

# From special (class) teacher to special educator – the Finnish case

---

Kristina Ström & Britta Hannus-Gullmets

Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies, Åbo Akademi University

Ingår i D.L. Cameron & R. Thygesen (Eds.) Transitions in the field of special education. Theoretical perspectives and implications for practice. Waxmann. 2015.

## Introduction

In the 1990's we were preoccupied with the role and profession of the special teachers. Both of us had worked as special teachers for many years, finding our work interesting and rewarding. However, sometimes we perceived our role as unclear and sometimes even as contradictory. We did not always know what was expected of us and what we were supposed to be doing according to local and national policy guidelines. Eventually we decided to seek new professional challenges. We were offered and took the chance to participate in research projects on university level. One of us was engaged in a project dealing with synthetic speech for students with reading and writing difficulties (Hannus-Gullmets, 1999), while the other one became absorbed in the role and profession of the special teachers within the Finnish compulsory school with a particular focus on special teachers working in part-time special education (Ström, 1996, 1999). Part-time special education is a distinctive part of the support system in Finnish comprehensive schools which Sabel, Saxenian, Miettinen, Hull Kristensen and Hautamäki (2011) call individualized service provision. Within part-time special education special teachers provide support to any student in need of support, mainly in reading, writing, mathematics and foreign languages. Part-time special education reaches many students (up to 30%) as an observed learning difficulty is a sufficient criterion for getting special educational support. No medical or psychological diagnose is needed.

The dominating role of the special teacher in the 1990's was a teaching role, however more complex and multifaceted than the role of the class or subject teacher. Nevertheless, the main task and responsibility of the special teacher was, and at least to some extent still is, to teach individual students or groups of students with a wide range of learning disabilities, mostly in more or less segregated settings (from segregated special schools and special classes to resource rooms in regular schools, often called clinics, an expressive example of the medical discourse in special education). Integrated and collaborative working models, such as team-teaching and co-teaching were not very common. However, alongside the traditional teacher role a more collaborative role including co-teaching and consultation

started gradually to emerge among the special teachers. During the almost 20 years that have passed since the early studies of the special teachers (Ström, 1996, 1999) the profession has undergone changes due to reforms in the school system and the expansion of the inclusive education movement world-wide. Nevertheless, the Finnish special teacher is still mainly a teacher, but a teacher with a much wider role. The special teacher has become a special educator with versatile tasks.

In this article we describe and analyze the transition from special teacher to special educator. We look at the changes in the special education profession in light of educational reforms. The aim of the article can thus be formulated as follows:

- To describe the current state of the special education profession in Finland
- To explore changes in the profession over time and factors influencing these changes
- To consider the implications of the observed developments for the future of special education and the provision of support to children with special needs

We begin our exploration of the Finnish special education profession by describing the important turning points regarding special education and the professionals working in the field.

## **The context of change**

Below we describe the development from the middle of the 1970's when the comprehensive school was established to the latest reforms taking place in the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The rise of a new profession**

The special education profession in Finland has remained rather stable for the last 30 years. The shift from the two-track parallel school system to a nine-year compulsory school system in the middle of the 1970's laid the ground for the special education profession. Special education existed also before the comprehensive school emerged, but special education was a segregated school system restricted to special schools for students with disabilities, mainly sensory and cognitive disabilities. However, the introduction of the comprehensive school did not mean that the segregated special school system was abolished. It continued as a parallel system to mainstream education.

School reform brought about new challenges because of increased student diversity. The solution was part-time special education, a support system within regular education. Apart from being inexpensive and easy to administer, part-time special education also had another "unspoken" function. It made teaching in diverse classrooms easier for the teachers, as students with learning difficulties and disturbing students could be pulled out and taught by special teachers (Kivirauma, 1989). In the wake of the comprehensive school, expansion of

the special education profession began. More and more special teachers were educated and employed as “part-time” special teachers in the schools.

The introduction of special teachers for part-time special education meant that there were two types of special education professionals; special teachers for part-time special education and special class teachers for the “full-time” special education taking place in special schools and special classes. However, the education of these categories was basically the same. The educational background of the student teachers determined whether they received a qualification as special teacher or special class teacher.

Part-time special education consolidated its position in the 1980’s and became the major form of special education provision. Reforms of the Basic Education Act (476/1983) and National core curriculum for basic education (Finnish National Board of Education, 1985) in the middle of the 1980’s were gradually geared towards integration (physical placement of students with disabilities into the mainstream) as the special schools became part of the mainstream education system and it became possible to establish special classes within regular comprehensive schools. These substantial reforms at the policy level had little impact on the special education profession. However, as more and more special classes were established an increasing amount of the special class teachers earlier working in administratively and often physically segregated special schools moved in with the special teachers in regular schools.

### **The consolidation of the special education professions**

In the middle of the 1990’s the policy guidelines were reformed again. A new National core curriculum was introduced at the same time as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). The inclusive values voiced in the Statement brought a faint echo of inclusive ideas into the new curriculum; education in regular classrooms for students with learning difficulties due to a disability or a medical condition was to be considered (FNBE, 1994). However, because certain criteria had to be fulfilled (suitable learning environment and appropriate support measures) and the municipalities and the schools had the power to decide what constituted a suitable environment for a student with a disability, the movement towards inclusive education was slow. Nevertheless, the reform opened up for physical and functional integration of individuals with disabilities in regular classes. As a result, the amount of students with disabilities in regular classes started to grow.

