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Joint Mission or Mission Impossible?

Exploring Conditions for Itinerant Early Childhood Special Education Teachers' Work

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Staffans has ten years of experience working as a teacher and as an itinerant special education teacher in early childhood education and care. Since 2011, Staffans has been working at Åbo Akademi University as a university teacher.

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Education Teachers' Work

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Abstract

This thesis aims to examine what conditions enable or constrain itinerant early childhood special education teachers (ECSETs) work with providing support for children with special educational needs in Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) in settings where Swedish is the medium of instruction in Finland. An itinerant ECSET provides support to several different ECEC settings in a municipality. This means that itinerant ECSETs, compared to ECSETs working in a group, face different challenges due to their working conditions. These working conditions were explored in this thesis by focusing on what frames and constitutes the work and role for itinerant ECSETs, what kind of support is offered to children in ECEC and what views and strategies ECSETs use during consultation.

The phenomenon studied is complex and difficult to untangle. To grasp all aspects intertwined, the frame factor theory, in combination with the theory of professions, is used. The frame factor theory constitutes the basis for studying conditions at different levels that might affect the work of ECSETs. Furthermore, the frame factor theory needs to be completed with the system of professions for being able to study the profession itself since frame factor theory does not provide the possibility to do so. Itinerant ECSETs are in focus in three of the included articles, and in one article, personnel working in ECEC are in focus. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. The study is a mixed-methods study with an explanatory sequential design, meaning that quantitative data collection is followed by a phase of qualitative data collection. The data are comprehensive, and several methods are used to analyse the data. The methods used in Study 1 and Study 2 comprise predominantly descriptive statistics, with an additional qualitatively oriented content analysis in Study 2. Studies 3 and 4 are characterised by a qualitative approach, where Study 3 comprises thematic analysis and Study 4 uses cross-case analysis.

The results compiled from the present study show that conditions for ECSETs are challenging in various ways and on different levels. On a legal level, the foundation for ECEC and children's right to support is emphasised; there is a unified support system for children in need of special educational support participating in ECEC. The foundation might be there on a legal level, but the present study indicates that there are many challenges for ECSETs on an organisational level; the premises for doing their work do not always align with the vision on the legal level. In the synthesis of the results, inhibitors and facilitators for the provision of support are discussed in relation to ECSET jurisdiction, namely how ECSETs claim legitimacy for, or control of, their work. The results show that there are inhibitors in the work environment that complicate ECSETs' work and weaken their jurisdiction. Inhibitors in the present study are ECSETs' diminished work role, insufficient resources and nonengaged personnel. In contrast to these inhibitors, there are also facilitators that support ECSETs in implementing support in ECEC. The facilitators for support provision are collaboration, supportive leaders and

environment, and autonomy and flexibility. When these circumstances coincide, support provision for children with special educational needs becomes a joint mission.

Abstrakt

Denna avhandling syftar till att undersöka vilka villkor som möjliggör eller begränsar ambulerande speciallärares möjligheter att erbjuda stöd till barn i behov av stöd som deltar i småbarnspedagogik eller i förskoleundervisning i finlandssvensk kontext. Ambulerande speciallärare inom småbarnspedagogik ansvarar för att barn inom småbarnspedagogik eller i förskoleundervisning i en kommun får det stöd som de har rätt till. Ambulerande speciallärare ställs på grund av deras arbetsförhållande inför andra utmaningar än de speciallärare som arbetar i en grupp. Möjliggörande och begränsande faktorer relaterade till ambulerande speciallärares arbetsförutsättningar samt hur dessa påverkar deras befogenhet att genomföra sitt arbete undersöks via följande forskningsfrågor: Vad ramar in och utgör arbetet och rollen för ambulerande speciallärare inom småbarnspedagogik? Vilken typ av stöd erbjuds barn med språkliga utmaningar och vilka strategier använder ambulerande speciallärare sig av under konsultation?

