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## A study of Finnish primary school teachers' experiences of their role and competences by implementing the three-tiered support

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate Finnish primary school teachers' experiences of the three-tiered support system, which was launched in 2010–2011 with the goal of promoting the inclusive approach in Finnish compulsory school. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight teachers in Finland, and the analysis was based on a thematic analytical approach. Results show that the teachers experienced having a central role in providing continuous support to pupils with different learning disabilities within the support system. Generally, they had a positive assessment of the system, which they saw as a natural part of their regular job. Nevertheless, they expressed facing challenges, such as the extended documentation and too little time for supporting all pupils in the class. The support from colleagues (i.e. special education teachers) was seen as very important, although their experience of consultation time was limited. Regarding the teachers' competences in handling the system, it was evident they had developed relevant skills by collaborating with the special education teacher and by being active themselves. Despite the challenges, the results show that Finnish primary teachers experienced the support system as a possible and practicable way of supporting pupils with learning disabilities.

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three-tiered support system;  
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## Introduction

Inclusive education has been the leading educational principle in the Western world since the ratification of the Salamanca Statement in 1993. Although a consensus has yet to be reached regarding the definition of 'inclusion', the definitions presented today are focused on all pupils' right to receive education according to their needs within mainstream education settings and in community with peers (Haug 2017; Kiuppis 2014). In Finland, a new administrative support system was launched in 2010–2011 (Finnish Basic Education Act, 642/2010), which aimed at promoting early support and the inclusive approach in Finnish compulsory schools (Björn et al. 2016; Pesonen et al. 2015). The new three-tiered system has much in common with the well-known US 'Response to intervention system' (Björn et al. 2016; Jahnukainen and Itkonem 2015)

and supports pupils' right to receive support according to their needs in regular classes (Finnish National Agency of Education 2016).

Inclusive education and the three-tiered support system have led to new demands on teachers who are expected to meet the needs among pupils with learning disabilities in regular classrooms (Pit-ten et al. 2018). To succeed in such an undertaking, they are also expected to collaborate with special education teachers (SETs) and other professionals (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Florian and Linklater 2010). Thus, teachers are at the forefront of the implementation and development of inclusive education. However, the teachers' roles and responsibilities when it comes to teaching pupils with learning difficulties remain unclarified (Jordan, Schwartz, and McGhie-Ramong 2009). Many teachers lack competence to meet special educational needs in the classroom, thus further affecting their attitudes towards inclusive education (Paju et al. 2018; Pit-ten et al. 2018; Saloviita 2018).

Previous studies have focused on the implementation of the Finnish three-tiered support system (Björn et al. 2016; Lakkala and Thuneberg 2018; Lakkala, Uusiautti, and Määttä 2016; Sundqvist, Björk-Åman, and Ström 2019; Thuneberg et al. 2014) and on teachers' attitudes and competences in relation to inclusive education (Paju et al. 2018; Saloviita 2018; Savolainen et al. 2012). Nevertheless, there still remains a lack of qualitative research – specifically on how teachers' experience their role in the three-tiered support system. Thus, the aim of the current study is to investigate Finnish primary teachers' experiences of the three-tiered support. We will use the term primary teachers in relation to our study since all informants are working in the lower classes in general education. Otherwise, the term teacher refers to general education teachers. The study poses the following research questions:

- (1) How do primary teachers experience their role in relation to the three-tiered support system?
- (2) What kinds of challenges do primary teachers experience within the three-tiered support system?
- (3) How do primary teachers experience their competence in the implementation of the three-tiered support system?

The results can contribute to the European understanding of how teachers without formal competence in special needs education experience the implementation of an extensive, systematised special educational support system, which aims to increase early support in the regular education setting.

### *The three-tiered support system and the teacher's roles*

In 2010, new amendments to the Finnish Basic Education Act (642/2010) resulted in the implementation of a national strategy consisting of a three-tiered support system implemented in Finnish schools in autumn 2011. The original aim of the new support system was to secure additional and early help for every struggling pupil and making general education more inclusive (Pesonen et al. 2015; Björn et al. 2016). However, others claimed the underlying intention was to diminish the increasing number of special education pupils and decrease the costs of special needs education (Jahnukainen and Itkonem 2015). Furthermore, the new support system has been criticised for increasing the

teachers' bureaucratic burden and the risk of special education needs pupils being left with insufficient support (OAJ 2017; Pesonen et al. 2015).

