

Faculty of Educational Sciences
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AN EXPANDED CONCEPTUAL AND PEDAGOGICAL MODEL OF INCLUSIVE COLLABORATIVE TEACHING ACTIVITIES

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I have examined the factors influencing the collaboration of teaching staff to develop inclusive teaching practices. The main aim of inclusive education is to promote the participation of every student and to provide high quality learning support at local schools. There is a wide range of perceptions in schools and teaching about how student support should be organised and how students with diverse needs challenge their teachers and teaching assistants in daily situations. This series of studies develops a new type of conceptual framework that can guide teaching staff to address their position, teaching practices, to support the learning of each student. The research seeks to answer questions about underlying factors associated with perceived tensions and to evaluate established teaching practices, thorough an activity-theoretical perspective.

Emphasising the historical nature of teaching practices, this dissertation presents previous research in the field of inclusive education, cooperation and the inclusive process of education policy internationally and in Finland. The summary part of the dissertation widens our understanding of the multidimensionality of inclusive teaching practices. The research methodology adopted in these studies combines quantitative and qualitative research approaches. A questionnaire was first designed and implemented. Then, a qualitative analysis of open-ended survey questions and interviews was conducted to deepen the analysis. The research progressed from a conceptual mapping approach to an analysis of contradictions and collaboration in teaching activities of students with special needs.

More precisely, this dissertation consists of three sub-studies that examine the perceptions, contradictions, and forms of collaboration of teachers and teaching assistants when instructing students with special needs in inclusive settings in Finnish schools. The first sub-study sought to find out how the teaching staff perceived their ability to teach students with special needs and which background factors influence it. The second activity-theoretical sub-study depicted contradictions in the teaching activities of students with special needs. The third sub-study examined how different forms of collaboration appeared in the teaching activities.

The results show that special educational training and competence development are prerequisites for organising adequate support for students with special needs. The teaching staff experiences pressures when trying to apply the existing teaching methods and the management of the classroom involves uncertainty in when teaching a classroom including students with special needs. This study identified historically well-established teaching activities and cooperation structures. Also, the cooperation between the teachers was fragmented, and the work was well-divided between several experts, thereby creating boundaries. However, when staff could collaborate

in the reflective way, certain activities were recognised. Overall, professional cooperation with the other staff members was perceived as an important way to support both students' learning and professional growth.

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the implementation of inclusive practices is currently understood as a historically well established practices, in other words, "traditional" special education and general education activities. In light of the results from the sub-studies, the development of inclusive practices is demanding due to the existing, historically evolved contradictions. The research results also show how reflective communication in teacher collaboration can support overcoming of the contradictions and lead to inclusive practice-related solutions. The findings of the study point to the need to enhance teaching staff collaboration through joint reflective discussion. The framework of inclusive collaborative teaching activities outlined in this study can be utilised in schools as an expanded conceptual and pedagogical model for the further development of inclusive collaborative teaching activities for the future.

Keywords: inclusive practices, collaboration, contradictions, teacher, teaching assistant, activity theory

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tutkimus tarkastelee opetushenkilöstön yhteistyöhön vaikuttavia tekijöitä inklusiivisen opetuksen kehittämiseksi. Inklusiivisen opetuksen tavoitteena on edistää jokaisen opiskelijan osallisuutta ja tarjota laadukasta oppimisen tukea lähikoulussa. Kouluun ja opetukseen kohdistuu monenlaisia käsityksiä siitä, miten oppilaan tuki tulisi järjestää ja miten oppilaiden moninaiset tuen tarpeet haastavat henkilöstöä. Tutkimuksessa kehitetään käsitteellinen viitekehys, joka ohjaa opetushenkilöstöä käsittelemään omaa positiotaan, opetuskäytänteitä ja opetusryhmän toimintaa jokaisen oppilaan oppimista tukeväksi kokonaisuudeksi. Tutkimus pyrki vastaamaan siihen, miten kulttuurishistorialliseen näkökulmaan perustuvan analyysin kautta voidaan ymmärtää koettuihin jännitteisiin liittyviä taustatekijöitä ja arvioida vakiintuneita opetuskäytänteitä.

Väitöstutkimuksen tavoitteena on laajentaa ymmärrystämme inklusiivisten opetuskäytänteiden moniulotteisuudesta ja kontekstisidonnaisuudesta. Tässä väitöskirjassa esitellään aikaisempaa tutkimusta inklusiivisesta opetuksesta ja henkilöstön yhteistyön merkityksestä inklusiivisen prosessin tukemisessa sekä kansainvälisesti että Suomessa. Tässä tutkimuksessa käytettiin sekä kvantitatiivista että kvalitatiivista tutkimusotetta. Tutkimus eteni käsitteellisestä kartoituksesta ristiriitojen ja yhteistyömuotojen analysointiin. Ensin kerättiin ja analysoitiin kyselytutkimuksen kvantitatiivinen osa, jonka jälkeen avoimet kysymykset ja haastatteluaineisto analysoitiin laadullisin menetelmin.

Tutkimus koostuu kolmesta osatutkimuksesta, joissa tutkitaan opettajien ja koulunkäyntiavustajien/ohjaajien käsityksiä, ristiriitoja sekä yhteistyön muotoja silloin, kun opetetaan erityisen tuen oppilaita. Ensimmäisessä osatutkimuksessa haluttiin selvittää sitä, miten henkilöstö kokee kykenevänsä opettamaan erityisen tuen oppilaita ja mitkä taustatekijät siihen vaikuttavat. Toisessa osatutkimuksessa selvitettiin koettuja ristiriitoja toiminnan teoreettisesta näkökulmasta. Kolmannessa osatutkimuksessa tutkittiin, miten eri yhteistyön muodot näyttävät opetuksessa toiminnan teorian viitekehystä tarkasteltuna.

Tulokset osoittivat, että erityispedagoginen koulutus ja osaaminen koetaan edellytyksenä oppilaiden tuen järjestämiselle. Henkilöstö kokee painetta opetusmenetelmien soveltamisessa, opetusryhmän hallinnassa ja epävarmuutta omassa osaamisessaan silloin, kun luokassa opiskelee tuettavia oppilaita. Tutkimuksessa tunnistettiin henkilöstön vakiintuneita toimintakäytänteitä ja yhteistyörakenteita, jolloin henkilöstön yhteistyö näyttöytyi sirpaleisena ja työ jakaantui eri asiantuntijoiden välillä. Lisäksi tulokset osoittivat myös käytänteitä, jolloin henkilöstön tavoitteellinen kollaboraatio oli mahdollista. Reflektiivinen kommunikaatio henkilöstön

välillä koettiin tärkeäksi sekä oppilaan tukemista hyödyttävänä ja omaa ammatillista kasvua tukevana asiana.

Tutkimustulosten perusteella voidaan päätellä, että inklusiiviset käytänteet käsitetään perinteisen erityisopetuksen ja yleisopetuksen kautta tapahtuvana toimintana. Tämän tutkimuksen tulosten valossa inklusiivisten käytänteiden kehittäminen on vaativaa olemassa olevien vastakkainasettelujen ja vakiintuneiden toimintatapojen vuoksi. Kun erityisopetuksen ja yleisopetuksen käytänteitä kehitetään inklusiivisen periaatteiden mukaiseksi opetuksiksi, se tuo esiin ristiriitoja ammatillisen osaamisen, opetuskäytänteiden sekä koko luokkayhteisön toimintaan liittyen. Tutkimustulokset osoittavat sen, miten henkilöstön reflektiivinen yhteistyö ja kommunikaatio tukee koettuihin ristiriitoihin ja inklusiivisiin käytänteisiin liittyviä ratkaisuja. Tutkimus vahvistaa tarvetta ohjata henkilöstön yhteistyötä kohti sitä, että jokainen oppilas saa tarvittavaa tukea oppimiseensa. Tässä väitöskirjassa esitetyn käsitteellisen ja pedagogisen mallin tavoitteena on tukea opetushenkilöstön prosessia siinä, kuinka he kehittävät käytänteitä inklusiivisten periaatteiden mukaisesti.

Avainsanat: inklusiivinen opetus, yhteistyö, ristiriidat, opettaja, koulunkäynninohjaaja/avustaja, toiminnan teoria

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This dissertation is based on following publications:

- Article I Paju, B., Rätty, L., Pirttimaa, R., & Kontu, E. (2016.) The school staff's perception of their ability to teach special educational needs pupils in inclusive settings in Finland. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(8), 801–815. DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2015.1074731
- Article II Paju, B., Kajamaa, A., Pirttimaa, R., & Kontu, E. (2018). Contradictions as drivers for improving inclusion in teaching pupils with special educational needs. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 7(3), 11–22. DOI: 10.5539/jel.v7n3p11
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Abstract

1 INTRODUCTION

Inclusive practices start with the principle that all students can learn and belong in mainstream school and community life. Also, the idea of learning difficulties and the need for support is itself plural and disputed. There are multiple perspectives to practical implications, and there is no precise definition in the research field (Florian, 2014; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Haug, 2017; Reindal, 2015). Therefore, the focus is not only on individual access and participation but how political and sociocultural aspects shape the meaning of inclusive education (Sharma, Loreman & Forlin, 2011; Schuelka, Johnstone, Thomas & Artiles, 2019, p.333–334). Increasingly, one begins to see less in the way of special needs, and more in the form of updated ways of education for all, although some students do need something special. In this process, the teaching staff role is striking.

The importance of collaboration between staff has recently been strongly highlighted, particularly in the debate on the quality of teaching (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). The cooperation of student support is required to comprehensively address the essential issues that support learning (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017). In this way, the aim is to utilise the expertise of a range of educators and build a smooth support path for the student. On the other hand, for teaching staff, the emphasis is on knowledge sharing, coping at work, and mastering varied teaching activities. The development of collaboration requires that we understand what it means in the school community, and what issues influence our understanding of the purpose of collaboration.

Schools are strong institutions in our society, with traditions and practices that have lived for decades. Traditionally, the teachers are independent workers who are responsible for the class or the particular subject. In contrast, the teaching assistant's job description is to support the teacher by helping to supervise activities and working with an individual student in a smaller group or classroom basis. A sociocultural framework is needed when investigating the teaching profession in extending teachers' teaching skills and competencies, and at the same time transforming schools to become more collaborative institutions.

Sociocultural theories are considered to be beneficial for the study of inclusion because of their particular focus on complex sociocultural systems, and the institutional and structural barriers (Engelbrecht, Savolainen, Nel & Malinen, 2013; Schuelka et al., 2019, p.18). Therefore, educators' underlying assumptions need to be examined in the context of generating inclusive practices that promote awareness of opportunity rather than an adherence to limitation (Bal, Afacan & Cakir, 2018). Daniels (1996) argues that the socioculturally and historically developed organisation of schools both hinders and generates options for inclusive practices. In this dissertation, the

theoretical-methodological approach taken has been the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 2014). From this perspective, human activity is understood as collective, context laden and carried out in multiple, intertwined activity systems. From the CHAT perspective, contradictions are tensions that emerge within and between the activity system (Engeström, 2014). Contradictions are the source of the development and need to be identified. In terms of inclusive practices, the collective identification of tensions and the underlying contradictions enhance the development of teachers' thinking (Cenci, Lemos, Boas, Damiani & Engeström, 2020; Martinez-Alvarez, Son & Arana, 2020). These studies clearly indicate that identifying contradictions is not enough, and interventions for elaborating these are essential.

In this dissertation, I have examined the challenges and opportunities for inclusive education in Finland from a sociocultural point of view, because a country's education system and its core values emerge in a historical context and they reflect national and contextual characteristics. The reform of the Basic Education Act (642/2010) and its emphasis on inclusive education defined a three-tiered support system. According to the national curriculum, support should be designed and implemented in collaboration between a range of experts. Also, collaboration is needed to safeguard the diversity and safety of learning environments and the well-being of the school community. The cooperation should be systematic, and its implementation is evaluated with partners (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016). So, the core question is that what is the present-day understanding about inclusive collaborative activities when implementing high quality and coherent teaching and learning support for all. Both the teaching staff's perceptions and contradictions in terms of collaborative, inclusive actions are investigated.

The aim with this dissertation was to create a new model for enhancing pedagogical collaboration in schools to widen the understanding of the quality of teaching for all students. The first chapter introduces the reader to the research topic and provides an overview of the structure of this dissertation. The second chapter opens up the research field of inclusive education and collaboration, and also the individual's professional learning in inclusive collaborative activities. The third chapter presents sociocultural and cultural-historical activity theory framework to capture the concepts of teaching activity, contradictions and forms of collaboration. In this chapter, I have described the previous research conducted in studies applying cultural-historical activity theory in investigating inclusive education. The fourth chapter describes the sociocultural characteristics of the Finnish educational system and the role of special education when approaching diversity in recent decades. In the fifth chapter, the aim of the study is presented.