Fenomenet som studeras är komplext och består av flera aspekter som är sammanflätade eller beroende av varandra. För att försöka få grepp om både yttre och inre aspekter som påverkar arbetet används ramfaktorteorin. Som komplement till ramfaktorteorin används professionsteorin för att studera speciallärarnas grad av befogenhet att genomföra arbetet. Ambulerande speciallärare är i fokus i tre av de inkluderade artiklarna, medan det är personalen som arbetar inom småbarnspedagogik eller i förskoleundervisning som står i fokus i den fjärde artikeln. Data till de fyra studierna har samlats in genom frågeformulär och intervjuer. Denna studie är en mixed-methods studie där de första kvantitativa datainsamlingarna efterföljts av en fas av kvalitativ datainsamling. Data är till sin karaktär omfattande och flera metoder används för att analysera data. Metoderna som används i Studie 1 och Studie 2 omfattar övervägande deskriptiv statistik, men delar av data för Studie 2 analyseras med en kvalitativt orienterad innehållsanalys. Studie 3 och Studie 4 kännetecknas av ett kvalitativt angreppssätt, där Studie 3 är en tematisk analys medan Studie 4 är en jämförande fallstudie.

Resultaten från denna studie visar att förutsättningarna för speciallärare är utmanande på olika sätt och på olika nivåer. På en juridisk nivå betonas grunden för småbarnspedagogik och barns rätt till stöd. Det finns numera ett enhetligt stödsystem för barn i behov av specialpedagogiskt stöd. Trots att grunden för arbetet finns på en juridisk nivå, visar den föreliggande studien att det finns många utmaningar för speciallärare på en organisatorisk nivå. Premisserna för att speciallärarna ska kunna utföra sitt arbete överensstämmer inte alltid med visionen på det juridiska planet.

I syntesen av resultaten diskuteras begränsande och möjliggörande aspekter i speciallärarens arbete. Denna diskussion kopplas till speciallärarnas jurisdiktion, det vill säga vilken befogenhet och kontroll de har över sitt arbetsområde. Resultatet visar att det finns begränsande faktorer i arbetsmiljön som komplicerar speciallärares arbete och försvagar deras jurisdiktion. Barriärer som framkommer i denna studie är speciallärares förminskade

arbetsroll, otillräckliga resurser och icke-engagerad personal. I motsats till hinder finns det också möjliggörare som stödjer speciallärare att implementera stöd inom småbarnspedagogiken. Möjliggörare för tillhandahållande av stöd är samarbete, stödjande ledare och omgivning samt autonomi och flexibilitet. När dessa omständigheter sammanfaller blir stöd till barn med särskilda utbildningsbehov ett gemensamt uppdrag.

Nyckelord: småbarnspedagogik, specialpedagogik, speciallärare, inkluderande undervisning, ambulerande speciallärare, stöd.

Acknowledgements

When writing this acknowledgement, several different feelings rush over me: gratitude, emptiness, pride and gratefulness. Gratitude to all of you, in one way or another, who have supported me through this process, giving me the possibility to reach this aim. There is emptiness because this thesis, which I have been working on for so long, is now done, and I have to give it away for everybody else to read. Pride because I am sincerely proud of myself for accomplishing this, even though the conditions sometimes have been challenging. Furthermore, I feel grateful for all the support that has surrounded me during this process.

First, I have been blessed with several supervisors during my journey. My head supervisor **Kristina Ström,** who has seen my work from the beginning until the end. I will never forget Kristina's comments when I showed her my emerging thoughts about my research. Her comment was: 'I have never seen such a plan for potential themes before', when I showed her my brainstorming map consisting of different circles, words and arrows. Even though the start was shaky and imprecise, one of the circles was chosen, and the journey began. Kristina, I cannot thank you enough for guiding me the whole way through, for being positive and for convincing me of the possibility to complete this thesis.

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I would also like to send my warmest thanks to all that have read my work and commented on it. **Petra Gäreskog**, you were my opponent at my final seminar and gave me new insights regarding my own work. **Päivi Pihlaja** and **Linda Palla**, you two took on the challenge to review my thesis, and thanks to you, the final version of my thesis improved. I also would like to express my gratitude to **Gunilla Lindqvist** for taking on the role as opponent and I feel honoured to hear her thoughts about my research.