The first tier of support, *general support*, provides an easily accessible form of support based on an experienced need. The Finnish Basic Education Act (642/2010) states that all pupils are entitled to state support immediately as the need arises. However, general support is considered a temporary kind of support, and there are no official documentation requirements or statistical information on how many pupils are currently receiving support on this tier. In the second tier, *intensified support*, a pedagogical assessment is required, and a learning plan (LP) must be made wherein the need for support is defined and the support measures are described. However, clear guidelines have yet to be formulated regarding when a pupil should receive intensified support. The policy documents only stipulate that intensified support is possible when the pupils need more regular support in one or several subjects. The third support tier, *special support*, requires an extensive assessment and a formal decision made by the administrative school leader. Special support is possible for pupils when the support provided in the first- and second-tiers of the framework is proven to be insufficient or when there exists a need for individualised goals in one or more subjects. An individual educational plan (IEP) is made for all pupils within the special support as pupils who receive their education within the special support system can study according to an individualised syllabus in one or more subjects.

The number of pupils receiving support has increased during the past years. The intensified support was a new type of support implemented in connection to the reform in 2010–2011 and the pupils receiving intensified support largely increased from 2.8% in 2011 to 11.6% in 2019. The special support has been quite constant since the reform and in 2019 approximately 8.5% of the pupils received this tier of support. However, the share of pupils having received special support in all comprehensive school pupils varied between 4% and 13% by region (Statistics of Finland 2020). As earlier mentioned, there are no statistics regarding pupils receiving the first tier of support. However, part-time special education is a common way of supporting pupils at all three support tiers in Finland. In 2019, 22.3% of the Finnish pupils in compulsory school received part-time special education. The proportion have been quite constant during the last two decades, with a small increase when comparing the statistics from 2002 (20.1%) and 2019 (22.3%).

Special-class teaching is only permitted at the third tier of support (FNAE 2016). In 2019, approximately 58% of the pupils receiving special support had their education over half of the time in a special class setting; the rest of the pupils received most of their daily education in a regular class (Statistics of Finland 2020). Thus far, no clear guidelines have been set regarding the content of the support provided in the different tiers. The support provided in different tiers largely consists of the same methods, guidance, differentiation, teacher collaboration, flexible modification of teaching groups, part-time special education or support from the teacher's assistant. As the schools and the teachers are given autonomy when it comes to the planning and the implementation of the kinds of support provided, this can lead to the iniquitous treatment of pupils. Björn et al. (2016) and Sundqvist, Björk-Åman and Ström (2019) thus call for clearer directives regarding the transition between the tiers and the implementation of the support.

Additional support for teachers who are teaching pupils with special educational needs in the general classroom is important as it can influence their attitudes towards inclusive education (Saloviita and Schaffus 2016). In the three-tiered support system, multi-professional pupil's welfare service and collaboration are emphasised more than ever and seems to have increased after the reform (FNAE 2016; Pesonen et al. 2015). In Finnish schools, some trained SETs offer part-time special education to pupils at all three tiers of support. Usually, part-time special education is delivered to pupils 1–2 h/week in subjects where they have difficulties (Sundqvist, Björk-Åman, and Ström 2019). This kind of part-time special education is critical to the success of the three-tiered system (Thuneberg et al. 2014). The SETs are expected to provide support to the pupils while collaborating with the teachers by using co-teaching and teacher consulting services (Sundqvist, Björk-Åman, and Ström 2019). The Finnish SETs' consulting role is diffused, and they expressed uncertainty regarding when and how they should carry out consultations with their colleagues (Sundqvist and Ström 2015).

Aside from encouraging collaboration between teachers and SETs, many schools also employ part-time or full-time school counsellors and school psychologists who work within the pupils' welfare service and are expected to collaborate with teachers as well (Vainikainen et al. 2015). Despite the participation of all actors involved, the support system has increased teachers' responsibilities in meeting the needs of pupils with learning difficulties. The Finnish teachers have a vast responsibility in the daily implementation of the three-tiered support, especially for pupils with mild learning difficulties in the first two tiers of support, while SETs' have the major responsibility in providing support for pupils at the third tier (Sundqvist, Björk-Åman, and Ström 2019). Teachers are also involved in the extensive documentation requirements connected to the support system.

