

Implementing co-teaching in pre-primary education – a Finnish multiple case study
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Rationale

Co-teaching between special education teachers (SETs) and teachers has been brought forth as a valuable inclusive teaching approach (Friend et al. 2010). In the Finnish curriculum for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and pre-primary education, co-teaching is highlighted as a possible form of collaboration (FNAE, 2014, 2022). Even though Finnish ECSETs visit the groups of children in the ECEC centers and are expected to collaborate with teachers and other staff (Heskanen & Viitala, 2019), co-teaching has received little attention in Finnish research. The fact that international research on co-teaching in ECEC and pre-primary education is sparse also indicates that there is a need for more research on co-teaching in this context.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how co-teaching between special education teachers and teachers can be implemented in pre-primary education as a teaching approach benefiting children as well as the teachers' professionalism.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework in the study is socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which shed how teachers who interact with each other can share knowledge and together create new knowledge to advance a domain of professional practice.

Method

A qualitative approach and multiple-case-study design were used, which offers an in-depth understanding of the research phenomena. (cf. Yin, 2014). The participants were two co-teaching pairs consisting of a SET a teacher who implement co-teaching one day a week during four months. The pairs co-taught in two different preschool groups which formed two different cases. The data collection consisted of observations of the co-teaching, audio recorded interviews with the co-teaching teachers, and the teachers' reflection notes. The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Lindgren et al., 2020).

Results

Differences and similarities regarding how the two co-teaching pairs implemented co-teaching appeared. The teaching pairs found a way to co-teach that they became comfortable with and stuck to it. One pair chose to split the group into two, while the other pair chose to keep the group together and teach the students collectively. The reason for the choice of how they organized the co-teaching was the children's needs, but also the time. The pair that chose to split the children's group highlighted advantages for the children, especially for those with support needs. The pair who co-taught all children in a common group expressed how co-teaching affected all the children's learning positively as well as the teachers' professionalism and possibilities to develop inclusive education. How co-teaching impacts children's learning and teachers' professionalism seems to be linked to how co-teaching is organized and how much interaction between teachers and children the organization allows.

Conclusions

The results suggest that co-teaching between SETs and teachers can contribute to increased opportunities to differentiate instruction according to all children's needs. The quality of co-teaching can be improved through flexible use of different ways to organize co-teaching. An organization that allows for increased interaction between both children and adults can enhance the quality of co-teaching and positively contribute to the children's learning and the teachers' professional development.