eager teacher as a pair' (SuT 16, Mid).

'... I have heard that after a tough beginning it (co-teaching) becomes easier. It is probably rewarding if you can share the work and its' challenges. It would be good if the other teacher is a special teacher' (CT 22, Exp).

'If the teachers fit together, co-teaching functions' (ST 37, Mid).

The main issue for requirements was planning time, and the teachers complained of the lack of it, as follows:

'At its best very instructive, but too little time for planning' (ST 2, Nov).

'Much more resources are needed to plan and execute teaching properly (resource that teachers also are paid for) > there are not enough hours in a day to do all the individualisation, while there is not time to plan it during the working hours' (SuT 26, Mid).

The requirements made teachers believe that co-teaching could not be commenced until the listed issues were fulfilled. If co-teaching was practised, it was modified and interpreted in a new way, as the next theme reveals.

Interpretations

Some teachers interpreted co-teaching differently from the accepted definition. Teachers used the concept of co-teaching when dividing the pupils into two separate rooms or when dividing the pupils into new groups according to their abilities. These groups were taught separately, and this is what the teachers called co-teaching. Also, part of the teaching responsibility was given to classroom assistants, as a special teacher and a secondary school teacher tell:

'Lessons in math and mother tongue for two first stage classes were placed in the schedule at the same time and the pupils were divided into four groups. Two of these were taught by the class teacher and one by special teacher and one by classroom assistant. All pupils received the support they needed, material was individualised, and guidance was tailor-made for the pupils' (ST 13, Exp).

'Classroom assistant has taken responsibility of one small group during the lessons (which demands continuous guidance)' (SuT 26, Mid).

As examples of co-teaching, teachers mentioned what they called 'theme days', school festivals or planning to teach a large phenomenon. Interestingly, there were no complaints of not having enough time to plan, for example, these theme days. Perhaps these festivals and similar events are seen as a part of the teachers' regular duties, which co-teaching is not. This type of collaboration for festivals and special events was considered co-teaching by some teachers, as a primary school teacher tells:

'Preparing a performance into school festivals, e.g. a play in foreign language. This was done by two class teachers and an English teacher.... In all these, the skills and expertise of several teachers are interlaced. Our motto is that the work teaches us. First, we planned the framework, after that we started working. We take small goals and change our way of working so that we reach the goals better' (CT 15, Exp).

This theme shows that the definition and guidelines of co-teaching are not clear. All types of co-operation were considered co-teaching.

Inclusion

Teachers wrote about individualisation and adapting to a pupil's needs in co-teaching situations. Individualisation, both for the most gifted and for those who could only do the most basic tasks, became easier when several teachers are present in the classroom. Pupils received more guidance, and teachers got to know the pupils better. The input of a special educator was valued in this situation, as follows:

'... It is important that the other teacher is a special educator, while then the challenges of special needs pupils can better be found meaningful solutions. Especially in math we could individualise meaningfully. We secured flexible proceeding for the gifted and talented. Also, pupils with special needs were given more support in challenges in mathematics ...' (CT 22, Exp).

'...the other teacher taught theory in the first lesson and the other in the next lesson, as well as they could. The other assisted pupils while the other was teaching, e.g., during making tasks. During experimental examinations, it was a big help, when pupils received more guidance ...' (SuT 1, Nov).

Inclusion was identified several times; however, it was not always noted in a positive way. Rather, it was spoken of in a way that could be called anti-inclusive. Elements of resistance to change when it came to inclusion were present. This resistance included comments about the attitudes of guardians, as well as some members of the school staff, toward pupils with special needs who were in regular education classrooms. This resistance was justified by talking about a lack of resources and planning time. The theme of inclusion included features of the previous theme of requirements, as follows:

'I feel that inclusion has already received too much power. I am really worried about how to make my time and possibilities meet the needs of pupils who progress well, how to give challenges to them' (CT 15, Exp).

One part of the anti-inclusion talk was that pupils need to be carefully chosen; some teachers said that not all pupils are suited to be in co-teaching situations. Co-teaching was noted as something close to *education not for all* (see Unesco 2017, Education for all), with the thought that co-teaching should not even be attempted in some inclusive settings. This is commented on below.

'...The pupils have to suit to co-teaching. Teaching can be divided and individualised so that teaching pupils needing various kind of support is fulfilled according to the goals set in the curricula' (ST 17, Mid).

'Co-teaching at its best can bring extra benefit to all pupils, but there are also pupils, who get disturbed in a big class. I think it is important to guarantee the right to special support to all when it is needed. It is important to remember that there are always pupils, who need a small group to study in' (SuT 30, Exp).

Full inclusion did not receive much support. Co-teaching was seen firmly as a way to implement inclusion more heavily and hence something to resist.