Due to the complexity of the support system, the teachers' bureaucratic workload and paperwork have largely increased, because of the vast documentation required (Pesonen et al. 2015). Teachers in the US experience the same challenges in implementing the similar 'Response to intervention' system (Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, and Moore 2014). Finnish teachers view the collaboration between SETs and teachers as a fundamental precondition for developing an inclusive school culture and managing the support system (Lakkala, Uusiautti, and Määttä 2016). Furthermore, the in-service training received by the majority of the Finnish teachers before the reform seems to be a central predictor for managing such a reform (Lakkala and Thuneberg 2018; Pesonen et al. 2015).

### *Inclusive education and teachers' competence*

Teachers in general education and SETs in Finland are highly educated, because a master's degree is required for these professionals (Decree on Qualifications Required for Teaching Staff [1986] 1998). Furthermore, teachers in Finland have trust in their own ability to develop their teaching practice (Thuneberg et al. 2014). However, teaching pupils with learning difficulties in general classes has led to new needs regarding teachers' competence (Dingle et al. 2005; Haug 2017; Pantic and Florian 2015).

Teachers' competence includes areas, such as attitudes, knowledge and skills, which are closely connected with one another (European Agency of Special Needs Education and Inclusive Education [EASNIE] 2012). A central issue to be considered is what kind of

competence do teachers need to teach diverse groups of pupils in general classes. The EASNEIE has published a profile for 'the inclusive teacher'. The profile includes four core values: valuing learning diversity, supporting all learners, working with others and continuing personal professional development. In the inclusive teacher profile, special educational knowledge or expertise in learning disabilities is not explicitly mentioned. Researchers have emphasised the importance of possessing good general educational knowledge and collaborative skills in the implementation of inclusive education (Dingle et al. 2005; Florian and Linklater 2010). However, in accordance with the current research, teachers lack special educational knowledge to teach pupils with learning disabilities in the regular class. Based on a questionnaire survey conducted by the Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ 2017), the teachers have a negative view of the support system and their own ability to provide support to the pupils. Approximately one-third of the responding teachers experienced a lack of knowledge concerning teaching pupils at the third tier of support (Paju et al. 2016). In another study, Paju et al. (2018) showed that teachers lacked sufficient special educational knowledge and time to be able to provide good general education for all pupils whilst also offering adequate support to students with learning difficulties.

The lack of special educational knowledge affects the teachers' attitudes towards teaching pupils with learning disabilities (Pit-ten et al. 2018; Savolainen et al. 2012). On the contrary, having special educational knowledge and a sense of being capable of managing inclusive settings in the classrooms have a positive influence on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden 2000; Savolainen et al. 2012; Saloviita 2018). Furthermore, teachers who received in-service training in inclusive education and actively participated in the process of making IEPs have an overall more positive view of inclusion and the support system than those who have not received such a training (Lakkala and Thuneberg 2018). Teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education also correlate with their self-efficacy beliefs, which means 'the more [the] teachers believe they are able to implement inclusive practices on a concrete and pragmatic level, the more positive their attitudes towards inclusion are' (Savolainen et al. 2012, 65). International research regarding teachers' self-efficacy in relation to the implementation of inclusive education indicates that teachers have many concerns about the consequences of including children with disabilities in their classrooms as well as doubts about their own capacity to meet the needs of these children. Knowledge on disability is an important factor influencing their self-efficacy regarding teaching pupils with disabilities. Personality and school climate, including support from school leaders and colleagues, are factors that can also influence teachers' self-efficacy (Kristiana 2018). However, Finnish teachers' overall self-efficacy on inclusive practices is at a relatively high level (Savolainen et al. 2012). To obtain a deeper understanding of teachers' self-efficacy in relation to their experiences of the support system, studies from their perspective should be conducted.