In the beginning, the two professions had mainly different tasks in the schools. The special teachers in part-time special education taught students with learning difficulties mostly in reading and writing, but also in mathematics and (foreign) languages in resource rooms while their special class teacher colleagues taught students with more profound learning disabilities in most academic school subjects, mostly in segregated special class settings. However, as more students with disabilities, including behavior disorders and more profound learning difficulties, started to attend regular classes the tasks of the two special teacher categories started to overlap and the roles became blurred.

## **The expansion of special education**

In the turn of the millennium a new Basic Education Act (628/1998) came into force. The act was followed by a new National core curriculum. One of the goals of these educational reforms was an integration of special education and mainstream education. The reforms were thought to enable students with disabilities to be educated alongside their peers in ordinary classrooms. However, students in need of extensive and continuous support were to be transferred to special education, which gave these students a special status. They were identified as students having special educational needs (SEN students). With special status followed additional resources, individual education plans, individualized learning goals and individual assessment and grades. Whereas special class teachers were deemed qualified to teach these SEN students, special teachers were not. The idea was to guarantee that students with learning disabilities who were educated in mainstream classes would have teachers with subject matter knowledge as well as knowledge of special education.

The intention in the policy documents was to increase integration and the regulations made integration possible. However, the intentions were only realized to a limited extent. It is true that integration of students with disabilities became more common after the new law, but the amount of students identified as SEN students also increased and the number of students transferred to special education grew rapidly.

The peak was reached towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium when almost 9% of the students in basic education (grades 1-9) were transferred to special education (Statistics Finland, 2010). For the individual student the transfer to special education did not necessarily mean educational placement in a segregated setting (special school or special class). Over half (54%) of all students identified as SEN students transferred to special education were fully or partly integrated in mainstream classes, while 46% were either in special schools or in special classes (Statistics Finland, 2010). The situation was paradoxical; the regulations in the policy documents conveyed inclusive values, at least to some extent, but the implementation of the policy guidelines on the school and municipality level led to the exclusion of more and more students in need of special educational support from the mainstream system.

## **Towards change**

Gradually this situation began to be questioned by the national education authorities. A school system that excluded almost 10% of its students from the mainstream was no longer in line with the national policy. The responsible education authority (Ministry of Education) summoned a group of experts whose report outlined a new strategy for special education in the country (Ministry of Education, 2007). In the wake of the report, the Finnish National Board of Education launched a nationwide reform movement aiming at implementing the new strategy. The main problem, according to the strategy report, was that schools and municipalities interpreted the policy guidelines regarding special educational needs and how to deal with those needs differently. A student with a learning difficulty could in one

municipality be transferred to special education while a student in another municipality with a similar learning difficulty was given part-time special education within the mainstream system.

The process resulted in new amendments to the Basic Education Act (642/2010) as well as to the National core curriculum in 2010 (FNBE 2010). The aim was to improve the rights and possibilities of students with disabilities to attend their neighborhood school and to receive necessary support within the school. This was done by initiating a three-tiered support system (general support, intensified support and special support, of which intensified support was the new support form), resembling the US system known as Response to Intervention, RTI (e.g. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). As in the original RTI-model the concept of early intervention was emphasized in the Finnish revised policy documents. The schools are required to provide adequate support to students as soon as a support need occurs. No diagnoses or formal arrangements are required. The support provided must be monitored and documented. The school management is accountable for providing support as soon as a need is observed. We return to a more detailed discussion of the three-tiered system at the end of this chapter.

General support can for example be remedial teaching and part-time special education. Remedial teaching is a temporary support form for students who need short-term support in different subjects. Remedial teaching is usually provided by the regular teacher, while part-time special education is always provided by the special teacher. If general support is not sufficient, the student has the right to intensified support. A learning plan must be prepared for the intensified support, which may consist of remedial teaching, part-time special education and/or other pedagogical arrangements. The student welfare teams are responsible for the provision and monitoring of intensified support. If intensified support does not meet the child's need, the student has a right to special support. An individual education plan must then be prepared for the student and a written decision must be made by the education provider before the special support can begin. On this support level one or more subjects can be studied with an individualized curriculum. Students receiving special support can study in a regular class, partly or totally in a special class or in some other appropriate facility, usually meaning a special school (Basic Education Act, Amendment 642/2010; FNBE, 2010). This means that the support level and educational placement are separated from one another. This is also the case with part-time special education, which is not only restricted to general and intensified support, but can be given on all three support levels.

Another important reform was the abolishing of certain concepts related to the earlier system. For instance concepts such as the SEN student, special education and transfer (to special education) were removed and replaced with the support concept (student in need of support; support for learning and schooling). However, the concept part-time special education was maintained as a support form relating to teaching arrangements in the three-

tiered support system. The intention was to tear down the boundaries between “ordinary” education and special education and to make special educational support an integrated part of pedagogical practices in the schools.