Further on, the participants, the data, and quantitative and qualitative research analysis are defined in the sixth chapter. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in the study. In the seventh chapter, participants in the three sub-studies are presented, and the central findings, involving the data analysis of each study. The final section concludes the dissertation by presenting the model for managing inclusive collaborative practices in the school context.

2 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND COLLABORATION

'Inclusion is a process that helps to overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners.'

'Inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners.'

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO
Education 2030: A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education (2017, pp.7)

Achieving inclusive education, among other things, depends on the agreement between teachers and teaching assistants, both in terms of having a shared vision and on the steps that must be taken to put the concept into practice (UNESCO, 2009). Through the ages, there has been a gap between the understanding and realisations of inclusive education (Haug, 2017; Hardy & Woodcock, 2014). Some have considered collaboration to be the one solution for the widening gap between the idea and practices (Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Florian, Young & Rouse, 2010). Based on the Salamanca Statement (1994) and recent studies, inclusive education is about school improvement through collaboration.

National educational policies, such as the Basic Education Act (16a §, 16 §, 17 §) and the National Curriculum (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2016) obligate local authorities to follow inclusive principles. While improving inclusive education is a school-level responsibility, it is also an individual responsibility. Educators need to consider what inclusion means and what they require in their teaching actions (Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). The importance of the contest about the interpretation of inclusion is that definitions reflect the understanding and affect the practising of the concept and, in turn, how inclusive education meets and treats different groups of students (Haug, 2017). In this chapter, I will define the connection between inclusion, inclusive education and inclusive practices. Then I will introduce the research field of collaboration in the inclusive practices and its connection to professional learning.

2.1 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FRAMES INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

In this dissertation, the principles of inclusion and inclusive education are described as an educational framework for inclusive practices. The practices are connected to sociocultural systems at school, which are based on educators' interaction for the purpose of providing high-quality learning for all students (Kozleski, Artiles & Waitoller, 2014). Based on that, inclusive education is viewed as a dynamic process that involves all children in the school community, by reducing exclusive structures (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2004).

There seems to be a gap between formulations and realisations of inclusive education in most countries (Haug, 2017; Hardy & Woodcock, 2014). The history of inclusion through various conceptualisations demonstrates the interests of administrators, professional groups and others in the area, and can be analysed from a variety of perspectives. The different uses of concepts of 'inclusive education' and 'inclusive practices' quickly lead to a conceptual misunderstanding in terms of their scope and rationale. Kiuppis (2014) concluded that there is disjointedness in inclusion research in terms of the question which learners are focused on: special education students, or all students.

As early as 1994 in the Salamanca Statement, there has been an international commitment to inclusive education (UNESCO 1994, p.11): "The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that children should learn together, wherever it is possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have". The more recent United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG, UNESCO, 2016) emphasise the system-level efforts and school-based activities when 'inclusive and equitable quality education' exists. The commitment marks a conceptual shift in the thinking about inclusive education. Inclusive education has been derived from a story about children with special needs to a story about inclusive schools and inclusive learning environments for children with physical, cognitive and social backgrounds of all kinds (Kiuppis, 2014).

Even though there is a range of aspects to the term *inclusive education*, primarily whether they serve the interest of students with special needs or all student learning, divergent understandings need to be noticed. Göransson and Nilholm (2014) defined four levels of inclusion in the research field: Inclusion as a placement for students with special needs in general classrooms (1), inclusion as a meeting specified individualised needs for students with special needs (2), inclusion as a general personalised need for all students (3) and community definition (4). These levels relate hierarchically to each other in the sense that the fourth level presupposes levels one, two and three, and level three presupposes levels one and two, and so on. The Göransson and Nilholm (2014) framework can provide a combinatory aspect of inclusive practices

through which the principles of individual needs should meet at the community level. Also, their study importantly made visible that different conceptualisations indicate differences in beliefs about what schools should accomplish. The discussion of physical placement, individual needs, and the role of the community can be considered to be separate interests at a practical level or as an argument for the lack of contextual definition of inclusive goals. Göransson and Nilholm (2014) concluded that inclusive education is a political issue to a large extent, because the different beliefs cause fierce debates about the practical implications of inclusive practices.

In terms of social and academic student outcomes, Carter with colleagues (2005) reported that the changes in peer support arrangements affected student outcomes (Carter, Cushing, Clark & Kennedy, 2005). The findings indicated that peers can be taught to modify instructional activities effectively and eliminate the disconnect that often exists between the instruction received by the students with special needs and classmates without special needs in inclusive settings. Educators need to evaluate practices to improve the educational outcomes of students with special needs (Cushing, Carter, Clark, Wallis & Kennedy, 2009).

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2014a) stated that the current debate is no longer about what inclusion is and why it is needed; the critical question is how it is to be achieved. Inclusive practices, as defined in this dissertation, are socially, culturally and materially mediated object-oriented activities and a process evolving in social interactions, involving multiple interrelated actors and practices. The practical implementation should serve diverse learners at the grassroots level, which means that various perspectives are in dynamic interplay.

2.2 COLLABORATION IN INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

In the research field of inclusion, collaboration is the precondition for the success of inclusive education (Ainscow, 2016). Collaboration is connected to the improvement of inclusive cultures in schools (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Booth, 2002) and school change (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Moreover, some research has examined collaborative knowledge construction, and it has been suggested that divided creative problem solving is increasingly essential because future teaching is becoming more and more complicated (Ainscow, 2016; Florian, Young & Rouse, 2010; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015; Rytivaara, 2011).

In their investigation of collaborative schools, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) described the importance of collaboration between teachers in promoting and sustaining a real change. Paulsrud and Nilholm (2020) reported similar conclusions in their review of teacher cooperation between regular and special education teachers. The co-teaching, consultative cooperation and professional development activities were described as having

the potential to change attitudes, school cultures, or classroom practices in a more inclusive direction. Although collaborations energise teachers and support reform, the difficulty of maintaining a collaborative school culture within bureaucratic school systems and hierarchical professional duties complicates the collaborative actions (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Ainscow, 2016). Consequently, collaboration would be the key strategy for strengthening the overall capacity of the system to reach out to vulnerable groups (Ainscow, 2012).

Ainscow (2016) argues that education systems have further potential to improve themselves, provided policymakers allow the space for practitioners to make use of the expertise and creativity that lies trapped within individual classrooms. In the school praxis, the starting point for strengthening the work of a school is the strategy for professional development and school improvement (Ainscow, 2016). It starts with the sharing of existing practices through collaboration between staff, leading to experimentation with new methods that will reach out to all students.

The recommendations of Fullan, Rincon-Gallardo and Hargreaves (2015) offer an investment in the professional capital of teachers and school leaders in and among the schools. The best way to do this is through strengthening collaboration within schools, between schools and beyond schools (Ainscow, 2016). These levels of cooperation can act as a catalyst for developments through the interruption of existing ways of teaching. Avalos (2011) highlights collaboration as a facilitator for learning amongst teachers, particularly for altering or reinforcing teaching practices.

In terms of competence-related collaboration, Florian, Young, and Rouse (2010) identified three elements of inclusive practice: seeing difference as a regular part of human development, a sense of efficacy in teaching diverse learners, and new ways to work collaboratively. These three elements are tied together in collaboration when the participants share the understanding in everyday practice. It is imperative to find collaborative spaces between the workers in special education and general education to build new synergies between divided perspectives (Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012; Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017).

It is also essential to recognise the complexities of interactions between the different elements in the teaching practice and their implications for achieving more equitable education systems. One of the foci on collaboration is sharing the knowledge and joint reflection between educators (Bjørnsrud & Nilsen, 2019; Lyons, 2016). Collective thinking emerged that teachers in the community consider it to be a strength to address individual students' issues to identify which practical solutions should be used. When participants shared responsibility for student outcomes, models of collaborative teaching become important (Sailor, 2015). In their study, Lyons, Thompson and Timmons (2016) reported that participants reported ongoing and conjoint processes of planning, teaching, reflecting on current practice, sharing knowledge and ideas, solving problems together, and attending to relationships.

Teachers' active participation in collaborative actions is often considered to be an optional way of working, in response to events as they take place. The Finnish National Curriculum promotes collaboration in education: "The organisation of schoolwork creates preconditions for the students' well-being, development and learning, and ensures the smooth operation of and well-functioning cooperation in the school community" (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 36). However, it is important to realise that the collaboration process is not unproblematic, particularly in the context of rigid bureaucratic structures that allow less space for developing collaboration and create suitable practices. Also, roles and responsibilities should be discussed concerning the position of teaching assistants (Mäensivu, Uusiautti & Määttä, 2012).

Previous studies have indicated that collaboration is widely aspirational, with a series of contradictions relating to time constraints, ad hoc planning and limited professional development opportunities. Teachers increasingly prefer cooperation and working in teams which are regarded as being beneficial for the students' and for the teachers' professional development (Ahtiainen, Beirad, Hautamäki, Hilasvuori & Thuneberg, 2011; Lakkala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2016). Malinen, Väisänen and Savolainen (2012) reported that one of the central goals of improving inclusive education is the development of competence related to collaboration. Teaching staff increasingly need to work across professional boundaries, and this requires the capacity to work in collaboration with other teachers and with other professions.

Despite collaborative processes and a collective commitment to inclusion, the school's position of relative powerlessness within a bureaucratic system required strategically developed compromises (Kugelmass, 2001). Ainscow and Sandill's (2010) argument is that the logical starting point for inclusive development is with a detailed analysis of existing arrangements. The question is how and how well the teachers and teaching assistants collaborate and what are those cultural and systemically opportunities for it. Educators can draw attention to ways of working, and at the same time, they may create new tools to overcome barriers to collaboration. As such, analysing the meanings that educators have with cultural lenses, the education system is more understandable for creating new practices.

2.3 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN INCLUSIVE COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES

In the field of inclusive studies, professional learning and collaborative learning are connected together (see Ainscow, 2016; Bjørnsrud & Nilsen, 2019; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015; Rytivaara & Kerscher, 2012). There is some degree of concurrence between educators around values of respect for difference and a commitment to offering all students access to learning opportunities

(Ainscow, 2016). This concurrence may not necessarily remove all tensions or contradictions in practice. In terms of attitudes, teachers hold negative attitudes to the implementation of inclusion, especially concerning students with severe learning needs and behavioural difficulties (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2011). Previous research indicated that the attitudes to inclusive education have become more positive (Saloviita, 2018). The active support system for teacher work, such as teacher interaction, could affect an individual teacher's attitude positively (Boyle, Topping, Jindal-Snape & Norwich, 2011).

The implication of promoting equity is that responding to diversity is a matter of thinking and talking, reviewing and refining practice, and making attempts to develop a more inclusive culture (Ainscow et al., 2006). When connecting teaching staff's professional knowledge and school improvement, based on research conducted by Messiou and Ainscow (2015), it has been suggested that the most potent strategies have to take part in the context in which practice develops. In other words, the progress relies on making connections with existing knowledge in collaboration. They reported that a significant barrier to professional development is the tradition of isolation that is the feature of schools.

Messiou and Ainscow (2015) created a model of teacher development through which different views of colleagues act as a stimulus for individual reflection. This model involves four interacting processes (see Figure 1). At the centre, emphasising the teachers' sensitivity of students' views and the connection to their thinking and acting in classrooms. In other words, educators have to learn about how to gather and engage with such beliefs and be prepared to consider responses that challenge the ways they teach. The professional discussions between educators can act as drivers to new thinking and development in practical implications, so that will make lessons more inclusive.

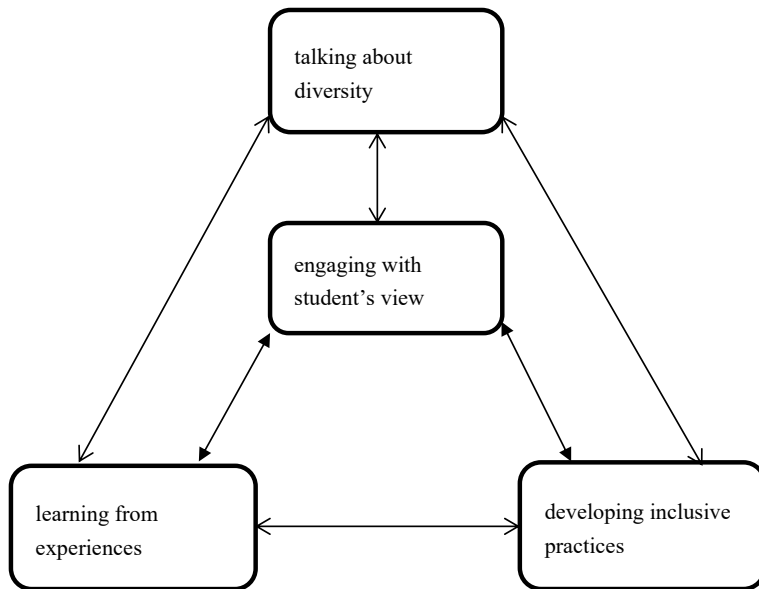


Figure 1 Learning from the differences: the strategy (Reprinted with permission from Messiou & Ainscow, 2015, p. 253).