## Method and analysis

### *Informants and data collection*

Data were collected in Spring 2019 through semi-structured interviews with eight (six females and two males) primary school teachers (Kvale and Brinkmann 2018). All

informants were working as teachers in a primary school and had a master's degree in education from the teacher educational programme in Finland. The teacher education in Finland is research-based and aims to educate professional teachers who can base their teaching on research principles and successfully use these principles to address the profession's practical challenges (cf. Takala et al. 2015). The participants' length of teaching experience varied between 1 and 25 years. In terms of their education, the informants had only participated in one mandatory course (5 ECTS) in special education and none of them had specialised in the subject. The informants were contacted personally and invited to participate in individual interviews. Two of the researchers conducted the interviews face-to-face or by FaceTime with video. The interview guide developed by the researchers was tested via a pilot study. No significant changes were made in the guide after the pilot study was concluded. The interview guide comprised three main areas: a) the teachers' views on their roles and tasks in relation to the three-tiered support system, b) the teachers' views on the challenges they faced under the support system and 3) the teachers' views on their self-efficacy in implementing the support system. In relation to each area, 6–10 interview questions were asked; when appropriate, follow-up questions were also asked. For the purpose of this article, all interview data were used. Each interview lasted for about 45 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. The study followed the general ethical standards approved by the scientific community and listed on the website of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2016).

### **Data analysis**

The data analysis process was based on a thematic analytical approach in accordance with the six phases of a thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

1. *Familiarising yourself with the data.* The researchers transcribed the eight interviews literally and read the transcripts thoroughly and repeatedly. 2. *Generating initial codes.* Two of the researchers analysed the data in an inductive manner. The researchers performed individual preliminary analysis, each focusing on the separate and common parts of the data. This open-coding procedure resulted in many different codes that are similar but also different in character due to the researchers' analysis. 3. *Searching for themes.* The researchers discussed and compared the initial codes and agreed on preliminary themes in relation to each research question. 4. *Reviewing themes.* The themes were checked in relation to the coded extracts and the whole data material, thus generating a thematic map of the analysis. Based on the preliminary themes and the thematic map, a more systematic coding was carried out. The codes were compared for similarities and differences. As in the previous phase, the identified themes were checked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. Systematic coding was mainly carried out by two researchers, whilst the others conducted a critical reading. This peer debriefing between the authors is critical in ensuring the trustworthiness of the analysis. 5. *Defining and naming themes.* The ongoing analysis refined the specifics of each theme, thus generating clear definitions and names for all of them. The condensed data resulted in seven themes: two themes related to research question 1, two related to question 3 and three related to question 2. The themes identified were a result of the inductive analysis and emerged from the empirical data. This means that no previous theoretical concepts functioned as basis and the themes were only defined in relation to the data. 6. *Producing*

*the report.* Authentic and convincing extracts were selected from the data to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis. A thick description of the data was finally presented focusing on the aim of the study, i.e. to investigate primary school teachers' experiences of the support system. The themes were organised in relation to the research questions, representing different aspects but together providing a deeper insight into the three-tiered support system from the teacher's perspective.

## Results

Primary school teachers' experiences of the three-tiered support system are presented below with illustrative quotes from the interviews. The responses in Swedish were translated by the authors.

### *Primary school teachers' experiences of their roles*

In relation to primary school teachers' experiences of their roles, two themes were identified; teaching: identify, support and differentiate, and document and collaborate.

#### *Teaching: identify, support and differentiate*

All eight teachers know they must identify pupils who need help and support them in their respective learning situations. As the teachers are responsible for the pupils, they continuously follow the pupils' progress and identify what they need to train and develop. The collaboration with SETs is seen as very important for all teachers ( $n = 8$ ) as this allows them to exchange ideas on how to handle different situations in the classroom. The SETs also give extended support to some pupils on the basis of the teachers' advice. Some teachers ( $n = 2$ ) document the support measures, because they find it important to follow the pupils' support during their education. All teachers ( $n = 8$ ) arrange their teaching to support the pupils' learning in all tiers. They differentiate their teaching by giving pupils appropriate materials and tools. As one interviewee noted, 'I individualise tasks based on the agreement with the pupils and parents ... It concerns all kind of things, to help the pupil to note the homework or to check if he/she has taken home the right books' (Interview 7). Pupils also receive extra assistance before regular tests and support in terms of study questions, verbal tests, and extended test times.

#### *Document and collaborate*

All teachers ( $n = 8$ ) write plans in relation to the three-tiered system. All except for one teacher write plans for the first and second tiers but get help from the SETs when needed. As the teacher shared, 'The teacher writes the plan on the second tier, the individual plan on the third tier is written together with the special education teacher. On the third tier, the special education teacher does the main job' (Interview 4). The pupils' parents are informed about the suggested support tier and, upon their approval, the plan is implemented together with them. When writing the plans, the teachers collaborate with other experts, with whom they discuss and coordinate meetings to ensure a smooth process. The IPs on the third tier are mainly written by the SET; hence, the primary school teachers' responsibility decreases on that tier.