For the special education profession, the reforms suggested changes. Special education as a parallel system was deconstructed (on a system-level) and it was no longer possible for special teachers to claim jurisdiction over all students in need of special education. Teacher collaboration and the responsibility of all teachers, including class and subject teachers, to organize and provide support are emphasized in the new policy documents. This policy suggests changes for both special teacher categories. For the special teachers working in part-time special education, the reforms indicate a new, even more complex role, including not only the provision of special educational support to students in flexible arrangements, but also consulting support to class and subject teachers (FNBE, 2010; Sundqvist, von Ahlefeld Nisser & Ström, 2014). For special class teachers, the formulations are more cautious; special education for students receiving special support may be provided within regular education, whenever possible, which suggests a more collaborative role also for the special class teacher. As the number of special schools and self-contained special classes decrease, special class teachers are likely to develop new collaborative and flexible ways of working together with regular classes (e.g., Göransson, Sténsson, Roll-Pettersson, Stenhammar & Thorsson, 2000; Wade, 2011). However, the National core curriculum allows educational placement partially or fully in a special class (FNBE, 2010). This suggests that segregated special education and the profession of the special class teacher are not necessarily deconstructed on the school and municipality level. In the section below we deepen the discussion about the special class teacher profession.

### **The deconstruction of the special class teacher profession?**

The concept of the “special class teacher” is virtually absent in official documents. Neither the Basic Education Act, the National core curriculum, nor official statistics mention special class teachers. Only special teachers, who according to the policy, are responsible for providing special education, are mentioned. However, the Basic Education Decree mentions two slightly differing types of qualifications: one which is required for giving intensified support, and another for giving special support. Teachers providing special support need to have a double qualification (class teacher and special teacher) while a special teacher qualification is enough on the other support levels.

Yet, according to recent Finnish research in the field, the profession of the special education teacher is still divided into two professions, the special class teacher and the special teacher professions (Jahnukainen, Pösö, Kivirauma & Heinonen, 2012; Ryytivaara, Pulkkinen & Takala, 2012). Furthermore, according to statistics on teachers from the Finnish National Board of Education, there are more special class teachers than special teachers (Kumpulainen, 2014). Also the collective agreement (UKTA) for teachers mentions two types

of teachers in special education, and states that the special class teacher has slightly less teaching duties (hours per week) than the special teacher (Läraren 5.6 2014). This also means that the special class teachers have a somewhat better salary compared to their special teacher colleagues.

The policy documents are ambiguous when it comes to the two professions and it is not easy to understand the real difference between these two teacher categories. Is the special class teacher still a teacher who works in a special school or a special class? Or is the special class teacher simply a person who has the qualification required to provide special support, but who works in regular schools? The municipalities may have different solutions to this. In municipalities with a strong special school tradition, the special class teachers are likely to work in more or less segregated settings, while in municipalities where the segregated learning environments are essentially deconstructed, the special class teachers might work alongside their special teacher colleagues in regular schools. One conclusion might be that the special class teacher is “deconstructed” on policy level but not necessarily on the municipality level. In the next section, we will take a closer look at the development of special education and the work of special education teachers since the year 2011, when the new three-tiered support system started implementation.

## **Recent developments in special education**

The changes in special education provision after the introduction of the three-tiered support system are not substantial. The amount of students receiving special education in Finnish schools has not decreased. Special education reached almost one third (28%) of all students in the comprehensive school in the academic year 2012-2013, which is exactly the same as the figure from the previous year (Statistics Finland, 2013). Special education in this context means the total sum of part-time special education (given as general, intensified and special support) and full-time special education (given as intensified and special support). Below we describe the different types of special education in more detail.

### **Special education in the three-tiered support system**

Part-time special education can accordingly occur on all three of the support levels, and in total, it reached almost twenty percent of all students. The amount of part-time special education has been almost the same since 2001, between 20 % and 24 % (Statistics Finland, 2013). The majority of special education is part-time special education as general support. It is given with a very low threshold without the requirement of a diagnosis or formal decision, sometimes only for one or two lessons per week, sometimes only for a short period of time. In 2010 the most frequent reason for part-time special education during the first six years of comprehensive school was learning difficulties related to reading, writing and mathematics, followed by speech and language problems. During the transition to lower secondary school (school years 7-9) the picture looked somewhat different. The main reasons for providing part time special education for this age group were learning difficulties in mathematics,

(foreign) languages and “other learning difficulties” (Statistics Finland, 2010). It is not yet known to what degree the introduction of the three-tiered support system has changed this picture.

The extensive use of part-time special education, especially in the early school years, is by international comparison striking, but it is also assumed to be one of the reasons for the good results of the Finnish schools in international achievement tests, as there are few students with very low scores (Sabel, Saxenian, Miettinen, Hull Kristensen & Hautamäki, 2011; Hausstätter & Jahnukainen, forthcoming). There is also a degree of uncertainty with regard to how one defines special education. Some of the teaching and support that is registered as part-time special education in Finland might not be registered as special education at all in countries with different legislation (Jahnukainen, Pösö, Kivirauma & Heinonen, 2012).

