

Teacher culture and the implementation of co-teaching from the perspective of Finnish teachers

Presenters: Maria Rönn-Liljenfeldt, Christel Sundqvist, Raisa Ahtiainen and Anna Rytivaara (Åbo Akademi University, Finland)

Rationale

The core curriculum (FNAE, 2014) and earlier research (Friend et al., 2010; Sundqvist, 2021) highlight co-teaching as a collaborative teaching approach between SETs and GETs to support all students in the general classroom. However, its implementation and use vary in and between Finnish schools (Kokko et al., 2021; Saloviita, 2018). The reason for the various use is not known, but factors such as school culture, teacher interest and knowledge, and the role of school leaders have been discussed. Therefore, this study aimed to capture the characteristics of teacher collaboration and aspects of teacher culture which hinder or enable co-teaching in Finnish schools where co-teaching has been implemented, guided by the research question: How do teachers experience teacher culture related to the implementation of co-teaching in their school? We examined this through the lens of Hargreaves' (1994) four forms of teacher culture.

Theoretical framework

By examining the patterns of relationships between teachers and their colleagues, Hargreaves (1994) identified four forms of teacher culture: individualism, collaboration, contrived collegiality, and balkanisation. Each form has unique characteristics, benefits and drawbacks, impacting teacher development and educational change (Datnow, 2011; Hargreaves, 1994). To better understand the teacher's daily work and what influences the choices they make, it is important to understand the work culture as a context of which they are part of (Datnow, 2011; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Teacher cultures consist of attitudes, beliefs, values, habits, and ways of doing things within a group of teachers or the teacher community, and they appear in what teachers think, say, and do (Hargreaves, 1994).

Research design

This study was part of a larger research project examining co-teaching experiences among SLs, teachers, and students. To answer the research question, we chose a multiple case study design. A multiple case study provides the opportunity to analyse each case separately while also enabling cross-case analysis to understand similarities and differences between the cases. Multiple cases also allow for a broader theoretical understanding of the data and research question.

Data were collected through semi-structured focus group interviews conducted in the participants' schools. Each focus group consisted of two CTs and two SETs from the same school. Teachers from three schools included in the project met the requirements of at least two hours of weekly co-teaching experience throughout the school year.

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis with a deductive approach. To capture the characteristics of teacher collaboration and aspects of teacher culture the three cases were first analysed separately. After this, data source triangulation (Yin, 2018) was used to compare cases. This, to reach an understanding of aspects of teacher collaboration enabling or hindering the development of co-teaching.

Conclusion

The findings provide insight into the characteristics of teacher collaboration in three schools and how these schools implemented co-teaching. The use of co-teaching and teacher collaboration differs in and between schools. This leads to the question whether Finnish policy documents communicate clearly enough schools' responsibility to develop teacher collaboration and co-teaching as an inclusive approach to support students. The tendency to adhere to teacher autonomy and traditional working models, where teaching alone and using segregated settings are common, risks causing teachers to neglect the collaborative teaching models imposed by governing documents. Too much autonomy allows teachers to ignore suggested policies. To make progress, teachers need leadership to impose guidelines. This leadership is particularly important when teachers choose not to collaborate and when the location of learning is prioritized over the quality of instruction.