## *Primary school teachers' experiences of the challenges they faced*

In relation to primary school teachers' experiences of challenges three themes were identified; inadequate collaboration with parents and professionals, lack of time and resources, and unclear structure.

### *Inadequate collaboration with parents and professionals*

All teachers ( $n = 8$ ) report that most parents are collaborative and are glad the teacher and school want to help and support their child. However, for some parents, it can be quite difficult to accept the fact that their child needs additional support, which they perceive as bad for the child. One teacher mentioned how this is especially the case when pupils have big problems and need support on the third tier: 'It is most difficult when a pupil should be moved from intensified to special support. The teacher knows it is the best solution, but the parents do not think their child needs more help, in some way, they get hurt when the teacher suggests special support for their child' (Interview 8). According to seven teachers, the collaboration with other professionals is working well, although resources are sometimes lacking. However, one teacher also finds it challenging to collaborate with professionals, such as school counsellors, nurses and psychologists, due to the unclear division of responsibilities.

### *Lack of time and resources*

All teachers ( $n = 8$ ) mentioned the lack of resources, and six of them shared how this is a real challenge for them. Although the teachers write plans and suggest acts of support, these are sometimes not realised due to the lack of resources. The teachers mentioned there are not enough school assistants or that the SETs' resources for offering consultations to the teachers and supporting the pupils are insufficient. They further find that the support system can be quite slow as it can take several months before a pupil receives the formal decision to move to another tier ( $n = 8$ ). This means that teachers may be reluctant to start or finish a support process, especially concerning special support on the third tier. All teachers also mentioned the lack of time as one of the main challenges within the system. The documentation is difficult and requires a great deal of time, which they would rather use to plan and differentiate the teaching. According to one teacher, 'In the worst case, it is less time for planning and differentiating teaching ... So the teacher does a lot of documentation instead of planning and differentiating teaching' (Interview 5). Two teachers further emphasised the challenge of paying attention to all pupils. Four teachers stated that the pupils who need support are often prioritised, whilst those who are more independent do not always receive enough intellectual challenges.

### *Unclear structure*

Four teachers mentioned challenges with the documentation process. The three-tier system is the same in all schools in Finland, although implementation may vary amongst the schools. Although detailed manuals are provided, there are no common guidelines, and it can be difficult for a teacher to determine when a pupil needs additional support and when a pupil should be moved to the next tier ( $n = 2$ ). As stated by a teacher, 'It is difficult when there are no real common guidelines; it would be good having guidelines helping the teacher to decide when the pupil should get special support' (Interview 2).

The national three-tiered support system gives the pupils the right to support, which is seen by four teachers as a good opportunity. Yet, for some teachers ( $n = 2$ ), the unclear structure also means possible injustice. Another teacher brought up her frustration when a pupil receives continuous support even though there is no longer any need for it. This happens when the school does not want to change the pupil's support from tier 3 to 2, because it receives extra resources for having pupils on the third tier.

### *Primary school teachers' competence*

In relation to primary school teachers' competence, two categories were identified; work experience, own interest and in-service training, and collegial collaboration and consultation.

#### *Work experience, own interest and in-service training*

For all teachers ( $n = 8$ ), their work experiences have given them competence in handling the support system. Some teachers had been working for many years, met many pupils in different situations and gained competence in implementing the system through their work experiences. In contrast, the newly qualified teachers felt somewhat insecure, although they did gain the required competence to implement the support system later on. Some teachers ( $n = 6$ ) emphasised how they developed competence through their own interest in reading and learning about pupils' need for support and how to implement the support system in the classroom. One teacher shared, 'I have participated in some courses and I read quite much on my own' (Interview 6). Six teachers participated in the in-service training in special education related to the support system, and four teachers received information from the SETs who participated in such a training.

#### *Collegial collaboration and consultation*

When implementing the support system, all teachers ( $n = 8$ ) received support and assistance from SETs. As one teacher stated, 'I find the special education teacher's expert knowledge very important, the collaboration with her and the possibility to see a problem from different viewpoints. The special education teacher is a great consult' (Interview 5). The teachers discussed central issues and problems with the SETs and, consequently, felt more confident in doing their job. Consultations with colleagues are seen as very important; teachers consult a colleague and discuss about their pupils, support arrangements and individual plans. The teachers learn from one another and gain new ideas on how to support pupils and implement the support system in the classroom. Four teachers have increased their self-efficacy by consulting other professionals, such as school counsellors, headmasters and school psychologists.