Intensified support, the newest level of support, is intended to be a more flexible and more inclusive form of support than special support or, according to the previous (1998) terminology, “transfer to special education”. The group of students receiving intensified support was the smallest group among those who received special educational support in the academic year 2012-2013. About five percent of all students in the comprehensive school were provided with intensified support. In the most recent statistics from autumn 2013, intensified support has increased to 6.5 % (Statistics Finland, 2014).

Special support, the type of support that is regarded as equivalent to the former approaches, known as full-time special education or transfer to special education (Hausstätter & Jahnukainen, forthcoming; Statistics Finland, 2014), had a somewhat larger share of students than intensified support. However, the trend after the change in legislation in 2010 is that intensified support has increased and special support has decreased, which also was one of the aims of the reform. However, the share of students in special support is still considerable, at 7.3 % in autumn 2013, although it has decreased somewhat during the last three years. A good third of these students receive their education in a mainstream class, either full-time or for more than half of the school day. Half of this group is placed in a special class, either full-time or for more than half of the time. Almost 13 % of students with special support are educated in special schools (Statistics Finland, 2013). It is true that the number of students in special support has decreased from 2011 to 2013, but the proportion of students receiving special support in regular classes, special classes and special schools has remained about the same. There has not been any shift from special schools and special classes to regular classes within this group. The share of students with special support in regular classes has even decreased from 2011 to 2013. It seems that the reforms have had little impact on developing inclusive practices.

The distribution of part-time and full-time special education varies substantially among grade levels over the course of the nine years of comprehensive school. According to a thorough study of special education in different age groups during the years 2001-2010,



part-time special education dominated during the first years of schooling (Kirjavainen, Pulkkinen & Jahnukainen, 2014). In grade one and two, more than a third of the students received part-time special education, but the proportion diminished rapidly to less than 15 % in the sixth grade, and remained about the same in grades seven to nine. In contrast, the development of the proportion of students receiving full-time special education (transferred to special education) went in the opposite direction. It was about 5 % in grade one, then it increased for every year, until it was more than 10 % in grade nine.

No corresponding study has yet been made after the introduction of the tree-tiered system in 2011, but recent statistics reveal a similar picture (Statistics Finland, 2013). The proportion of students with special support is much higher in grade seven to nine than in grades one to six. The proportion of students with intensified support is almost the same, around 6 %, during the comprehensive school years. The statistics do not tell us anything about how part-time special education as general support varies during the school years, but probably a great deal of part-time special education as general support is concentrated within grade one or two as in the ten year period from 2001 to 2010.

Although part-time special education is the type of special education that reaches the largest number of students, there are still many children and young people being educated in special schools and in special classes, either full-time or for more than half of the time. In 2013 there were 24 800 students in special classes and special schools (Statistics Finland, 2014). These students need teachers. In the following section we shall attempt to make a rough calculation of how many special class teachers might actually be required for these students.

### **Where are the special class teachers?**

Based on legislation, special classes are small by definition, with not more than ten students or, in some cases, not more than eight students (Basic Education Decree, § 2, Amendment 893/2010). In addition, classes for children with what is called “very severely delayed development” cannot have more than six students. If we assume that the average number of students in a special class is eight, we estimate that 24 800 students will form 3 100 special classes. These 3 100 classes will need at least 3 100 special class teachers. This number is rather close to the total number of special class teachers in Finland. In 2013 there were 3 360 special class teachers and 2 118 special teachers according to national statistics (Kumpulainen, 2013). This means that the majority of special class teachers in fact work in a special class or in a special school.

Special class teachers can further be divided into two groups: those who teach children with “severely delayed development”, and those who teach children with a great variety of difficulties and disabilities. The first group is small, only 14 % of all special class teachers. What kind of classes or students the larger group of special class teachers work with is not known. Official statistics describing the reasons for transfer to special education (special support according to current terminology) provides some clues, but these data were no

longer collected after 2010. According to Kirjavainen, Pulkkinen and Jahnukainen (2014) the most frequent reasons for transfer to special education for younger children were called varying degrees of cerebral dysfunction, physical disability, slightly delayed development and problems in language development. For students in grades 7-9 the most common reason for transfer to special education fell into the category of "other reason". Emotional disturbance and social maladjustment was another commonly reported reason for older children. It seems as if other than disability related reasons were the most common reasons for transferring students to special education.

If we assume that the picture has not changed significantly we can conclude that the reasons for students to receive special support are diverse. This means that a large group of special class teachers teach in classes with diverse learners with regard to learning difficulties and other disabling conditions. Special classes for children with varying kinds of difficulties are certainly challenging learning environments, and it appears to be difficult to find qualified teachers to teach these classes. About 74 % of special class teachers are fully qualified, while about 84 % of special teachers are qualified.

### **Special teacher education**

Finnish special teachers are educated at the university level. There are two alternative routes that lead to special teacher qualification; a 5 year master's (pre-service) program (300 ECTS) with special education as the main subject or a postgraduate (in-service) program in special education (60 ECTS) for persons who already have a teacher qualification and/or a master's degree. Also students in other teacher programs can sometimes choose special education as a minor subject (60 ECTS) and receive a special teacher qualification in addition to a general teacher qualification.