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Table of contents

List of Original Publications

This thesis includes following original publications, which later on are referred to as Studies 1–4. The original publications are re-printed with the kind permission of the copyright holders.

Study 1:
Staffans, E., & Ström, K. (2022). Mission impossible? Finnish itinerant early childhood special education teachers' views of their work and working conditions. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, *11*(3), 1–21.

Study 2:
Staffans, E. (2022). Teacher perceptions of language challenges among children in three different language-medium settings in Finland. In H. Harju-Luukkainen, N. B. Hanssen & C. Sundqvist (Eds.), *Special education in the early years. International perspectives on early childhood education and development* (pp.247–261). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91297-0_17

Study 3:
Staffans, E., Ström, K., & Björklund, S. (Manuscript revision) Supporting children with speech, language and communication needs – Finnish early childhood special education teachers' views.

Study 4:
Staffans, E., & Sundqvist, C. (Accepted manuscript) Caught between expectations and ambitions: Finnish early childhood special education teachers experiences of consultation as interprofessional collaboration. In S. Alisauskiene, N. B. Hanssen, D. Kairiene (Eds.), *Interprofessional and family-professional collaboration in early childhood education and care*. Palgrave McMillan

Author contribution
Eva Staffans is the first author of all four publications. In Study 1, Eva Staffans is responsible for collecting data, analysing data, interpreting the results and writing the manuscript under the supervision of Kristina Ström. In Study 2, Eva Staffans is responsible for collecting data, analysing data, interpreting the results and writing the manuscript under the supervision of Kristina Ström and Siv Björklund. In Study 3, Eva Staffans is responsible for collecting data, analysing data, interpreting the results and writing the manuscript under the supervision of Kristina Ström and Siv Björklund. In Study 4, Eva Staffans is responsible for writing the method, collecting parts of the data, transcribing data, interpreting the results and co-writing them together with Christel Sundqvist.

List of Figures

List of Tables

1. Introduction

In today's society, the discussion about quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and children's equal rights to education is constantly present in research (e.g. Bjørnestad & Os, 2018; Hansen & Broekhuizen, 2021; Lee-Hammond & Bjervås, 2021; McNally & Slutsky, 2018; Papandreou & Dragouni, 2022) as well as in evaluations of quality conducted in Finnish ECEC (Pihlainen et al., 2022; Ukkola & Väätäinen, 2021). The principles of inclusion (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1994) are intertwined with the perception of high-quality ECEC in Finland (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2014b, 2022). There is an assumption of mainstream access for all children, which presupposes an understanding among ECEC personnel regarding how inclusion is implemented. Inclusive education can take various forms depending on the personnel's knowledge of inclusion (Heiskanen et al., 2018; 2021b; Lundqvist et al., 2016). Children in need of special educational support participate in regular ECEC; therefore, intervention and support provision to children are prominent issues in research (e.g. Bricker et al., 2022; Buli-Holmberg et al., 2022; Kesäläinen et al., 2022; Ringsmose, 2022; Stites et al., 2021). Furthermore, other research areas within ECEC concern policy aspects and steering documents (Garvis et al., 2018; Hännikäinen, 2016; Kangas et al., 2022; Roth, 2014), values (Einarsdottir et al., 2014; Gunnestad et al., 2022; Kuusisto et al., 2021) and education as a quality aspect (Kangas & Harju-Luukkainen, 2021; Karila, 2012).