## **Discussion**

The aim of the study was to investigate Finnish primary school teachers' experiences of the support system, focusing on their roles, competences and the challenges they faced. The three-tiered support system has increased the teachers' responsibilities in meeting the needs of pupils with learning difficulties in the general classroom (Paju et al. 2016; Pesonen et al. 2015). In our study, all teachers expressed that they took great

responsibility for all pupils in the class, and that they arranged their teaching to meet the needs of each pupil on every tier. Furthermore, they expressed mostly positive attitudes towards the support system and their own role in its implementation. This interesting result is somewhat different from those reported in previous studies (Paju et al. 2016, 2018; OAJ 2017). In accordance with the study conducted by the Trade Union for Education (OAJ 2017), teachers had a negative view of the support system and their own capability in supporting pupils with learning disabilities in the general class. The collaboration seems to have increased since the implementation of the three-tiered system (Pesonen et al. 2015) and the Finnish teachers see especially the collaboration between SETs and teachers as fundamental precondition for developing an inclusive school culture and managing the support system (Lakkala, Uusiautti, and Määttä 2016; cf. FNAE 2016). In the current study, the collaboration with the SETs is also seen by the primary teachers as critical to the success of the documentation and implementation of the support system on all tiers. On the first and second tiers, the teachers' role and responsibility are evident, whilst the SETs' involvement largely increased on the third tier. This finding is in line with earlier research (Sundqvist, Björk-Åman, and Ström 2019).

Although the primary teachers in our study expressed positive thoughts regarding the support system and their capability in supporting pupils in need, they also mentioned several challenges related to the documentation and implementation of the system. The most evident result is the teachers' experiences of lack of time to carry out the vast documentation and difficulties in the implementation of the support system in the classroom. They found the documentation difficult as it required a great deal of time from them, which they would rather use to plan and differentiate the teaching. This is in agreement with previous research, which showed that the teachers' bureaucratic workload has largely increased since the implementation of the support system (Pesonen et al. 2015). Similar results have been reported in relation to the implementation of the 'Response to intervention system in US', i.e. the system is complex and the documentation requirements are huge (Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, and Moore 2014).

Furthermore, the primary teachers in our study expressed frustration regarding the slow process in the transition of a pupil from the second to the third tier. In worst cases, it could take several months before the formal decision of moving on to the third tier of support is made, which results in teachers feeling frustrated and unmotivated to even start and carry out this process. This result is in line with that reported in a previous research (cf. Lakkala, Uusiautti, and Määttä 2016). In addition, our results showed that, although primary teachers and SETs work together to devise plans and suggest actions of support, these are not always realised due to the lack of resources. For example, they mentioned the lack of teaching assistants and the challenges faced by SETs to give direct support to pupils in need and consult with colleagues on how to provide such support. As shown in earlier research (Sundqvist and Ström 2015), the complexity of the SETs' consulting role and their need to have more time for such consultations are evident. The SETs' consulting role is still overridden by their responsibility to give direct support to pupils.

Aside from primary teachers' expressions of their own roles and expectations, they also pointed out challenges within the support system from the pupils' perspective. They expressed concern for the unclear directives regarding the transition of pupils from one tier to another and the injustice this could generate. Due to financial reasons, it was

evident in the data that schools sometimes prevent pupils from moving on to the second tier from the third tier, even though pupils no longer need that much support and can already keep up with the general curriculum. This result may also be an explanation to the differences between regions concerning the number of pupils receiving special support (Statistics of Finland 2020). Björn et al. (2016) and Sundqvist, Björk-Åman, and Ström (2019) discussed the need to make directives clearer in terms of granting equal treatment for all pupils irrespective of which municipality they live in or which school they attend. This is especially important since it seems that the economic situation in the local authority may influence the willingness to move pupils from the third to the second tier.