One of the critical issues of the collaborative activities is using a common language to develop inclusive practices (Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). It means that teachers develop ways of talking that enable them to talk about the details of their practices. They can share ideas about their ways of working with colleagues. This also assists individuals to reflect on their own ways of working, as well as the thinking behind their actions.

Collaboration between teachers is needed to support the introduction of new ways of working (Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). Even though not much research has been conducted about teaching assistants' partnership in collaboration, effective team collaboration in inclusive classrooms requires each member to accept ownership and responsibility for its implementation. If the necessary changes do not make sense to those enacting them, they might resist and not implement the changes. This requires organisational teaching strategies and practices that promote collaboration. The essential question is what are the teaching strategies and practices that reinforce barriers to collaboration. Learning from contradictions is likely to be challenging 'how things stand' within a school. Consequently, the staff have to be prepared to encourage and support the willingness to try new ways of teaching.

Several structures of collaboration between teaching professionals have been reported. Friend and Cook (1990) defined collaboration as a professional partnership between two or more equal educators who share responsibility, accountability, and resources. Collaboration between special education

teachers and general teachers could combine their professional expertise of both special education and practices in general education. This combination of teachers is pivotal to improving the educational practice that meets diverse learners and for the successful inclusion of students with special needs in general education classrooms (McLaughlin, 2002).

Mullholland and O'Connor (2016) reported that learning support teachers and resource teachers provide additional support to the increasing numbers of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms. Working alongside general teachers, this triad of teaching expertise represents an opportunity for whole-school and classroom-based approaches to successful collaborative, inclusive practice. In this research, the participants identified the logistic challenge of time allocation and the impact of this on planning for effective teaching. Teachers identified the improvements they would like to see in the collaborative process, and many of these apply to a whole school as well as to a classroom.

The concepts of inclusive education, collaboration and professional learning are not unambiguous. They take shape in social interaction and are realised in a specific context. When inclusive education is seen as a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach all students (UNESCO, 2017), the focus is shifting classroom practices towards more collaborative practices. The process means that these practices are changed together through collaboration. The conceptual and pedagogical dialogue needs the tool to combine these concepts into well-functioning practices in schools.

3 SOCIOCULTURAL AND ACTIVITY-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Sociocultural theories are beneficial for understanding complicated local systems when implementing inclusive practices (Engelbrecht, Savolainen, Nel & Malinen, 2013). Previous research using a sociocultural framework has viewed collaboration as a fertile ground for teachers' professional learning and identity development while improving inclusive education (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2012). It is thus important to focus further research attention on collaboration strategies and practices to support professional partnerships for enhancing inclusive education (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020; Hedegaard-Soerensen, Jensen & Tofteng, 2018).

To this end, activity theory can help us to understand better the collaboration and collective processes that occur when school professionals work towards organisational change and the development of a shared object of their collective activity (Bal, Waitoller, Mawene & Gorham, 2020). From an activity-theoretical viewpoint, the shared object of activity and the development of new work practices calls for the existing traditions to be questioned and collective analysis of contradictions (Engeström, 2014, 2001). Further, the activity system provides a useful, systemic unit of analyses to depict tensions and contradictions, and to find new options for the teachers' professional development aiming at enhancing inclusive practices.

Further, previous activity theoretical studies in the field of inclusion education have produced research evidence on the connection between professional learning and collaboration (Pearson, 2009; Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2008; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2012). Also, researchers applying activity theory have reported findings concerning the pivotal role of teacher preparation to understand inclusive practices (Abdullah, 2014; Hancock & Miller, 2018; Martinez-Alvarez et al., 2018; McNicholm & Blake, 2013). In addition, activity theoretical interventions have been carried out to changing schools towards inclusive the practices (Bourke, Mentis & O'Neil, 2012; Cenci et al. 2020; Daniels, 2004).

In this chapter, I will examine the inclusive practices in the activity system framework. In particular, I have conceptualised the manifestatations of contradictions and forms of collaboration in mediated schema that enhance inclusive collaborative practices.

3.1 INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES AND ACTIVITY THEORY

Sociocultural approaches to learning and development are based on the idea that human activities take place in cultural and historical contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Scholars applying cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), have developed Vygotsky's ideas on the individual's sociomaterially mediated mental activity towards a collectivist view, emphasising the importance of the social, cultural, educational and historical context in which the individuals act (Leont'ev, 1978). Among studies representing the so-called third generation activity theory, activity system model presented as the unit of analysis for human activity, and it is structured and visualised by a triangular model that includes six elements. The elements of an activity system include subject, mediating artefacts (signs and tools), object, rules, community and division of labour (Engeström 2015).

The activity system allows us to analyse connections between the subject and the surrounding context, also making it possible to distinguish between individual action and collective activity. The context that constitutes the elements 'rules', 'community' and 'division of labour' lays the premises and also possible restrictions to the subject's object-oriented actions. The 'community' refers to all people expected to act together and to share the same aims. Rules are the norms and conventions hold by a community (e.g. a school) that direct the actions in the activity system. Division of labour means the actors (e.g. a school staff) are required to share specific responsibilities and tasks at work (Engeström 2015; see also Engeström & Miettinen, 1999).

These elements of an activity system are essential when it comes to inclusive teaching in schools. According to Vygotsky (1987) the objects, resources or people that facilitate learning and change influence the way in which the learning and change occur. For instance, at a school, not everyone has the same understanding about the inclusive education and the related practices which locally occur. Therefore, based on recent studies that have applied activity theory for the study of inclusive education (including the articles presented in this dissertation), I constructed the following activity system, providing a framework for the study of inclusive teaching activity and its tensions and contradictions (Fig. 2)

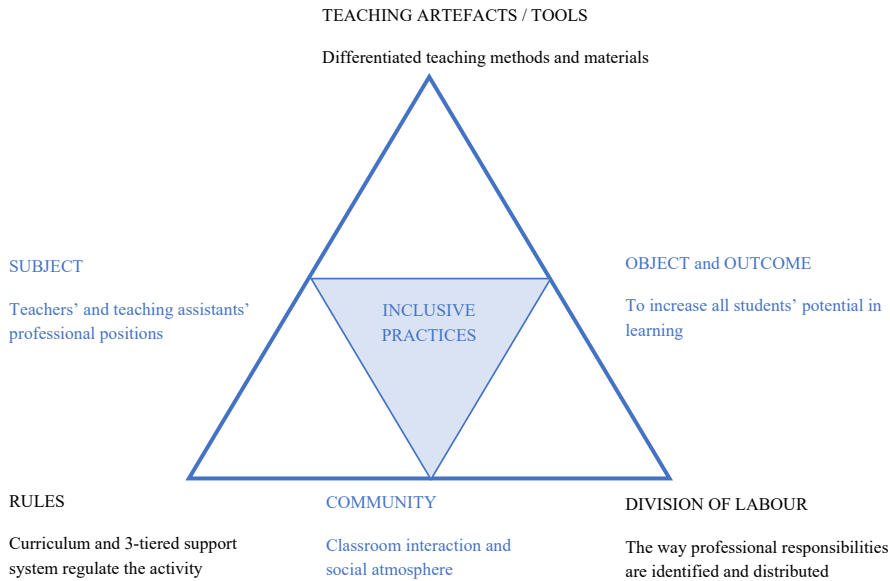


Figure 2 An activity system for inclusive teaching.

This teaching activity figure demonstrates the system of teaching when the object is to improve inclusive practices and promote all student learning, including that by students with special educational needs. An object gives purpose to an activity, and there is no object-less activity (Leont'ev, 1978). Teaching artefacts are the tools that are needed in classroom practice to implement teaching, such as materials, methods and learning spaces. Community means the respective class in which the students are studying, including students with additional needs. Rules focused on curriculum aspects, including documents that are guiding goal-oriented learning.

In the view of teachers and teaching assistants, the position is quite independent, and the expectations of their professional duties are traditionally shaped. The positions are the result of dynamic and locally established process that is being constructed within the classroom in interactions and actions the members take (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). In this study, the subject is considered to be the individual teacher or teaching assistant engaged in the mediated action. It is significant for gaining knowledge and an understanding of the subjects' perspectives in object-oriented activities and how this is considered at the system view level.

A teaching assistant's position has not been investigated in the research field in the framework of activity theory. Overall, their position seems complicated in many ways and varies greatly from the assisting role to teacher-type duties in the work community (see Giangreco, 2010; Mäensivu et. al, 2012). At the same time, the teaching assistant is not responsible for teaching but might carry relevant activities in practice.

Activity theory pays specific attention to subject positions' learning through contradictions, when constructing a shared understanding of the object of the activity. In the research conducted by Yamagata-Lynch and Haudenschild (2008), the connection between the subject's interests and object-oriented practices is essential for professional development. When teachers perceived that institutional objects drove their professional development experiences, it became challenging for them to engage in meaningful activities (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2008). Therefore, in clarifying the object-oriented work, understanding the situational factors in schools and also at the educators' professional level is essential.

3.2 CONTRADICTIONS

In activity-theoretical studies, contradictions within and between activity systems are viewed as sources of learning and practice development (Engeström, 2001, 2014). Achieving this requires that historically generated contradictions are defined through their manifestations, such as tensions and conflicts (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). By recognising these contradictions, debating them and interpreting them from a cultural-historical perspective, participants can become aware of the real anomalies and to move towards their anticipated future. Engeström defines the object as a constantly reproduced purpose of a collective activity system that motivates and defines the horizon of possible goals and actions (Engeström, 2001).

Detailed activity theoretical analysis has been conducted depicting different types of manifestations of contradictions, namely called conflicts, critical conflicts, dilemmas, and double binds in activity systems (see Engeström & Sannino, 2011), but the analysis of manifestations of contradictions in the context of special education is largely missing. According to Engeström and Sannino (2011), at the level of conflicts, participants take the form of resistance, disagreement, argument and criticism. In terms of critical conflicts, people face inner doubts that paralyse them confronted by contradictory motives. In social interaction, critical conflicts typically involve feelings of being violated or guilty. A dilemma implies a situation in which a person is forced to choose between two courses of action, or between doing something or nothing. Dilemmas are expressions of an exchange of incompatible evaluations between people or within a single person. Double binds are processes in which the respondents face demanding and unacceptable alternatives in their activity system (Engeström & Sannino, 2011).

In their intervention project which included an analysis of manifestations of contradictions in the context of special education, Censi et al. (2020) concluded that when aiming at inclusion, the object of activity was understood by the teachers as merely placing the student with special needs in regular schools. This perception seemed to limit the impact of the intervention in which they took part, and instead of developing inclusive practices, they

remained focused on problems. Therefore, the intervention itself was not enough to overcome the contradictions and to change their conception of inclusive education. The research findings showed that although the intervention did not promote change in practices, it improved the awareness and discussions of the manifestations of contradictions concerning the inclusive process in the school.

Another example of an activity theoretical analysis of contradictions is Pearson's (2009) research of teachers' understanding of two concepts, 1) students with special needs and 2) students with disabilities. The results of this study revealed the multiple beliefs and attitudes about their perceptions. The associations with the term disability were blind, wheelchair and deaf, i.e. restricted to physical and sensory disabilities while students with special needs were nearer to the legal definition and referred to behavioural, mental and physical features of the students. It is thus argued that all prospective teachers need some knowledge of systems and procedures, but the attitudes and beliefs need to be noted in the context of action. In particular, when pedagogical practices are discriminatory and disabling, then this might facilitate student teachers to engage in an instructive critique of their practices (Pearson, 2009).

Traditionally, in the context of work, contradictions are considered to be crises and tensions that need to be controlled or diminished. It is important to note that the historical origin of the contradictions regarding inclusive practices should be taking into consideration. For example, in her activity theoretical study, Kerosuo (2011) argues that analysing contradictions collaboratively may create solutions and change. Then, individually experienced contradiction may lead to collective uncovering of contradictions between activity the elements of an activity system (Kerosuo, 2011). Bourke, Mentis and O'Neil (2012) analysed tensions that occurred during the professional development course for teaching staff. One of the critical tensions was the shift towards the inclusion of students with special needs and ensuring their rights and opportunities in terms of schooling. The results of this study highlighted how important it is to reveal the staff's skills and expertise in supporting them with professional learning development. For reaching this, there needs to be a shift from individually experienced contradictions to collaboratively created approaches for change (Bourke et al., 2012).