Finnish teacher education is characterized by an ambition of research-based professionalism (Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi, 2006; Westbury, Hansén, Kansanen & Björkqvist, 2007). This applies to special teacher education as well, since special teacher education and general teacher education were established at the same time as university based master's programs in the late 1970's. Ever since then, the two teacher education programs have been regarded as parallel paths to a university level teacher qualification. Some of the programs are collaborative in the sense that they lead to double certification as special teacher and class teacher (cf. Pugach, Blanton & Correa, 2011).

The structure and content of special teacher programs in Finnish universities have changed over the past 30 years due to changes in national education policy, teacher qualification decrees and statutes that govern Finnish university degrees. Nevertheless, the core of the special education discipline has remained more or less the same. The early programs emphasized categorization of disabilities and educational exceptionality more than the more recent ones, but the core is still centered on reading, writing and mathematics, speech and language, socio-emotional and behavioral challenges, professional collaboration,

assessment, evaluation and teaching practice (Hausstätter & Takala, 2008; Holopainen, Luokola & Niemelä, 2003). One area which seems to have gained more importance in recent years is communication and consultation skills. To date, the proportion of such courses within these special teacher education programs is limited, although the amount varies from university to university (Sundqvist, von Ahlefeld Nisser & Ström, 2014). However, in the wake of the reformed policy and the gradually spreading collaborative ways of working in schools, the importance of focusing on different needs in special teacher programs will become apparent. (Special) teacher education reflects what is regarded by the education providers (the universities) as crucial and valid knowledge for student teachers who after a few years of studies enter into the profession. The program content also tells us something about how the policy documents governing education are interpreted. These issues will be discussed in the next section.

## **The knowledge base of the special education profession**

Is there a unique set of professional knowledge, skills and expertise that Finnish special teachers possess? Before we attempt to answer the question we will take a brief look at the history and development of the knowledge base of the special teacher profession in Finland.

### **From remedial class teacher to change agent**

During the era of the two-track parallel school system special education was mostly confined to special classes. The majority of these classes were called remedial classes. Bladini (1990) uses the concept class for backward children. The term is an adaptation from the Swedish term "hjälpklass" (help class). The remedial class system came originally from Germany (Hilfschule). In line with the concept remedial class, the teachers working in these self-contained classes were called remedial class teachers, or using Bladinis (1990) words, teachers for backward children. The remedial class teacher was the first typical representative of the special education profession. The remedial teacher was supposed to have a broad competence. In addition to pedagogy and didactics suitable for students with learning difficulties, knowledge of medicine and educational psychology was regarded as important (Committee Report, 1958:4). Educational psychology was emphasized because the remedial class teacher was supposed to participate in intelligence testing so that the right students could be selected for the remedial classes. This was not unique for Finland, for instance, also in Sweden knowledge of intelligence testing was regarded as part of the core knowledge for special teachers in the 1940's and 50's (Bladini, 1990). The specific knowledge of psychological testing differentiated the remedial class teacher from the "ordinary" elementary school teacher. In this sense the special teacher was more professional than his or her colleagues teaching regular classes. According to Kivirauma (1991), who has studied the history of Finnish special education, specialized training and expert knowledge increased the professional autonomy of the remedial class teacher.

The expansion of part-time special education in the wake of the comprehensive school brought changes to the special education profession. Although special class teachers working in special schools and classes continued as before, the main focus of special education provision gradually moved to special education within the mainstream system. Thus, the special teacher profession started its entry into the schools. Yet, the special teacher needed other qualifications compared to the special class teacher. Reading, writing and speech difficulties became the new area of expertise among special teachers. Expertise related to mathematics was also acknowledged, although literacy difficulties took up most of the special teachers' work. Special teachers adopted a pull-out model, which became the dominant model of special education provision. The term clinic was coined and the special teacher was commonly called a clinic teacher (Bladini, 1990; Ström, 1999). Students with reading and writing difficulties were to be diagnosed and treated in the (reading) clinics and after treatment brought back to the mainstream. The professional knowledge of the special teacher was like that of the special class teacher, based on educational psychology, but the emphasis was no longer on intelligence testing. Rather, the focus turned to identification, intervention and evaluation of speech and literacy difficulties. Thus, the special teacher was able to create a certain expert role in the school community. However, as for instance Malmgren Hansen (2002) points out, it was not always easy for special educators to maintain an expert role when they were in fact carrying out tasks that their colleagues requested of them. The uncertainty of what was expected of the special teachers sometimes lead to a role conflict which decreased their professional standing.

Even though the Finnish special teacher profession has consolidated its position in the school system it is not static. For special teachers working in part-time special education, knowledge of learning difficulties has remained the main area of expertise, but in the wake of reformed educational policies their work tasks have become much more versatile than before. Besides individual, small group and co-teaching, multi-professional collaboration, planning, administration and documentation have become new tasks for the special teacher (Takala, Pirttimaa & Törmänen, 2009). New qualifications as guidance and counselling have also become an important part of the special teacher's profession as teacher consultation is emphasized (Rytivaara, Pulkkinen & Takala, 2012; Sundqvist & Ström, forthcoming). Hence, the special teacher formerly teaching students with learning difficulties has become a versatile special educator working in multi-professional teams in the school community. Special educators (special teachers as well as special class teachers) provide multi-professional teams with knowledge of special educational matters. The special educator can also be regarded as a change agent whose task it is to monitor and ensure that the three-tiered support system is implemented according to national and local guidelines, and that students receive support in a setting which is as inclusive as possible.