Joy

Teachers with a positive outlook on co-teaching were willing to develop their teaching skills and any other required skills to meet and help diverse pupils. Having a colleague who was eager and had a similar outlook helped teachers experience the possibilities of developing and using their own skills as a teacher. One teacher described co-teaching as a flow experience (see also Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Sharing work issues and discussing them regularly functioned as supervision. After discussing the issues related to the school day with a partner who worked in the co-teaching class, work issues were easy to leave behind. The two teachers noted that the atmosphere in class was better when two adults were present. This positive atmosphere and the joy of working spread to the pupils (see also Leskisenoja and Uusautti, 2017). Sharing the responsibility of teaching pupils promoted the teachers' wellbeing and reduced the workload of both teachers.

Co-operation and good, functional interactions were seen as sources of joy. Knowing that co-teaching can be continued in the next school year also promotes this joy. One teacher underlines the atmosphere:

'A warm, unreserved and open atmosphere between teachers. An appreciating attitude towards a colleague strengthens the functionality of the team. Sharing responsibilities and the joy of working together is catching also the pupils. Teaching together with a positive attitude created experiences with success both to adults and to pupils. Belief in common good is needed in co-teaching' (CT 39, Nov).

Although co-operation was not self-chosen, it could be finally experienced as positive, as follows:

'Being an equal teacher created the possibility to have fruitful, sometimes also hot-tempered discussions about the pedagogy and guidelines of issues taught ... Pupils became "accidentally" common and we could mainly also evaluate them together, although we did not choose co-teaching. As opposite persons we were not very thrilled at the beginning to be a pair, teaching pupils at the same grade' (CT 38, Exp).

An open and honest interaction, open discussion of the possible personal differences and accepting the strengths and weaknesses of each teacher in the classroom seems necessary when co-teaching. This open dialogue between teachers was essential for joyful co-teaching, as shown in the following:

'We enjoy our work and we get a lot done. We are proud of ours work' (CT 10, Mid).

Figure 1 summarises the results. The main themes form a continuum that moves toward a positive experience with co-teaching. Nevertheless, the first two themes were more dominant than the last two.



Figure 1. *Co-teaching themes*

Discussion

Over the last decade, school has changed, moving toward the inclusion of more diverse pupils studying in regular education and more teachers becoming involved to support them (Finnish Basic Education Act 2010; Morgan 2016). This demands co-operation with those who know more about learning difficulties (Lakkala *et al.*, 2016; Scruggs and Mastopieri, 2017), and co-teaching is one way to respond to these changes and demands.

The teachers' experiences with co-teaching that were described in the studied rural municipality differ from prior urban studies in Finland (see Author *et. al.*, 2010; Takala and

Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012). The current quantitative study shows very positive and orthodox results: co-teaching is planned, executed and evaluated together with a partner who is co-operative and supportive. However, the qualitative analysis reveals that this does not seem to be the case. Co-teaching is closer to co-operation, often in different locations and with select pupils.

The teachers who responded to the questionnaire seemed to have a positive view of co-teaching. Eight teachers had no or very little experience with co-teaching, but most had some experience with it. Teachers considered co-teaching to be a developing form of teaching. In this small sample, the teachers' demographics show no statistical significance when compared with the results, except that co-teaching was used a bit more often at the primary, rather than at the secondary, stage. However, co-teaching was seen to be beneficial when individualisation was needed. Along with this, co-teaching could promote teachers' professional development. Teachers using co-teaching felt they were equal teachers and that they were seldom playing the role of an assistant. This experience differs from previous studies, where the role of an assistant has often been the one offered to special teachers (e.g., Shin *et al.*, 2017).

In the closed questions, teachers positioned themselves as spokespeople for co-teaching, even though they had little experience with it. However, more negative issues appeared in the open responses. It may be that the teachers had adopted the cultural context of the inclusive ideology and with it the demand for more co-operation. Being in favour of these changes is politically correct, so this was expressed. However, negative and opposing views of co-teaching were present, but they were more or less hidden. The teachers did not speak directly of the challenges they faced, but they listed numerous demands before any co-teaching could be started; similar requirements were named as competing forces by Morgan (2016).

The requirement theme was central. It included, for example, demands of personality matches and complaints of lack of support from the head of the school. When mentioning the head of the schools, teachers gave the responsibility and initiative to start co-teaching to someone else, including the head of the school. The decision to start co-teaching rested with the head of the school and administrators, not with the teachers themselves. On the other hand, administrative planning can promote co-teaching, for example, by producing a common vision and planned schedules or by changing the work habits at school (Malinen and Palmu, 2017; Makay, Reilly and Fletcher, 2018; Ojala, 2017).