Investigating contradictions (Engeström & Sannino, 2011) is carried out in this dissertation study (see article Paju, Kajamaa, Pirttimaa & Kontu, 2018) to widen the understanding of tensions and lead participants to having the potential to come up with new practical solutions. To enhance inclusion, all elements of an activity system should be considered to produce a shared object-oriented view among the educators. The activity system for inclusive teaching with core contradictions, identified in this dissertation study (in article Paju et al., 2018) and in need for acknowledging and tackling, is visualised in Figure 3.

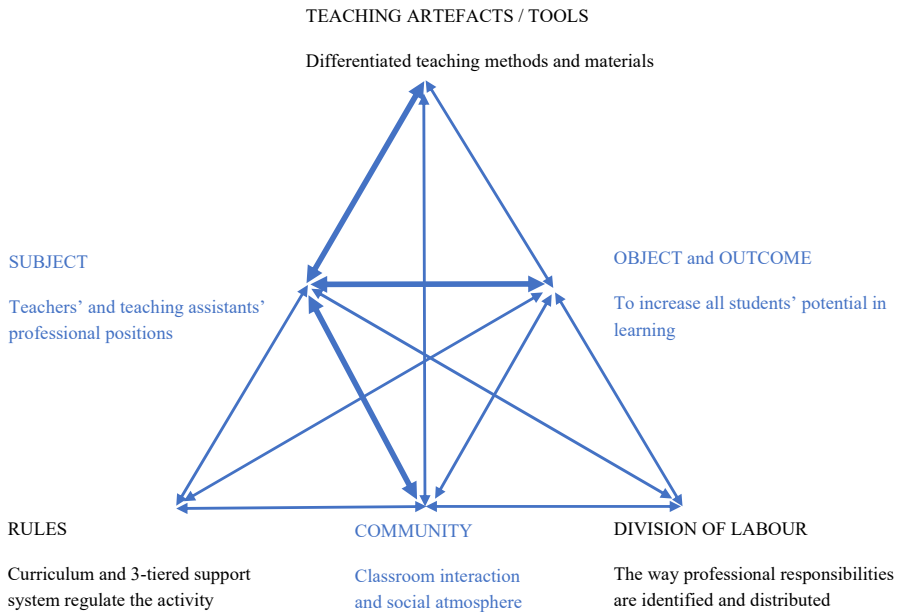


Figure 3 An activity system for inclusive teaching with contradictions (Paju et al., 2018).

3.3 THE FORMS OF COLLABORATION

From an activity theoretical view, the role of collaboration is to expand the individual actors' awareness of their current practices and to see the contradictions hindering these. In the context of school, it is about learning both at a personal level and a collective, classroom level, connected to the societal activity of schooling. Some previous activity theoretical studies have identified several forms of collaboration, namely coordination, cooperation and reflective communication (Engeström, Kajamaa, Lahtinen & Sannino, 2015; Kajamaa & Lahtinen, 2016). This framework has been used in this dissertation study to reveal and understand the dynamics of these forms of collaboration, to help educators to analyse practices and to turn contradictions into drivers for development and change in regard to special education in schools. Analysing the forms of collaboration and the relationship with nature of the object and instrumentality (tools and artefacts) of the collective activity, this framework can become a tool for making collaboration work. When beginning to collaborate, each participant typically has his or her own understanding of the object of the activity. Coordination means that the work is task-oriented and the way to teach is quite individualistic and stable. When the object becomes more shared, the collaboration can develop from

coordination to reflective communication, which is a more flexible and object-oriented form of collaboration.

In the conceptualisation of collaboration, activity theory is based on the idea of learning in a social context with other people. From this view, collaboration and learning are simultaneously and inseparably about social exchange and social distribution (Engeström, 2015). In other words, actions always occur within a community directed by a certain division of labour and rules. Further, the activity systems are affected and saturated by the basic socioeconomic laws and by the corresponding contradictions of the given society (Engeström, 2015, p.124). In this perspective, if the structure of schooling is traditionally based on the value of teachers' professional autonomy and the responsibility of their specific teaching area, collaboration in teaching practices may become challenging.

In terms of inclusion as an education for all, the nature of the object might become the forms of teaching activity instead of thinking about the students with special needs as an object. Still, the goal of teaching can be the students' maximum learning. In practice, there could be variations concerning the nature of the object and instrumentality. Thus, taking an activity theoretical framework, the potentials of collaboration need to be examined through the dimensions, namely, the nature of the object of the activity and the type of the instrumentality employed in the activity (Engeström, Kajamaa, Lahtinen & Sannino, 2015; Engeström & Sannino, 2011), as has been done in this dissertation study (see article Paju, Kajamaa, Pirttimaa & Kontu, 2020). In Figure 4, the potentials of collaboration are visualised in the context of the teaching activity system.

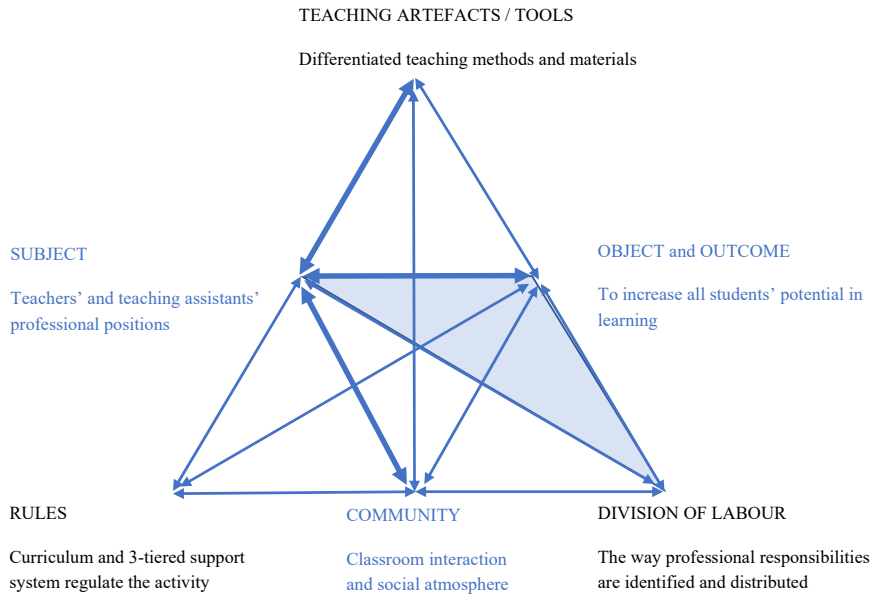


Figure 4 The inclusive activity system including collaborative zone.

The conceptual base described in this chapter is summarised in Figure 4. It draws a framework for analysing the complexity of teaching activity, identifying contradictions and elaborating collaborative actions in the cultural-historical context. It is necessary to analyse its current status as well as its historical development to understand the possibilities for improving inclusive practices.

4 THE FINNISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AS THE RESEARCH SITE

In this chapter, the Finnish education process is presented in notions of the acts that are the most centrally related to inclusive process. Also, some implications of the role of special education in Finnish education system have been examined. To tackle the problem of the diversity of the student population especially from the 1960s to the present day, some important educational policy decisions have had an impact from a cultural and historical perspective on the present-day understanding. These institutional contradictions and how they were solved can be seen as a source of development (Miettinen, 2013). Lastly, the connection between the theoretical issues of this study is summarised in a system-level manner.

4.1 EDUCATION POLICY IN INCLUSIVE PROCESS

Finnish education policy is based on a grand consensus about equality and democratic aims of equity and participation (Antikainen, 2006; Chong, 2018; Honkasilta, Ahtiainen, Hienonen & Jahnukainen, 2019), which are also the central values of inclusion. It is a commitment to values which conquer exclusion and promote participation. These principles are manifested through education that is based on equal opportunity and is free of charge all the way from compulsory school throughout upper secondary and higher education, irrespective of gender, age, skills, origin and socio-economic background.

Miettinen (2013) argues the necessity of strong education and culture for the survival of a small and linguistically-solitary nation, so this has been a recurrent theme in the policy discourse. In a comparison of the education systems of four European countries, including Finland, Arduin (2015) underlined the importance of reflecting on the values of an education system prior to implementing effective educational policy for all and for children with disabilities and learning difficulties in particular.

After the 1970s, comprehensive school reform (Basic Education Act, 1968) transformed the Finnish educational system from a selective system into a comprehensive one. Free comprehensive schools for children aged between seven and sixteen replaced the two-tier system of grammar schools and civic schools. The grammar school was for the theoretically oriented and the civic school for the practically oriented students. After the comprehensive school reform, all students received nine years of education according to a uniform curriculum comprehensive school system. This was now an education system that provided everyone with the opportunity to undertake education regardless of wealth or place of residence (Varjo, 2007).

The comprehensive school strategy emphasised the special educational support system to meet the diversity needs of students (Jahnukainen, 2015; Kivirauma & Ruoho, 2007). In practice, this meant that students could receive part-time educational support in general classes or full-time support in special classes. Part-time special education support was needed so that almost the entire age group could be taught together for nine years. When knowledge about learning difficulties deepened, especially in reading and writing, it became evident that students learn in different ways and that individual strategies are needed (Miettinen, 2013).

The comprehensive school reform was praised and criticised especially among political parties (Miettinen, 2013). In the comprehensive school reform in 1968 the essential question was how to teach all students in the same school context despite differences in students' learning abilities. In the mid-1970s, there were already signals that the system led to the reproduction of a dual track school system and therefore worked against the ideal of educational equality (Miettinen, 2013). The dispute was resolved by the compromise of dividing students into three group levels in mathematics and languages in grades 5–9. Parents and students made the decision of the level of the groups. The grouping was abolished for equality reasons in 1985 in the National Core Curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 1985), thereby guiding the politics of comprehensive education. In the early 2000s, the role of the PISA results led to the discussion of the comprehensive school as a success story of a kind, especially in terms of 'social innovation' (Kosunen & Hansen, 2018).

In general, Finland's educational policy acts of parliament are based on inclusive principles but focused mostly on students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and mild difficulties in narrow areas of reading and writing. Students with a diagnostic disability are expected to benefit from high levels of pedagogical support in special classes and schools. Some students were considered to have such a different mental capacity that permanently segregated education was considered to be a completely natural solution (Kivirauma, Klemelä & Niemelä, 2006).

The segregated arrangements in special schools or social work have had a central role when teaching students with mild or severe intellectual disabilities or groups unable to follow the general curriculum with other students (see Merimaa, 2011). From 1985 in the Basic Education Act (476/83), a child of compulsory school age could no longer be exempted from compulsory schooling. Slightly and intermediately, the education of people with intellectual disabilities shifted from social work authorities to teaching authorities. Also, the exemption from compulsory education for children with intellectual disabilities was abolished.

The most revolutionary reform concerning inclusive principles in line with the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) was The Basic Education Act in 2010 (642/2010), with more individualised education. The main idea was that learning support is educationally determined and not based on psychological or medical needs, which is the one of the differences from other countries

(Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016). The learning support practices are based on collaboration between teachers and parents, special education teachers and regular teachers, and, when needed, between teachers, parents and the multi-professional groups (Ahtiainen, 2017).

The Basic Education Act (642/2010) presented a three-tiered learning and support system. The three-tiered support system comprises levels of general, intensified and special support. The first tier focuses on offering high quality instruction for every student and meeting the diversity in general classroom. The second support level, so-called intensified support, is organised in terms of quality and quantity according to the student's level of development and individual needs. The focus of the second tier is on the students for whom the first tier primary instruction is not sufficient (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016). The second tier methods are basically the same as those in use in the first tier, but they should be more intense and follow an individual education plan (IEP). IEPs are based on the curriculum about a student's learning and schooling objectives, the necessary teaching arrangements, and the support and guidance required by a student. The classroom teacher in conjunction with the special needs teacher and other teachers who teach the student draw up this pedagogical plan in collaboration with the parents. If necessary, student welfare professionals can be consulted in developing the plan.

Special education support at the third tier level is based on an administrative decision. According to the Basic Education Act “special education shall be organised in conjunction with other teaching, or in whole or in partly in a special education class or other appropriate place, taking into account the interests of the student and the conditions under which the teaching is provided” (Basic Education Act 17§, 642/2010). The purpose is to provide the support in regular classrooms instead of moving students into separate settings. Similar to the second tier level, IEPs with more specific details about how special support objectives and arrangements are implemented and evaluated (Basic Education Act 17a§, 642/2010).