As previously noted, the teachers expressed overall positive thoughts regarding the support system. One explanation could be that they experienced having enough competence for supporting pupils with learning disabilities and felt quite comfortable working within the support system. This is especially true for teachers who have already worked for many years. Teachers' belief in their own ability is linked to their attitudes towards inclusive education (Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden 2000; Pit-ten et al. 2018; Saloviita 2018; Savolainen et al. 2012;). Meanwhile, teachers also experience lack of competence to support pupils with learning disabilities (OAJ 2017; Paju et al. 2016, Paju et al. 2018). The support system has been in force for approximately a decade, and the Finnish primary teachers may have gradually become accustomed with the system, the principles of inclusive education and their own responsibilities and roles in its implementation.

In the beginning of their teaching careers, the primary teachers in our study experienced feelings of insecurity, although they did develop assuredness in competence later on. In accordance with previous research, multi-professional collaboration is a key factor in the success of inclusive education (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Florian and Linklater 2010). Support for teachers who are expected to teach pupils with learning disabilities can thus influence their attitudes towards inclusive education (Saloviita and Schaffus 2016). The teachers, in particular, agreed that the support given by SETs is critical to their sense of confidence to implement support for pupils on different tiers of support. Compared with the primary teachers, the SETs have undergone in-service training regarding the three-tiered system and have thus taken the responsibility of informing and discussing the system and pupils' rights with the primary teachers. The SETs functioned as consultants for primary teachers, which increased the latter's confidence and competence in handling issues concerning inclusive education.

Aside from the SETs' consultation, the primary teachers also collaborated with other colleagues and professionals, such as school counsellors, headmasters and school psychologists. Thus, our results indicate that the teachers' competence regarding inclusive education can be developed by close collaboration with other professionals (cf. Dingle et al. 2005; Florian and Linklater 2010). The teachers reported being frustrated in situations wherein collaborations with other professionals did not work out. This was especially the case when the division of responsibilities was not clear, or when the SETs did not have time to offer consultations with them. However, they also pointed out the importance of being responsible for developing their own competence in the field of learning disabilities and inclusive education. They developed their competence by reading literature and participating in in-service training. Similarly, in-service training has been reported as an important factor in the successful implementation of the three-tiered support system, and the trained teachers tend to have a positive view of the support

system and inclusive education (Lakkala and Thuneberg 2018; Pesonen et al. 2015). The teachers' statements regarding the possibility of increasing their competence by reading literature in the field, which have not been noted in the previous research, indicate their sense of responsibility in developing their competence according to the new requirements. One explanation may be that they possess a solid educational background (i.e. their research-based master's education) and the ability to handle the profession's practical challenges in a reflective and analytical way (cf. Takala et al. 2015).

### **Limitations**

Several limitations of the study should be addressed. As the study is small and bound to a specific context, any conclusions that can be drawn may be limited. The sample was selected from primary teachers who graduated from one teacher education department in Finland. Based on their interest in the project, eight teachers were interviewed for the study. Although the informants varied in terms of gender, age, work experience and regional affiliation it may be difficult to determine whether the informants are representative of the group. The sample was also quite small, which may be due to the fact that the study was conducted in spring – a critical time during which the informants experienced heavy workloads. Furthermore, one successful pilot interview was carried out with a newly qualified teacher; a pilot interview with a more experienced teacher may have led to elaborated interview questions before the study.

Moreover, as only interview data were utilised in the study, there may also be a missing link between the teachers' verbal knowledge and practice. To deepen our understanding of the relationship between these two facets, future studies should include detailed observations and documentation of teachers' actions in classrooms. In accordance with the results of the study, the relation between the primary teachers and the SETs is very important. To gain a deeper understanding of the three-tiered support system, it would be interesting to investigate the experiences and collaborative work of primary teachers and SETs during the implementation of the support system.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the primary teachers experienced having a central role within the three-tiered support system and expressed more positive attitudes towards it than previous studies have shown. The support given by SETs was considered important although their time for consultation was found to be limited. In particular, early career teachers needed support in order to develop their ability to meet the needs of pupils with learning disabilities. The teachers further experienced challenges as a too extended documentation and unclear directives concerning the transition from a higher to a lower tier. This indicates a need for simplifying the documentation and developing more clear directives for the transition between the second and third tier in both directions. Another challenge was the collaboration with parents and professionals and the division of responsibility, which brings forth the need of clarifying the areas of responsibility in the support system and developing prospective teachers' interactive skills during the teacher education and by offering teachers in-service training.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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