### **The unique (?) competence of the special educator**

Although special educators can no longer claim legitimacy over a certain group of students, the question about their unique professional knowledge and skills needs to be answered. If

we adopt the idea that the special educator is the person in the school community who has specific knowledge of learning disabilities and their possible negative consequences, then the existence of a unique set of professional knowledge and skills can be argued for. Firstly, professional expertise may include knowledge of a wide range of disabling conditions that can affect individual development and learning. Secondly, it should also cover knowledge of common learning difficulties (e.g., in reading, writing and mathematics) and the skills to identify, design, evaluate and implement research based interventions. Thirdly, special educators should be able to demonstrate knowledge of educational consultation and the skills needed to advise colleagues, parents and others and collaborate in the school context. In addition to the above areas of expertise, knowledge of teaching methods for diverse classrooms and subject matter knowledge is crucial not only for class teachers but also for special educators. The special educators also need to work alongside their colleagues in (regular) classrooms in order to be able to offer consultation in special educational matters.

The above outlined special educator competences are in line with the Finnish special teacher education programs and also with the professional standards defined by the American Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). The professional and ethical standards are compiled to a publication called the Redbook, which in a detailed manner describes what knowledge and skills special educators are expected to possess in order to deliver responsible and effective special education for students with disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009).

However, this view of specific knowledge and skills in special education can also be challenged. Proponents of sociologically oriented structural theories about special education, for instance Skrtic (1991) and Tomlinson (1982), see special education as a dysfunction of the school system. In their view schools function as bureaucracies unable to adjust to student diversity. Hence, the school system needs special education in order to deal with diversity. Students who receive different kinds of labels (learning disability, behavior disorder etc.) can easily be removed from the mainstream by (regular) teachers into the care of special education professionals. According to these and other critical voices, special education as a system lacks a sustainable theoretical basis (e.g. Skrtic, 1991; Thomas & Loxley, 2007). This assumption leads to the claim that there is no specific special educational knowledge, only some kind of “pseudo-knowledge” or “smokescreen” that the professionals themselves maintain in order to keep themselves in business. In the Finnish debate these arguments have been voiced by Saloviita (2006) who claims that there is no such thing as special educational expert knowledge and that special education professionals do not possess any unique knowledge and skills that regular teachers do not possess. Regular teachers are fully qualified and skilled to teach all students, regardless of abilities or disabilities, in mainstream classes.

The logical consequence of this line of thinking is a deconstruction of special education and the special education profession. However, if we accept the idea that the majority of schools

are complex and diverse learning environments we can assume that there is a need for teachers and other professionals with various and differential competencies. Many critical issues need to be addressed before pre-service teacher education can equip prospective teachers with all of the knowledge and skills that are needed in inclusive and diverse classrooms with a wide range of learners (Pugach, Blanton & Correa, 2011).

## Conclusion

Our aim was to describe the current state of the special education profession through the lens of those contextual changes that have shaped and influenced the profession over time. In addition, we sought to consider the observed implications for the future of special education provision and special education professionals working in the field.

Finnish special education is characterized by two major trends, trends that may seem contradictory at first sight. The trends we refer to are the extensive use of part-time special education and the slow deconstruction of segregated special education provision. On one hand, many students (almost one-third) receive additional support within the three-tiered support system. The majority of this support is based on observed difficulty, not on disability, which means that formal statements or medical diagnoses are not a prerequisite for receiving special educational support (cf. Jahnukainen, 2011). The special education teachers working in part-time special education play a crucial role in providing this support. They identify support needs, plan, carry out and evaluate intervention programs in reading, writing and mathematics. This type of support seems to be effective. On the other hand, special education taking place in more or less segregated learning environments has remained rather stable over time. However, a move towards more inclusive solutions is currently underway as a result of policy reforms. Yet, the development is slow moving.

The fact that two forms of special education still coexist can be explained by several factors. Established patterns and traditions in education are hard to break, especially as educational policy allows for special school placements. Another explanation might be the fact that the debate about inclusion as a democratic human rights issue has not been very prominent in Finland. Jahnukainen (2011) sees this as an expression of pragmatism rather than ideology in education. To put it more bluntly – why change a system that works? The Finnish education system works well, students get enough support from qualified professionals in special education and most of the students perform well. The fact that more than 40% of all students receiving special support are educated in full-time special classes or special schools is a discord that not many hear.

The division between part-time special education and full-time special education taking place in special schools is also reflected by the two professions within special education. The work of special teachers working in part-time special education is becoming more and more versatile, including tasks that reach beyond teaching students who face difficulties in learning. Special teachers are becoming special educators with a broad set of responsibilities

for special educational matters in the schools. Their special class teacher colleagues form an interesting group. On a policy level, they are rather invisible, but in reality they exist and in fact outnumber the group of special teachers. Yet, the group of special class teachers is diverse. Not all of them work in special schools and special classes, but many of them do. As more than 40% of the students receiving special support are educated in special schools and special classes many special class teachers are needed because of the low student numbers permitted per class (6-10 students). However, neither cost-effectiveness nor effectiveness when it comes to academic performance has been debated to a very large extent. Also, differences in teaching load and salary between the two special teacher categories have not been questioned. On an individual level it is more “profitable” to work as a special class teacher compared to a special teacher because of higher salary and fewer teaching hours per week. How much these structural factors contribute to the status quo with regard to professional change is impossible to know.