The theme of having a lack of planning time has been shown in several studies (e.g., Author *et al.*, 2010; Walter-Thomas, 1997; Strogilos *et al.*, 2016; Shin *et al.*, 2016; Scruggs and Mastopieri, 2017; Ricci *et al.*, 2017;). However, the teachers in the current study found the

time for planning days or school parties, and no problems in relation to this planning were reported. Today, modern technology allows planning without meeting other teachers face to face. This might promote the planning of co-teaching in the future (Pratt et al., 2017)

Various interpretations gave a different definition of co-teaching than the official one. It was not a way of teaching with two teachers in the same class, but rather, it was two or more teachers teaching groups of pupils with different ability levels in different rooms. The responsibility of teaching was also given to assistants although one main idea of co-teaching is to give more teacher time to the pupils (Morgan, 2016). The interpretation theme also included elements of segregation, showing how the various themes are intertwined.

With the *inclusion theme*, it was easy to individualise teaching with two teachers present. Individualisation seems to be a central element in an inclusive school. Inclusion can be in danger if pupils need to be moved elsewhere to individualise teaching (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016). Most often, pupils with special needs, here mainly pupils with behavioural challenges or with an immigrant background, are moved out of class (Bešić et al., 2016). However, a lot of anti-inclusion talk appeared in the current study, which included choosing pupils and seeing inclusion as saving money and making classes restless.

The *joy theme* underlined the importance of valuing each teacher taking part in co-teaching as a competent professional. Joy was present when the teachers were teaching together and sharing the work responsibilities. To obtain this joy, good interaction skills and a drive to develop as a professional were more important than having matching personalities. Shin et al. (2016) underline the importance of open communication. When taking part in co-teaching, teachers had experienced work-related joy and success at work, and their wellbeing had improved in the current study. Co-teaching had also diminished teachers' workloads.

The teachers shared the work, which made planning the teaching, and the teaching itself, easier. Research has shown that teachers' work-related stress drops and that the quality of teaching rises when co-teaching is used (Wolgast and Fischer, 2017).

Conclusions

In the present study, the main issue teachers raised about co-teaching was the requirement that mandated them to co-teach; another issue was that teachers interpreted co-teaching in their own way. However, the teachers saw that co-teaching can be inclusive and promote joy both for the teachers and their pupils.

Throughout, the teachers took the *teachers'* point of view and seldomly talked about the *pupils'* point of view. When mentioning pupils, the teachers identified the right to receive enough support. In this rural municipality, the teachers recognised inclusion and the demand

for co-operation. However, inclusion was not very welcome, and co-teaching was not a daily practice. It seems that co-teaching is taking its first steps and needs further development.

Rural schools can have unique needs and circumstances when compared with urban schools. Although the special teachers are often itinerant, and as such not always available, other teachers co-teach. Perhaps, some other professionals could take part in classroom lessons (Andersen *et al.*, 2014). Little is known about the pupils' experiences and long-lasting co-teaching partnerships. This rural municipality is starting to familiarise itself with co-teaching, and it needs all the support it can get from the head of the school, experienced teachers and the educational authorities.

While co-teaching promotes inclusive values, such as co-operation (Watkins & Donnelly, 2016), it is worth supporting. It can also be seen as a tool for professional development, as co-operation is needed more and more in diverse schools (also Shin *et al.* 2016). Teacher educators could include co-teaching to their teaching practice. School administrators could think about structural changes to school days so that co-operation would be easy, easy to plan and execute.

The current study has its limitations. First, the present study was based on a limited sample of teachers; more extensive data are needed to confirm these findings. In addition, because the participants in the current research were volunteers, there may have been some bias in the data, and a district-wide cohort of teachers might provide more significant insights. The results here may not be replicated if conducted as a large-scale study; the results also offer a general view of co-teaching in one municipality, but their specific pertinence at the primary or secondary level remains unclear, and replication with more respondents is needed. Because the questionnaire was long, it may have reduced the teachers' motivation to respond. However, the results can be said to resemble those received elsewhere (Shin *et al.*, 2016; Bešić *et al.*, 2016), and the credibility and dependability of the qualitative analysis can be assumed to be high because two researchers read the data independently, and a third researcher evaluated the results (see also Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In addition, content analysis makes a phenomenon simpler than it is, therefore, the subthemes, those that could become bigger themes, were presented in Table 2.

Finally, co-teaching represents a challenge to the traditional conceptions of teaching and learning. It provides the space and possibilities needed for inclusive education. In the current study, we have looked at co-teaching in one rural municipality. It was practised, but it was not yet rooted, in the schools' culture. We hope our results can be a starting point for a change in teacher practices in northern rural schools in Finland. In the future observations and interviews could be used to study co-teaching in detail.

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