Whereas Finnish education endorses inclusive equity-driven policies, policy and practice have no uniform meaning. In the Basic Education Act (642/2010), inclusive education is not designated as a clearly stated goal. There is considerable variation in terms of how and where the municipalities organise the support for students (Lintuvuori, 2019) It enables municipalities to tackle the principles of inclusion in cost-efficient practices, and this leads teachers to conceptualise inclusion in a polarised manner (Honkasilta et al. 2019). Therefore, the progress of inclusion has been resisted in Finland and the absence of contradictory discourses in policymaking about how to reach the goals of inclusive education of equity and high quality of education (Chong, 2018).

4.2 APPROACHING DIVERSITY THROUGH PROMOTING SPECIAL EDUCATION

When analysing the Finnish education policy and the framework of this study, special education has strong cultural roots in responding to diversity in mainstream education. If one considers the starting points for the development of cooperation from the point of view of activity theory, it is necessary to consider the elements of both special and general education. Understanding individual divergent perceptions and actions can better work towards common goal-oriented action, thus clarifying the debate about the goal of inclusion.

Special education teaching activity in Finland has traditionally been either part-time or classroom based. According to Kivirauma and Ruoho (2007), an essential theme of the Finnish understanding of inclusion is everyone's right to learn. Concerning personal support, one way is to place students in full-time special education, and the other is part-time special education that is an integrated solution for guaranteeing the right to learn for every student. Part-time special education has offered help in reading, writing and mathematics which has guaranteed good reading skills and small differences between the students in international comparisons (Haustätter & Takala, 2008; Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2007).

Takala, Pirttimaa and Törmänen (2009) call this 'The Finnish model of an inclusive special education', in which the focus is on the role of special education teachers promoting possible changes in organising special educational provision at school level. Hornby (2015) goes further in his article, seeing Finland as an example of inclusive special education by combining philosophies, policies and practices from both special education and inclusive education in order to create a clear vision of quality education.

The position of the staff in this framework should be evaluated. Finnish teachers consider themselves to be highly autonomous in their classroom practice and their educational decisions (Salokangas, Wermke & Harvey, 2020). Sahlberg (2015) argues that trust in autonomous teachers separates Finnish teachers from those in other countries. Teachers are responsible for student assessment without any standardised tests, and they can freely use multiple methods when planning their teaching activities (Sahlberg, 2015). Errs and Kalmus (2017) argues that the preferred form of teacher professionalism is historically and locally determined, depending on general factors such as provided resources and support along with shared responsibility between teachers and the local administration. Even though the teachers in Finland are highly qualified and committed, they constantly need to improve their competence. In terms of general teachers, they felt that they had not gained enough knowledge and experience in the field of special education or diversity in the classroom, and also that their competencies in

school and community cooperation were insufficient (Saloviita & Tolvanen, 2017).

Special education in Finland has always been the responsibility of special education teachers with the knowledge to provide special education for students. Traditionally classroom and subject teacher assignments did not include teaching students with special needs. Then, the position of special education teacher is more pivotal as a consultant for mainstream teachers in counselling the practical solutions, which not have been the main issue in teacher training. The training programmes concentrate mainly on reading, writing, language, mathematical and behavioural issues (Hausstätter & Takala, 2008; Takala, Pirttimaa & Törmänen, 2009). According to Sundqvist (2012) the combination of the understanding of the nature of consultation, lack of support from school leaders for doing that and lack of common 'student-free' teacher time causes pitfalls in the implementation of consultation between teachers in school.

To sum up, the Finnish education system is firmly based on the principles of inclusion, but it appears to be the confrontation between three angles: part-time special education: class-based special education: and general education. However, teachers enjoy a large amount of authority in determining which of their students needs remedial instruction (Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2010). The challenge is to change the perception that special needs education can be part of classroom activities more effectively. In the 21st century, socio-cultural and historical structures in the special education field are not self-contained (Schuelka et. al, 2019). Instead, understanding, discourse, and structuration move beyond and between the actors and institutions. Gradually, schools have experimented with various forms of cooperation and the results have generally been encouraging. Lakkala, Uusiautti and Määttä (2016) concluded that many steps towards inclusion could be traced and teaching in small groups was not considered to be the only solution for teaching diverse students. The history of special education through various kinds of segregation finds new approaches when the expertise is pedagogically and practically intertwined.

4.3 POSITIONING THIS STUDY IN THE RESEARCH OF INCLUSIVE PRACTICES AND COLLABORATION

In this study I applied a sociocultural and activity-theoretical framework to offer a specific system-level view and interpretation to the study of changing teaching activities in local contexts. In Finland, however, the way forward to greater inclusion that is endorsed is very much a continuation of existing equity-driven policies in education (Chong, 2018). Simultaneously, it is the evaluation of existing practices when special education pedagogy and general education system are more flexible intertwined as effective learning for all. When inclusive practice is defined as socially, culturally and materially mediated object-oriented activities, in this study I sought to capture the

framework for developing collaborative actions in schools. The activity theoretical view of inclusive practices enables a more holistic approach to develop collaboration, which has been considered to be the key theme when building inclusive schools. In addition, this study expands the understanding of inclusive education by focusing on sociocultural systems between educators, and their professional and structural challenges. Figure 5 demonstrates the connection between the theories presented in this chapter.



Figure 5 The system-level view of this study for capturing inclusive collaborative practices.

Collaboration between educators is considered to be beneficial for both practical implementation and educators' professional learning. The starting point for developing inclusive practices is with the sharing of existing approaches through collaboration between staff, leading to experimentation with new practices that will reach out to all students (Ainscow, 2016). Yet the understanding of developing collaborative actions remains vague. In the Finnish sociocultural context, this study brings together teaching staff's perceptions and central themes of contradictions into a model that need to be evaluated when promoting best inclusive collaborative practices.

5 THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim with this study was to uncover the educators' perceptions, the contradictions they felt and the forms of collaboration when implementing inclusive practices in a Finnish socio-cultural context. By focusing on exploring the teaching staff's aspect for supporting students with needs in mainstream classrooms, this framework provides recognition for the role of historical, cultural and systemic conditions for shaping the interpretation of inclusive education in Finland.

The research questions have been realised respectively in the three articles. The overall research question of this thesis is:

What conceptual and pedagogical models are needed for enhancing inclusive collaborative practices?

The results from the three articles answer the overall research question leading to the development of a model for enhancing collaboration for promoting inclusive practices in Finnish school. To address the overall research question, I conducted three studies with the specific research questions presented below. At the beginning, I needed to reach a general understanding of the school staff's views about teaching students with special needs. The first article of the dissertation expands the knowledge of current situations about the teaching staff's perceived abilities.

Research questions in *article I*

What are school workers' perceptions of their ability to meet the educational needs of students with special needs? Considering the participants' genders, ages and profession, are there differences in their ability to teach students with special needs?

At the beginning, I needed to understand what teachers and teaching assistants consider when teaching students with special needs in their classrooms. Therefore, the research questions investigated the factors that identify the teachers' and teaching assistants' ability to meet the needs of students with special needs. In addition, the connection between perceived abilities and background questions were analysed.

Research question in *article II*

What are the main manifestations of contradictions in classroom teachers, subject teachers, special education teachers and teaching assistants whose students include learners with special needs?

The second article depicts the manifestations of contradictions, that arise in the drive to improve teaching practices among students with special educational needs. The framework of Engeström and Sannino (2011) was modified for analysing the written data. This study focused on describing the topic area of concern issues and making the overview of the contradictions the teaching staff describe in their daily work. This article describes the tensions that could be identified in four levels of contradiction, namely conflicts, critical conflicts, dilemmas and double binds. From the activity theoretical view, this article moves beyond the practical concerns to uncover the connection at the system level. In so doing, identifying historically-evolved contradiction can provide motivation and effective tools for developing practices.

Research questions in *article III*:

How do the participants consider the school-level factors regarding inclusive practices and how are forms of collaboration situated in this?

The third article examined collaboration between educators in teaching activity. The third research question addresses the forms of collaboration in the context of activity theory elements. Collaboration is often seen as a uniform phenomenon which is useful for creating learning communities. In this study we examined views of the teaching staff of elements of activity theory in the school system and the collaborative forms in this complex activity. The article presents the three forms of collaboration.

Table 1 presents a summary of the titles of the articles in the dissertation. I will present the main focus of the three articles, the central concepts, data collection and the analysis applied in each study. While creating the model for enhancing inclusive collaborative practices, which was the main research question in this dissertation, the mixed-methods design was needed for reaching the different aspects of the same problem. In this series of studies, the quantitative design (*article I*) was used before the qualitative approach (*articles II and III*). This dissertation is positioned in the sequential explanatory design when quantitative results inform the following phase of a qualitative study (see Greswell, 2005).

The aim of

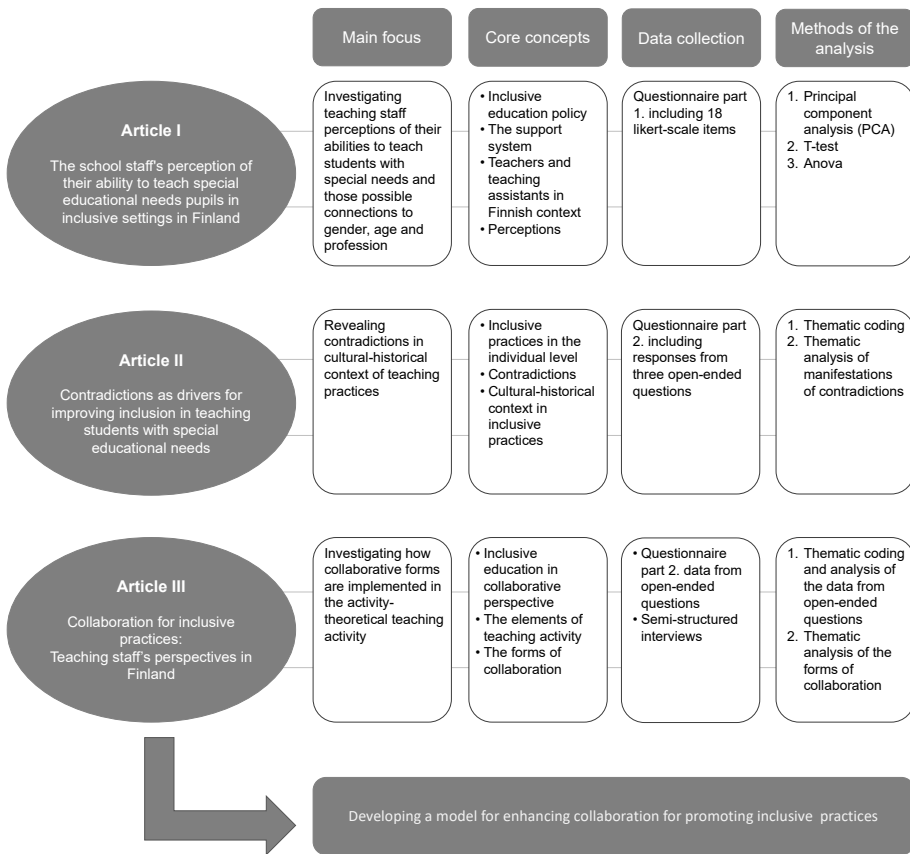


Figure 6 A summary of the main aims, core concepts, data collection and analysis in articles I–III.

6 METHODS

In this series of studies, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used for analysing inclusive practices and collaboration in the frame of cultural-historical activity theory. When combining different data options, it provided a more insightful understanding of the current topic (Creswell & Plano, 2007). More specifically, the study relied on mixed-method research following sequential explanatory design, which means that data gathering, and analysis of quantitative data was followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data (Creswell, 2005).

In the first phase in *article I*, I described the teachers' and teaching assistants perceptions of teaching students with special needs in the mainstream, and the second phase in *the articles I and II*, there is a detailed picture of the overall research question of generating a conceptual and pedagogical model for enhancing inclusive collaborative practices. A descriptive analysis in *article I* established the associations between the background variables and issues of teaching students with needs in mainstream. The results generated knowledge and created an understanding about further qualitative processing.

The second phase in *articles II and III* were based on qualitative data analysis. A qualitative approach was used to discover subjective nuances from participants as individuals and explain the phenomenon that cannot be described merely by the quantitative data. The qualitative data consisted of two sources, from open-ended questions from the questionnaire and interview data. The analysis was tightly integrated with the cultural-historical viewpoints of manifestations of contradictions (Engeström & Sannino, 2011) and dynamics of collaboration (Engeström et al. 2015) in terms of activity theory elements (Engeström, 2014).

6.1 PARTICIPANTS

In this dissertation, the participants were classroom teachers, subject teachers, and special education (class) teachers and teaching assistants in primary and secondary schools. Teaching assistants work full-time in the classrooms, so it is essential to investigate these professionals in terms of promoting collaboration and inclusive practices.