Both special teacher categories are well qualified for the work they do. They combine pedagogical content knowledge with knowledge of those disabling conditions that can affect the learning and development of individuals. This professional knowledge of Finnish special teachers enables the schools to deal with special educational needs as an integrated part of education support in regular schools. This is not the case in all Nordic countries (cf. Hausstätter & Jahnukainen, forthcoming). The professional knowledge of teachers working in special education also enables school communities to contribute to the gradual dismantling of segregated education provision, at least in principle. Whether the deconstruction of segregated educational provision and the construction of more inclusive learning environments will eventually take place, depends on how education providers, parents, education authorities, school leaders and teachers interpret and implement policy regulations and guidelines.

## References

Basic Education Act. 476/1983. Helsinki: Government Printing Office.

Basic Education Act. 628/1998. Helsinki: Government Printing Office.

Basic Education Act. Amendment 642/2010. Helsinki: Government Printing Office.

Basic Education Decree. Amendment 105/2012. Helsinki: Government Printing Office.

Bladini, U-B. 1990. *Från speciallärare till förändringsagent. Svensk speciallärarutbildning 1921-1981 relaterad till specialundervisningens utveckling och förändringar i speciallärarens yrkesuppgifter*. Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis. Göteborg studies in educational sciences 76.

Committe Report 1958:4. *Erityisopettajain koulutuskomitean mietintö*. [Report from the committee on special teacher education]. Helsinki.

- Council for Exceptional Children. 2009. *Redbook 2009. What every special educator must know. Ethics, standards and guidelines*. Sixth Revised Edition.
- Finnish National Board of Education. 1985. *The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education*. Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education.
- Finnish National Board of Education. 1994. *The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education*. Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education.
- Finnish National Board of Education. 2010. *Amendments and additions to the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education*. Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education.
- Fuchs, D. & Fuchs, L.S. 2006. Introduction to response to intervention: What, why and how valid is it? *Reading Research Quarterly*, 41, 93-99.
- Göransson, K., Stéenson, A-L., Roll-Pettersson, L., Stenhammar, A-M. & Thorsson, L. 2000. "Om alla är lika skulle det inte vara lika roligt". Att bygga en skola – Samverkan mellan särskola och grundskola. Stockholm: FUB:s stiftelse ALA.
- Hannus-Gullmets, B. 1999. *Syntetiskt tal på dator som hjälpmedel vid läs- och skrivträning med finlandssvenska elever*. Rapporter från Pedagogiska fakulteten vid Åbo Akademi. Nr 18/1999.
- Hausstätter Sarromaa, R. & Takala, M. 2008. The core of special teacher education: a comparison of Finland and Norway. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23:2, 121-134.
- Hausstätter Sarromaa, R. & Jahnukainen, M. Forthcoming. From integration to inclusion and the role of special education experiences from two Nordic countries. In F. Kiuppis & R. Sarromaa Hausstätter (Eds.) *Inclusive Education – Twenty years after Salamanca*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Holopainen, E., Luokola, A. & Niemelä, E. 2003. Erytispedagogiikan laitos kouluttajana (The Department of Special Education as educator). In T. Ladonlahti, A. Naukkarinen & S. Vehmas (Eds.) *Poikkeava vai erityinen? Erytispedagogiikan monet ulottuvuudet* [Deviant or special? Many dimensions of special education], (pp. 54-66). Jyväskylä: PS-kustannus.
- Jahnukainen, M. 2011. Different Strategies, Different Outcomes? The History and Trends of the Inclusive and Special Education in Alberta (Canada) and Finland. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 55, 5, 489-502.
- Jahnukainen, M., Pösö, T., Kivirauma, J. & Heinonen, H. 2012. Erytisopetuksen ja lastensuojelun kehitys ja nykytila [The current state and development of the special education and child welfare]. In M. Jahnukainen (Ed.) *Lasten erityishuolto ja –opetus Suomessa* [Children's special care and special education in Finland]. 13. Edition, (pp.15-54). The Central League of Child Welfare. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Jakku-Sihvonen, R. & Niemi, H. (Eds.) 2006. *Research-based Teacher Education in Finland – Reflections by Finnish Teacher Educators*. Finnish Educational Research Association. Research in Educational Sciences 25.