The questionnaire respondents provided 187 responses from 14 primary, three secondary and three special education public schools in one typical, medium-sized city of Finland. Of the 243 questionnaires distributed to the school staff, 186 were completed and returned, representing a 77% response rate. The participants consisted of nine principals, 133 teachers and 45 teaching assistants. For further analyses, principals and teachers were

classified as teachers (n = 142) by their function or degree in education; the other participants were categorised as a group of teaching assistants (n = 45). The other degree group included teachers with several combinations of degrees, but the participants were not officially qualified teachers.

Interviews were conducted with 30 participants at eight primary or secondary schools located in rural and metropolitan areas. Table 2 demonstrates the numbers of respondents in each professional group based on their qualifications.

Table 1. The professional groups and the numbers of respondents in primary schools (PS), secondary schools (SeS) and special schools (SpS).

Degree	Questionnaires (n=167)			Interviews (n=30)		
	PS	SeS	SpS	PS	SeS	SpS
Classroom teacher	58			7		
Special education teacher	12	6	11	5	1	3
Subject teacher	5	30		1	6	
Teaching assistant	21		24	5	1	1

At these schools, all teachers and teaching assistants were offered the opportunity to take part in an interview, of which 30 indicated willingness to participate in the study. Of the interviewees, 29 were female, and one was male. Schools had both general and special classes administratively, but there were also students with special needs studying in mainstream groups.

6.2 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The data used in this dissertation consist of 187 questionnaires, including Likert-scale items and open-ended questions, and 30 interviews with teachers and teaching assistants. The data were collected between 2014 and 2019 in rural and metropolitan areas in Finland.

The data were gathered in two sequences. First, the data from the questionnaire were gathered and then used to inform the collection of data from the interviews. The questionnaire was drafted using the Special Education Coordinator (SENCO) activity in Britain (e.g. Soan 2010). This questionnaire was condensed and adapted to Finnish circumstances to cover the main issues of teaching students with special needs.

The first part of the questionnaire included background questions, such as age, gender, job title and qualifications and 18 Likert-scale items related the respondents' understanding of their (a) teaching methods and materials; (b) knowledge about planning, implementing and evaluating teaching according to the individual education plan (IEP) for the students with special needs; (c)

ability to handle challenging behaviour, friendship and bullying and (d) communication and cooperation with the students and their families/other professionals. The respondents rated the five-step Likert scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. In the second part of the questionnaire, three open-ended questions relating to successes and concerns in teaching students with special needs. With the open-ended questions, the participant supplies the answer, which is ideal when a researcher does not know all of the response options and wants to explore them all (Creswell, 2005).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 teachers and teaching assistants at eight schools located in rural or metropolitan areas. All interviews were conducted by the same interviewer (the author) to ensure consistency across the interviews. The times and locations of interviews were based on the participants' convenience. The length of individual interviews was approximately 30 minutes within the range of 20–40 minutes. Each interview took place at the participant's workplace, and each of the interviews was audio-taped and transcribed. The semi-structured interviews consisted of questions regarding the same issues as in the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, namely successes and concerns related to teaching students with special needs. The participants were asked questions about practices and the situations in which they felt successful and/or challenged while teaching students with special, and the issues that might have affected them. In addition, their experiences with collaborative actions in those situations were sought.

6.3 DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

6.3.1 ARTICLE 1

In article I, the quantitative study as a part of the mixed-methods approach was a theoretical lens for guiding this study to explaining the teaching staff's perceptions of inclusive practices (see Creswell, 2005). The statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS Statistics 20.0 software. Principal component analysis (PCA) was used beforehand to determine whether it was possible to aggregate the 18 items into fewer variables. The purpose of this analysis was to search for combinations of variables that could explain the model more effectively and reveal structures in the data for further processing. Additionally, this method was an attempt to find the variables that would explain the variations in the 18 variables without any prior assumptions based on any particular theory.

After the PCA, t-test and ANOVA were conducted on the independent samples to compare the background variables and determine the differences in the school staff's perceptions according to their gender, age and qualification. All statistical tests were based on the $p < .05$ value of significance.

6.3.2 ARTICLE II

Article II concerned the contradictions in the written responses to the open-ended questions that were included in a questionnaire. In the second part of the questionnaire, three open-ended questions relating to successes and concerns about teaching students with special needs were analysed using a modified classification of Engeström’s and Sannino’s (2011) manifestations of contradictions.

First, the data were analysed using thematic coding for the concerns the data contained (Gibbs, 2007). Also, the distribution of four types of contradiction were analysed to give an overview of the data. Second, linguistic cues were identified concerning conflicts, critical conflicts, dilemmas and double binds. The typology of discursive manifestation of contradictions developed by Engeström and Sannino (2011) was modified for analysing the textual data. Following figure (Figure 5) presents the used framework for analysing contradictions in the data.

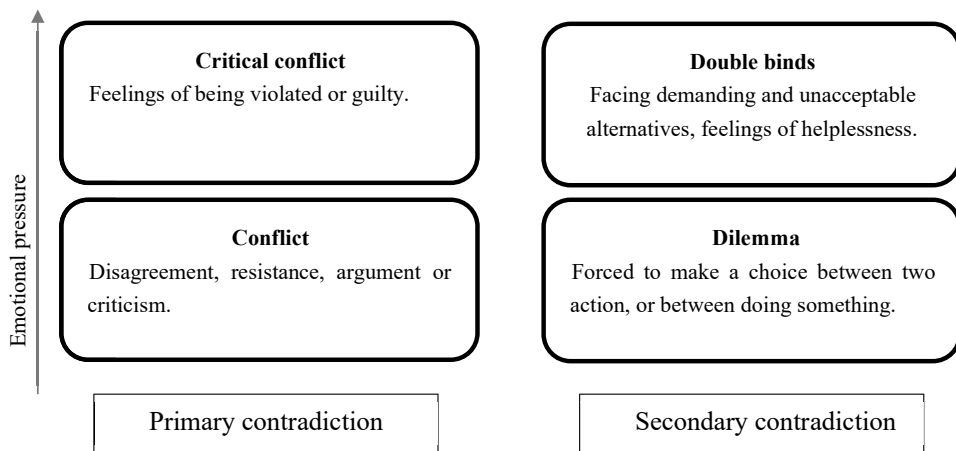


Figure 7 Framework for analysing contradictions in textual data.

In this study, the contradiction terms conflict–critical conflict, and dilemma–double binds were considered as pairs. Conflicts and critical conflicts are tied together at the system level so that they constitute a primary level of contradiction. However, dilemmas and double binds are secondary contradictions between two activity theory elements, such as the object (teaching students with special needs in mainstream classes) and community (classes). Both the emotional expressions and the levels of primary or secondary contradictions were analysed.

Expressions of denial and all other linguistic forms that related to the lack of something were identified as a conflict. Critical conflicts were coded when responses had an intense emotional tone. Dilemmas were expressed as if there

were opportunities to overcome the barrier they named. For double binds, this means the questions that the respondents proposed but could not find answers to. Also, double binds are statements that expressed being “caught between a rock and a hard place” with no way out. Rhetorical questions proposed by the teachers in their responses, and data describing feelings of helplessness were classified as double binds.

6.3.3 ARTICLE III

In article III, thematic analysis was used in the frame of Engeström’s (2014) activity theory. In the data analysis, ATLAS.TI software for qualitative data analysis was used for coding the open-ended questions from the questionnaire and for analysing the interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 teachers and teaching assistants at eight schools located in rural or metropolitan areas.

First, the questionnaire data were analysed. The responses ranged from single utterances of between three words to two or three sentences. Each of these data units was coded in terms of the topic of each response. After that, I analysed the data using the six elements of the activity system model (Engeström, 2014), namely subjects, objects, tools, rules, divisions of labour and community. I decided to rename these to teacher/teaching assistant, SEN student, teaching artefacts, rules, division of teaching professionals and school community (classes).

Second, the transcribed interviews were transferred from Microsoft Word documents to the ATLAS.TI program, in which reflections of the quotations were written. After reading and selecting quotations from each interview, interactive processes were analysed in the framework of activity-theoretical data analysis (Engeström, 2015). In conducting different modes of collaboration, I went through the quotations and identified the three forms of collaboration; coordination, cooperation, and reflective communication. The interviews provided information on how the participant evaluated the proceedings of teaching activity, how they viewed their positions as educators in the classrooms.

7 TOWARDS AN ACTIVITY THEORETICAL VIEW OF INCLUSIVE PRACTICES AND COLLABORATION

This chapter presents the central findings of the three articles, which are answers to the research questions presented in the fourth chapter. This dissertation is a series of explorative studies for capturing the main research question of conceptual and pedagogical models and tools for enhancing inclusive practices. The findings of perceptions, contradictions and the forms of collaboration have been summarised in the framework of cultural-historical point of view. In the following sections, I will summarise the articles and findings more specifically.

7.1 THE SCHOOL STAFF'S PERCEPTION OF THEIR ABILITY TO TEACH STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

In the first article of this study, the school staff's perceptions of teaching students with special needs were analysed. The study includes a review of the literature on inclusive education, and its international conceptualisation and the Finnish inclusive education process. It also presents Finnish teacher education and teaching assistants' training. The notions of Finnish teachers' positions as an autonomous professional were also introduced.

This study took a professional view and it shows that the differently-qualified teachers and teaching assistants consider that teaching students with special needs means that they need specialised educational training and expertise in practice. The study depicts the strong trust in special education training and identifies two components in it: special educational knowledge, and confidence to teach students with special needs. The first component, knowledge, included nine statements that were related to the pedagogical and practical knowledge of teaching students with special needs. The second component, confidence, included eight statements that were mostly associated with social or communicative skills. Also, how physical injuries and underachievement were taken into account in learning situations were also included in this confidence component. Table 2 presents the issues related to both components.

Table 2. The results of PCA analysis presenting the knowledge and confidence components items.

Knowledge component items	Confidence component items
The principles of the content selected for special support student	Supporting friendship between classmates and student with special needs
Knowledge of how the IEP is planned	Ability to identify and intervene with bullying
Knowledge of how the IEP is implemented	Methods to control the challenging behaviour
The assessment tools for special support student	Communicating with the student with special needs
The principles of three-tiered support system	The student's physical injuries are taken into account
Instructional materials for the student of special needs	Teaching the student on the level of his/her capable of learning
Setting targets for whole-class teaching, taking into account a student's IEP	Able to identify the student's under-achievement
The assessment of special support student	Ability to organize co-operation with the student's family
Teaching methods	Supporting friendship between classmates and student with special needs

Note. IEP = individual education plan.

As observed in the knowledge and confidence components, the knowledge component items were focused on teaching tools, whereas confidence items deal with interaction issues. The items of the confidence component were evaluated more positively than the skills based on knowledge of teaching a student with special needs. A relatively high percentage of respondents (44.5%) agreed with the confidence component issues, but the knowledge component had a lower percentage (22.9%). Moreover, 35.5% of the respondents thought that they had insufficient knowledge of how to plan and implement teaching according to the IEP and the three-tiered support system.

Concerning the differences in the teaching staff's perceptions as a function of gender, the findings showed no significant differences between men and women. Also, no differences between different age cohorts was found. Instead, the special educators' perceptions of their ability to teach students with special needs varied significantly from the other teachers' perceptions.

The analysis of teachers' and teaching assistants' results revealed no significant difference in the knowledge component, but the confidence component showed a significant difference between teachers and teaching assistants. These results indicate that the teaching assistants felt slightly more confidence in social situations, communication and cooperation with students with special needs and their parents.

The results indicate that teachers' qualifications constitute the main reason affecting their ability in this area. The existence of special education expertise needs to be acknowledged when creating models for collaboration. Pedagogical and practical knowledge, as well as collaborative skills in teaching students with special needs, are focused on special educators, so collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers is of value in practice.

7.2 CONTRADICTIONS AS DRIVERS FOR IMPROVING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

The second article in this study focuses on contradictions while teaching students with special needs in the mainstream. The research question was posed to find the main contradictions in teaching experiences of classroom teachers, subject teachers, special education teachers, and teaching assistants when students with special needs are studying among mainstream students. Four types of contradiction were modified from Engeström and Sannino's (2011) manifestations of contradictions for analysing written sentences from open-ended answers. Both the content of the answers and the possible feelings were analysed through the modified version of Engeström's and Sannino's (2011) theory, presented in chapter 6.3.

This study brings out the teachers' and teaching assistants' concerns in the practical arrangements at the school system-level. The notions of three themes were found in the data, namely teaching artefacts, community, and the staff's ability themes, focus on understanding the concerns better. In other words, this study depicts the complexity of the actual discussion of problems related to inclusive practices.

A comparison between themes shows that dilemmas and double binds are more frequent in *the teaching artefacts* and *community* themes than in the theme related to *the staff's ability*. The occurrence of dilemmas in teaching artefacts and community indicates that the respondents felt the need to do something but faced barriers to implementing it. For the staff's perceived ability to teach students with special needs, the findings are focused more on conflicts and critical conflicts. A conflict reflects concern about their personal or professional incapability of teaching students with special needs among mainstream students.

For the contradiction underlying the theme of teaching artefacts, participants contend between two simultaneous needs which is dilemmatic. A dilemma implies a situation in which a person is struggling between the object of the activity and the community. Practically this implicates whether high-quality general education should be provided to the class students while at the same time, the teachers are expected to provide learner-centred and individualised special education.

In terms of community, which means students' relationships with each other, the contradiction of assimilating students with special needs in the group and possible reactions among other students was one of the central contradictions. The dilemma between the student with special needs and other students indicates the dominant logic of integration when the student with special needs adapts to the teaching activities of the other students. Even the logic of "interference of the student with special needs in the community" existed in the data.

The results called attention to the teachers' and teaching assistants' concerns related to time. The concept of time occurred in every theme and was

considered to be a primary contradiction and a secondary contradiction. Participants have a sense of inadequacy about whether time resources are available to deal with a variety of matters. For general teachers, the limited time resources were dilemmatic, when instructing students with special needs individually and teaching others at the same time.

This study illustrates how the analysis of contradictions of the teaching staff's responses leads to critical questioning of the current understanding of teaching activity. All these contradictions may cause pressure on the work of the teaching staff but they also influence all levels in the school community. This study shows the importance of creating new activities and models for expanding our thinking of teaching activity.

7.3 COLLABORATION FOR INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

In this third article of this study, when the perceptions of the teaching staff and the concerns they felt have created an understanding of the current situation concerning inclusive practices, the forms of collaboration were investigated. The literature used in this study presents the connection between collaboration and inclusive practices as an intertwined solution for future teaching. Based on previous results, the diversity in all classes calls for collaboration to create effective teaching and at the same time, supporting teachers' and teaching assistants' learning and well-being in their work.

The findings from this study show that many issues and complexities are at stake in the activity system of teaching involving students with special needs. In this study, the teaching activity system theory was created modifying cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT, Engeström, 2014). Based on the thematic analysis enabled by the Atlas.ti program, the framework for analysing three modes of collaboration from the interview data, were created.

In this study, I emphasised the complex nature of teaching activity. Six elements, namely subject (teacher or teaching assistants), teaching artefacts (methods and materials), object /outcome (teaching students with special needs in mainstream), community (respected class), rules (curriculum, IEP and three-tiered support) and division of labour (professional responsibilities and collaboration forms) created a multi-layered system. This complexity addressed the issue of the importance of connecting the expertise in schools to reach the inclusive practices of educating all students to reach their best.

This study indicates the characteristics of coordination, cooperation, and reflective communication as forms of collaboration in the participants' teaching activity. In coordination, when all professionals have their teaching focus, mostly related to subject-based goals, the collaboration is scattered between professionals. In terms of classroom teacher work, the long-term, supportive and object-oriented teaching activity is often missing. An implication of this study is that when structuring the work in schools, instead

of focusing on the expertise of a different profession, the stability of collaboration should be the focus in implementing classroom activities.

According to the results from cooperation and reflective communication, when participants share the same intention of object, the collaboration is fruitful. Teaching staff share the responsibilities, worries and create new interventions to serve the needs of all students better. Also, the results illuminate that there is no division between students. In terms of inclusive principles of education for all, reflective communication builds the context for active learning for all.

The results highlight that there are cultural-historical boundaries for creating collaborative activities. Teachers often wished for collaboration, but usually they stayed in their traditional positions and the coordination mode, carrying out specific tasks of teaching students with special needs. Both the time management and adequate resources were widely expressed as tangible boundaries in practice implementations. At the practical level, innovations for structuring the work and rethinking the division of labour should be considered.

To summarise, these explorative studies presented in three articles reflected teachers' and teaching assistants' views about teaching students with special needs in the current education system. The findings of perceptions and contradictions clarify the practical issues that need to be noted when creating inclusive practices in schools. The third article gave information about the way to collaborate in the complex teaching activity system. Reflecting the results with the activity theoretical lenses, the challenges of implementing inclusive practices are more visible. A tool is required to overcome barriers, meaning questioning the traditional perceptions and analysing contradictions. To this end, the model for establishing inclusive practices that engage practitioners are presented in the next chapter.

8 DEVELOPING A MODEL FOR PROMOTING INCLUSIVE COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES

An aim of this study was to uncover the factors affecting teaching staff's views about improving inclusive practices which are based on collaborative work. Based on the findings of the three articles in this dissertation, I am offering a model for developing collaborative practice in inclusive schools. Similarly, this model manifests the importance of the process of improving collaboration in teaching and challenge the traditional independent structure of working. When teaching staff share new ideas in environments characterised by collective actions, they can affect their colleagues' approaches to classroom practice.

When looking at the studies presented in this dissertation, three main conclusions reveal the importance of collaboration. First, the position of teachers and teaching assistants when teaching students with special needs relies on the professional expertise of special education. The argument in the study is that special education has a stable cultural-historical place in the education field, and therefore the competencies should be available in daily activities. Special education teachers have a role as mediators and sources of special education knowledge, so their positions as empowerers of other professionals is notable. Also, the results indicate that teaching assistants felt more confidence in social situations with the student with special needs, so they felt that ability in this field should be recognised.

Secondly, contradictions related to the traditional thinking about special education and general education as separate teaching arrangements demands analysis of different viewpoints and creating collaborative practices in schools. The three themes of contradictions, the inability felt by staff, fluctuating teaching artefacts, and unstable class community, were the main contradiction issues. Teachers and teaching assistants constitute a form of organisational learning together, which enables the contradictions and structure the actions to be elaborated on that they are unlikely to discover alone.

Thirdly, educators value collaboration but mainly apply that as a coordinated way of working. In this study, the collaborative actions were analysed through three forms of collaborative efforts, from task-oriented activities to possibility-oriented communication, when the object is unified. Breaking the historically established boundaries between special education and general education is here seen as pivotal for the joint development of inclusion. In so doing, schools need to develop more common network-based practices in and outside the classroom. This means that formal structures, such as schedules, meetings, and resources are put into place to allow for

teaching staff exchange ideas and advise the process of attending to students' learning needs.

Differently-qualified teachers and teaching assistants have professional boundaries in their work. In Daniels' (2004) research, different professions will often initially interpret objects differently. In his study, changes were prompted by Change Laboratory intervention sessions (Engeström, 2007). In these sessions, tensions and dilemmas were highlighted and alternative ways of working proposed. The result highlighted the professional context with a strong emphasis on skills and knowledge. It also recognises that work must be organised for learning new forms of practice, mainly when that practice involves changes in boundary relationships between professionals.

In this chapter, I have also examined the ethical considerations. Trustworthiness is established when findings reflect the meanings as described by the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Primarily I have identified and made explicit my role as a researcher to avoid bias due to the researcher's subjectivity.

8.1 THE MODEL FOR INCLUSIVE COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES

I have argued that inclusive education in the Finnish educational system cannot rely solely on the persistence of teaching arrangements, in terms of either professional expertise or practical implementations. The professional groups in schools maintain historically-evolved expert discourses when the focus is on reliable individual and professional autonomy. Teachers as professionals traditionally hold a respected role in society, whereas teaching assistants are typically viewed as caring and helpful people. The arrangements in schools support this individualistic way of working, so changing the current activities into collaborative actions needs system-level evaluation in practical implementations. Scaling up and sustaining innovative and evidence-based practices requires analysing the current practices, which is a complicated process (Sailor, 2015).

When bringing together active individual professionals, the question is that the individual and collective aspects are combined in interaction. In so doing, educators thrive on diversity, disagreement and overall approaches, and increase individual teacher development as well as collective talent (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). To move away from individual autonomy towards collective autonomy (see Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016), participants will have more support from each other in meeting their responsibility for students' diverse needs and personal duties in teaching. Also, they might be less independent concerning various teaching activity elements, such as planning curriculum adaptations and improving their teaching.

In terms of leading the collaborative actions, this model guides the development of collaboration within the school community. The model provides a framework for giving centre stage to relevant issues, and thus facilitates discussion in the school community. It challenges educators to expand their professionalism by questioning their cultural-historically constructed assumptions and current actions. Hancock and Miller (2018) argue that by identifying activity systems, CHAT attends to context, recognises varied influences, and is sensitive to opportunities and challenges for inclusive praxis.

The process through which educators from different activity systems work together, participating and taking actions to create a redefined form of activity, is referred to as expansive learning (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). In this dissertation, the model of inclusive collaborative practices was inspired by the model of collaboration form called knot-working and understanding behaviour with the concept of expansive learning (Engeström, 2014; Engeström & Sannino, 2011), and boundary breaking (Kajamaa, 2011). It is the process of mediating educators' actions, contradictions and the stable structures in school practice. In expansive learning, participants recognise something new in that current situation by questioning, analysing and modelling it (Engeström & Sannino, 2011). To be sustainable, it needs a shared assessment tool and management support when overcoming strong organisational contradictions (Kajamaa, 2011).

In this model, there are three main modules (Figure 8) based on these research findings of perceptions and contradictions. The emphasis on the module about staff ability is to note the importance of the teaching staff's zones of proximal, contributory and collaborative opinions and readiness for the sustainable change to inclusive practices. Then, participant focus on the so-called object orientation when they create a shared vision of inclusive goals. Collective dialogue about teaching staff members' motivation and personal abilities, such as skills and professional knowledge, builds a foundation for creating teaching activity together.

The second module concerns the teaching artefacts, meaning the methods, materials and other classroom instructions. There is no one way to differentiate teaching, and the practical implications need to follow the cohesive pedagogical guidelines. In inclusive practices, teaching practices are based on students' personal ways of learning that need to be recognised. When connecting students' learning strategies and classroom practices, it engages students in the learning process (Sormunen, 2020). The instructive pedagogical guidelines need to be clear for all educators and considering the actual implementation in possible-oriented way. Still, professionals may have alternative ways to act in ad hoc educational situations, and different personalities may enrich the whole.

The third module discusses how the community supports all students' learning. Supporting means not only students with special needs but also supporting all on their learning path. Based on the results from this study,

participants considered the challenges related not only to students with special needs but also the diverse needs of the whole class and their abilities to orchestrate this in classrooms. Inclusive and positive learning community supports each student's education. Furthermore, evaluating group dynamics and practising collaboration between students creates the well-being community where the learning can flourish.

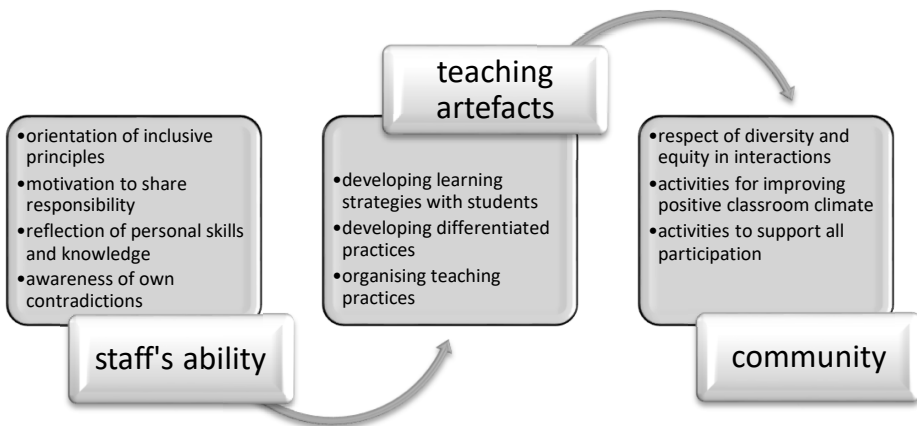


Figure 8 The modules of inclusive collaborative activities.

The modules of inclusive collaborative activities can be applied to the improvement of school-wide collaboration structures, or they can be used in the work of school teams. Only one module can be emphasised at the time, but it should be noted that these three key areas are those which, according to this study, are central to each other.

When generating a transformation towards more collaborative activities, a cycle of elaborating contradictions in daily actions can systemically guide the process more purposefully. Often the participants change-efforts at the school level may disappear. It is essential for the representatives in management who make the strategic decisions and direct changes in boundary-breaking to do so in a continuous way (Kajamaa, 2011). At the in-classroom level, someone as a facilitator may encourage the participant to bring their ideas, analysing resources and tools in new ways and in this way increase their commitment to innovation. The facilitator guides the process in line with the principles of expansive learning (Engeström, 2008; Engeström & Sannino, 2011). Figure 9 illustrates the operation when modules can be examined.