- Kirjavainen, T., Pulkkinen, J. & Jahnukainen, M. 2014. Perusopetuksen erityisjärjestelyt eri ikäryhmissä vuosina 2001-2010 [Special arrangements in basic education in different age groups from 2001 to 2010]. *Kasvatus* 2/2014, 152-166.
- Kivirauma, J. 1989. *Erytysopetus ja suomalainen oppivelvollisuuskoulu vuosina 1921-1985* [Special education and the compulsory school in Finland from 1921-1985]. Turun yliopiston julkaisusarja. Reports from the University of Turku. C 74.
- Kivirauma, J. 1991. *Erytysopettajaksi rekrytoituminen. Uralla etenemistä vai työpaikan vaihtamista?* [The recruitment of teachers to special education. To be promoted or to change work place?] Turun yliopisto. University of Turku. Kasvatustieteiden tiedekunta. Faculty of Education. A 145.
- Kumpulainen, T. 2014. *Opettajat Suomessa 2013* [Teachers in Finland 2013]. Opetushallitus. [Finnish National Board of Education]. Koulutuksen seurantaraportit 2014:8.
- Malmgren Hansen, A. 2002. *Specialpedagoger – nybyggare i skolan*. Stockholm: HLS.
- Ministry of Education. 2007. *Specialundervisningens strategi*. [The special needs education strategy]. Undervisningsministeriets arbetsgruppspromemorior och utredningar 2007:42. Helsingfors: Undervisningsministeriet.
- Pugach, M.C., Blanton, L.P. & Correa, V.I. 2011. A Historical Perspective on the Role of Collaboration in Teacher Education Reform: Making Good on the Promise of Teaching All Students. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 20 (10), 1-18.
- Rytivaara, A., Pulkkinen, J. & Takala, M. 2012. Erytysopettajan työ: opettamista yksin ja yhdessä [The work of a special teacher: teaching alone and together]. In M. Jahnukainen (Ed.) *Lasten erityishuolto ja -opetus Suomessa* [Children's special care and special education in Finland]. 13. edition. (pp. 333-352). The Central League of Child Welfare. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Sabel, C., Saxenian, A., Miettinen, R., Hull Kristensen, P. & Hautamäki, J. 2011. *Individualized service provision in the new welfare state: Lessons from special education in Finland*. Report prepared for SITRA and Ministry of Employment and Economy. Helsinki. SITRA Studies 62.
- Saloviita, T. 2006. Erytysopetus ja inklusio. [Special Education and Inclusion], *Kasvatus*, 37 (4), 326-342.
- Skrtic, T. 1991. *Behind Special Education. A Critical Analysis of Professional Culture and School Organization*. Denver: Love Publishing Company.
- Statistics Finland 2010. *Special Education 2009*. Helsinki : Tilastokeskus [Accessed: 8.6.2014]. [http://www.stat.fi/til/erop-2009-2010-06-12\\_tie\\_001\\_en.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/erop-2009-2010-06-12_tie_001_en.html)
- Statistics Finland 2012. *Special Education 2011*. Helsinki : Tilastokeskus [Accessed: 8.9.2014]. [http://www.stat.fi/til/erop-2011-2012-06-12\\_tie\\_001\\_en.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/erop-2011-2012-06-12_tie_001_en.html)
- Statistics Finland 2013. *Special Education 2012*. Helsinki : Tilastokeskus [Accessed: 26.5.2014]. [http://www.stat.fi/til/erop-2012-2013-06-12\\_tie\\_001\\_en.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/erop-2012-2013-06-12_tie_001_en.html)

Statistics Finland 2014. *Special Education 2013*. Helsinki : Tilastokeskus [Accessed: 14.6.2014].  
[http://www.stat.fi/til/erop-2013-2014-06-12\\_tie\\_001\\_en.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/erop-2013-2014-06-12_tie_001_en.html)

Ström, K. 1996. *Lärare, försvarsadvokat, lindansare eller... Speciallärarens syn på sin verksamhet och roll på högskolan*. Rapporter från Pedagogiska fakulteten vid Åbo Akademi. Nr 13/1996.

Ström, K. 1999. *Specialpedagogik i högskolan. Ett speciallärarperspektiv på verksamhet, verksamhetsförutsättningar och utvecklingsmöjligheter*. Åbo Akademi University Press.

Sundqvist, C., von Ahlefeldt Nisser, D. & Ström, K. 2014. Consultation in special needs education in Sweden and Finland: a comparative approach. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 29 (3), 297-312.

Sundqvist, C. & Ström, K. Forthcoming. Special education teachers as consultants. Perspectives of Finnish Teachers. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*.

Takala, M., Pirttimaa, R. & Törmänen, M. 2009. Inclusive special education: The role of special education teachers in Finland. *British Journal of Special Education*, 36 (3), 162-172.

Tomlinson, S. 1982. *The Sociology of Special Education*. London: Keegan Paul & Routledge.

Thomas, G. & Loxley, A. 2007. *Deconstructing Special Education and Constructing Inclusion*. (Second edition). Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill.

UKTA – *Arbetstid och undervisningsskyldighet. PM för läsåret 2014-2015* [Working hours and teaching duty. PM for the academic year 2014-2015]. *Läraren*, 5.6 2014

UNESCO (1994). *The Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education. Adopted by the world conference on special needs education: Access and quality*. Paris: United Nations.

Wade, S. (Ed.) 2011. *Inclusive Education: A Casebook and Readings for Prospective and Practicing Teachers*. New York: Routledge.

Westbury, I., Hansén, S-E., Kansanen, P. & Björkqvist, O. 2007. Teacher Education for Research-based Practice in Expanded Roles: Finland's experience. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 49:5, 475-485.