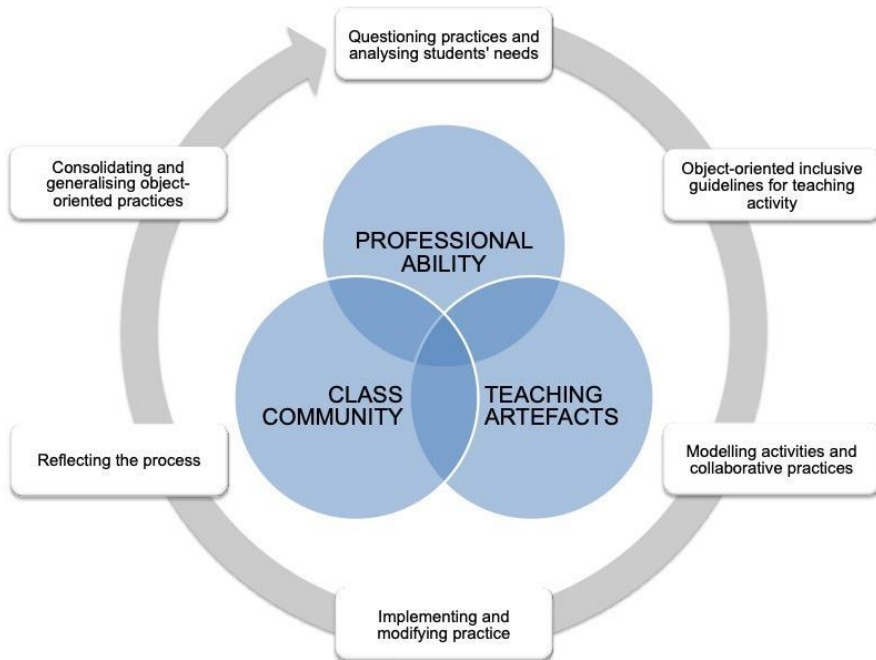


Figure 9 Sequence of learning actions in an expansive learning cycle (adapted from Engeström & Sannino, 2010: 8; see also Engeström, 2014, p. 322)

The first phase is questioning and analysing the situation critically in terms of inclusive principles. Questioning involves both mental and practical evaluation to clarify the connection to tangible actions in classroom work. Educators might accept the inclusive policies of participation but usually remain in traditional activities. It is important to note why traditional activities need to be changed and what the contradictions in that sense are.

Reflection plays an essential part when the individual analysis meets the discourse in reflective communication. In the second phase, participants discuss their thoughts and listen to alternative views with the purpose of coming up with a shared understanding of mediating factors about inclusive practices in their school context. The contradictions should be noted as a source of change for modelling new tools.

In the third phase, participants should elaborate on various collaborative practices that enhance differentiated ways of learning and support all participation in these teaching activities. Different dynamics of collaborative practices should be noted and made use of these when generating a suitable work structure in the respective school.

In the fourth phase, implementing and modifying practice are tied together. In collaborative practice, the practical implications are observed and altered in line with guidelines that have been discussed. Next, reflecting on the

whole process so far is important. The sixth phase is evaluating and consolidating the outcomes into a new stable form of practice.

The model of developing collaborative inclusive practices presented above (Figure 9) illustrates how a multidimensional conceptual framework is connected to this educational change. The basis of this study, the model created, is the beginning for exploring the phenomenon in the discourse of inclusive education in a culturally respected public sector institution, such as a school represents. Overall, it is worth noting that the generalisation of collaborative work is far easier to accomplish if support in the form of time and resources is available.

8.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE POLICY

The findings in this study contribute to inclusive practices in Finland and the cultural-historical view of enhancing collaboration among teaching staff. This study differentiates itself from most studies on inclusive education in Finland by taking an activity-theoretical interventionist perspective that operates at the level of collaborative teaching activity. The activity theoretical view of inclusion in the Finnish context, captures the dialogue between the education system and practical implementation.

In this research, inclusion is based on a broad view concerning meeting the social and academic needs of all students. Göransson and Nilholm (2014) presented approaches for understanding inclusive education, and one was as a placement of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms. I argue that educators lack knowledge about inclusion in terms of the broader view and consider inclusion to be student placement in a general education classroom without special education activities. Support for students in the Finnish school system has been based on the skills of special education teachers and differentiated education arrangements such as special schools and classes, as well as part-time special education in small groups and often in separate facilities. The polarisation discussion about whether to focus on special education or general education forgets the power of the class community to support everyone's learning.

An implication of this study is that official regulations of three-tiered support system and practical implementations, manifested as culturally emerging positions and structures, need to be acknowledged. Teaching is governed by many official regulations and policies concerning curriculum implementation, a three-tiered support system and professional responsibilities. The dialectical activity theory takes the contradictions seriously and analyses the manifestations in activities in practice work (Kajamaa, 2011). In so doing, the managerial-administrative regulations are significant when the focus is on object-oriented issues and reach the daily actions in schools.

From this study it is proposed that the inclusive process needs to be viewed as collaboration between different professionals, retaining Slee's (2013, p. 905) essential question central: "We need to be asking what kind of education facilities are needed for all kids in this century who build knowledge, skills and disposition to work in and reshape the world of the future?". In this dissertation, a need to create new learning solutions based on collaboration in building and advancing the knowledge necessary for future professional challenges has been recognised. From my point of view, educators' professional self-concept and the understanding of inclusive education have a substantial impact on how the classroom is constructed as a social practice and to what extent the classroom can handle diversity. Finnish education policy provides the framework for this, but practical implementation needs more tangible tools for practitioners.

8.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR RECONSTRUCTING PRACTICE

As presented in the Introduction, I consider teachers and teaching assistants to be the most crucial agents in transforming practices towards processes of reflective collaboration. In all, the three articles show that move to be beyond the categorising of inclusive education as a placement of a student with special needs, either special classes or general classes. We need to change our thinking and actions (see, e.g., Honkasilta et al., 2019; Saloviita, 2018; Ainscow et al., 2006).

Schools need to be prepared to find specific solutions together for facing more and more diverse communities in the future. In this dissertation, inclusive practices are defined as socially, culturally and materially mediated object-oriented activities. It is a process evolving in social interactions, involving multiple related actors and practices. Altogether, this dissertation claims that a readiness to overcome and negotiate the boundaries of different viewpoints and the stable culturally connected practices, as well as a willingness to rethink the ways in teaching activity is implemented, is necessary for schools to implement inclusive education successfully.

When it comes to developing collaboration among teachers, it is easy to emphasise seeking interaction with the people with whom it seems most natural to work with. In this case, cooperation is mainly based on person-to-person interaction. Schools may have problematic social relations between teachers, for whatever reason, so promoting meaningful collaborative practice is very difficult. However, the basis for cooperation is in the national curriculum and, therefore, should be systematically developed. A slight social pressure for collaboration, combined with formalised structural changes, provide teaching staff with the need to take a closer look at the advantages of shared practices.

The concept of teacher autonomy should be considered from the perspective of collaboration. The development of cooperation may appear to

be a reduction in classroom autonomy, meaning that there is no pedagogical freedom and trust to decide how to teach. From the individual's point of view, it is possible to look at whether work done jointly is out of the feel of autonomy and thus appears to be a loss of control in one's work. Then, the collaboration may seem meaningless and confusing. Teacher autonomy endorsed an atmosphere of trust and may hold the risk that some teachers would use autonomy as a reason for denying of participation of collective work. Therefore, the relationship between collaboration and autonomy should be dealt with honestly at both individual and community level.

8.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Between 2012 and 2019, I worked as a special education teacher and as a principal, but also as a researcher. In conducting research, it is vital to be aware of one's perspectives and prejudices. These positions have advantages and risks which need to be evaluated. My roles as a researcher, a special education teacher, and as a principal have enabled me to become well acquainted with many aspects of the inclusive practices.

In the collection of quantitative data, my role as the researcher was practically non-existent. However, the role of an interviewer was quite different, because the researcher is considered to be an instrument of data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This means that the researcher somehow affects the situation by asking probing questions from certain viewpoints, and in interactions might give unconscious signals to guide discussion in specific directions. Participants were aware of my topic and interests in the research field, so there could have been a risk that their answers were more positive than in some other situations. As an interviewer, I emphasised to the participants my role as a researcher who is interested in knowing the teaching staff's honest views about the current topic and the importance of investigating their practical views. In applying the activity-theoretical orientation, I focused on asking specific questions about six elements of activity theory. My attempt was not to find any specific issues of concern, but rather I wanted to widen my understanding of multi-layered issues in teaching.

While analysing the data, it was necessary to note that the interpretation of the data is always subjective, when I wanted to understand and uncover the participants' understanding of how they experience the phenomenon. Over the years, I have gained valuable tacit information about concerns and practical boundaries. Although familiarity can be a strength, in the context it can also be problematic as it may be more difficult to see problems or view certain practices critically. One of the advantages of recognising subjectivity is to reflect on whether it facilitates or impedes real comprehension (Ratner, 2002). During the data analysis process, I worked closely with my supervisors, which enabled me to distance myself from the data and to avoid bias.

One of the interesting notions was the tone between written data and spoken answers via interviews. Even though the types of data were different, there were more rather negative answers in the written answers than in the interviews. The question is, were the interviewees more positive on the topic issues or did the written way of collecting data reveal the more straight-forwarded opinions? I noticed some similarities between public comments in the social media and the written data in this study.

During the process, the results have guided the study when exploring the teaching staff's views about inclusive practices. The purpose of the research has been to elaborate on developmental efforts for generating conceptual and pedagogical tools for enhancing inclusive practices. This study provided a wealth of details and perspectives on teaching, which in itself is a complex process. The activity theory framework has helped me to make sense of these connections by viewing change more broadly, by acknowledging that within social networks, the factors affecting change are intrinsically intertwined.

In this study, a mixed-methods approach was useful. Combining multiple qualitative and quantitative methods that complemented one another gave a better understanding of the processes related to professional learning and development in a complex educational context of inclusive practices (Creswell & Plano, 2007). In addition, using results from several methods in order to generate new insights. The mixed methods approach enabled an analysis at several levels and from several perspectives.

This study faced certain methodological limitations concerning data analysis. It must be noted that with Likert-scale answers there is always a risk of participants responding to the scales in a professionally desirable manner and in terms of how they think they are expected to answer rather than basing their answers on their real perceptions of their ability to teach students with special needs. The Likert-scale answers did not reveal how the respondents justified or reasoned their answers. Therefore, analysis of the replies to the open questions provides a more in-depth and broader understanding of teachers' and teaching assistants perceptions of concerns. In terms of the open questions, some of the answers were rather short. This should be considered when seeking to generalise the results.

Since the activity theory is most usually used when analysing interaction, the framework of activity theory was applied in the analysis of the written data. It is therefore worth considering whether the contradictions can be deduced from the written output. Although a simplified model of contradictions was used in the study, it is possible to consider whether they reflect real contradictions or prompt comments written in a hurry. Also, the qualitative approach has certain limitations for its generalisability, and it is not applicable in widely dispersed settings. Therefore, the results should be treated with caution.

8.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This dissertation takes a broad system-level view of analysing teachers' and teaching assistants' perceptions of inclusive practices, their contradictions and type of collaboration and it can therefore provide insights for future research. The main finding of this study is that teaching staff are guided by the cultural-historical traditions of special education and general education as separate pedagogical activities, which creates practical contradictions. The teachers' self-efficacy predicts their attitudes to inclusive education, especially teachers' concerns about carrying out inclusive practices (Savolainen, Malinen & Schwab, 2020). Therefore, I suggest that meaningful collaborative between teaching staff is a powerful avenue for school improvement, job satisfaction, and professional development. These central issues affect students learning (see Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). Although there is already a push for collaboration, there is also a need to identify authentic community-identified interests and tools for developing inclusive collaborative practices. This study revealed the complexities for understanding that there is no single solution, but that certain elements need to be evaluated in practice.

In future research, it would be interesting to identify more precisely the personal descriptions of what is involved in administrative guidelines that frame the work, such as the role of the teacher's union e.g attitudes towards inclusive practices. Using cultural-historical activity theory to analyse the organisational and interactional prerequisites of inclusive education could identify contradictions between different activity systems. Additionally, it will be essential to identify personal descriptions of teaching staff and their successful experiences and practices of overcoming boundaries.

As shown in the literature, many useful interventions and pedagogical arrangements have been reported in schools (e.g. Okkolin, Koskela, Engelbrecht & Savolainen, 2018; Sormunen, Lavonen & Juuti, 2019). Research with the activity system as the starting point could contribute to the knowledge about the situation before and after an intervention, whereas research with the expansive learning cycle can present the knowledge about the mediated object-oriented actions at a practical level. However, more research has to be done to understand the knowledge created during such research and how the results contribute to school-based development of inclusive collaborative practices. I hope that the model presented allows educators to acquire the skills of this nature in authentic contexts.

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