The present thesis is entitled "Joint mission or mission impossible? Exploring conditions for itinerant early childhood special education teachers' work". The title can awake various associations, depending on knowledge or experience, or even lack thereof, of the work of itinerant early childhood special education teachers (ECSETs). In the present study, explicit itinerant ECSETs are in focus. Itinerant means that ECSETs are employed by a municipality and are expected to provide support to children in various day care centres scattered around the municipality (Pihlaja et al., 2022). Itinerant ECSETs plan their work according to the needs of children, but the working culture of individual settings can also affect the way itinerant ECSETs work. Frames that constitute work for itinerant ECSETs can have various characters and can be on several different levels. On a legal level, ECSETs' work is affected by laws and steering documents (Act on Early Childhood Education, 2018; EDUFI, 2014b, 2022). On an organisational level, ECSETs' work is affected by the number of children they are responsible for (Curran et al., 2017), collaboration with personnel (Riis Jensen et al., 2022) and so on. Finally, internal conditions affect ECSETs' work since they have great autonomy (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2022; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017) and can, at least to some extent, choose in what ways they prefer to work.

During the last few decades, there has been a noticeable growing interest in researching ECSETs' work roles and the way they conduct their work (e.g. Alijoki et al., 2013; Curran & Boddison, 2021; Hallett, 2022; Middleton & Kay, 2021; Richards, 2022; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Zhu et al., 2021). The work roles for ECSETs

become multifaceted since professional requirements are increasing, and there are constant changes in the working environment (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Eskelinen et al., 2018; Holst & Pihlaja, 2011; Middleton & Kay, 2021; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). Furthermore, the lack of clear guidelines concerning work roles (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2022; Heiskanen et al., 2021b; Nelson et al., 2011; Suhonen et al., 2020; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017), contextual premises for work (Cowne et al., 2019; Curran et al., 2017; Klang et al., 2017, Magnússon et al., 2018) and the autonomy that ECSETs have (Alijoki et al., 2013; Dettmers & Bredehöft, 2020) add to the complexity regarding work and work roles for ECSETs. Research shows that ECSETs experience that their primary work is to support children with SEN included in regular ECEC (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Nikula et al., 2021; Stites et al., 2021), through working directly with children (Nordberg, 2022; Stangeland & Hansen, 2022) or indirectly through consultation of personnel (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020, 2022; Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019; Jensen et al., 2022; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017).

Support provision to children with SEN has been studied from numerous different angles, often focusing on a specific SEN, for example, children with autism (D'Agostino & Douglas, 2021; Dynia et al., 2020; Gonzalez-Barrero & Nadig, 2018; Kessel et al., 2019), children with concentration challenges (Athanasiadou et al., 2020; Perrin et al., 2019) and children with socioemotional challenges (Bekkhus et al., 2022; Harrington et al., 2020; Meagher et al., 2009; Sala et al., 2014). In this thesis, it was of crucial interest to obtain a comprehensive picture of the frequency of children's different challenges (Study 1), but the focus (Studies 2 and 3) is on children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). This choice was made based on the results of Study 1. Children with these specific support needs are the focus of international research investigated from several perspectives: assessments of SLCN (Joner et al., 2022; Nordberg & Jacobsson, 2019), second language learners (Aindriú et al., 2020; Erdemir & Brutt-Griffler, 2022; Smolander et al., 2021), prevalence and predictors of SLCN (Barnes et al., 2020; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; McKean et al., 2017) and supportive activities for SLCN (Cárdenas et al., 2020; Deshmukh et al., 2019; Holmes et al., 2019; Maureen et al., 2018, 2021). Few studies have explored how daily support provision within ECEC relates to contextual conditions.

Few studies have comprehensively addressed ECSETs' working conditions. Dobson and Douglas (2020b) and Takala et al. (2015) used ecological theory to address the complexity of ECSETs' work, but the results derived mostly from the relational level, while values and attitudes were seldom raised. Moreover, the research literature has failed to provide a consensus of causation between contextual conditions and the availability and quality of support provision for children with SEN participating in different types of ECEC settings. In other words, there is a need for studies that take a holistic approach and research elements affecting support provision for children with SEN. Through such approach, it is possible to explore the complexity surrounding the work of ECSETs and the challenges on different levels that may affect the actual support

children with SEN receive. With this thesis, I hope to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the field of early childhood special education. The aim of the present study is to *explore what conditions enable and constrain itinerant ECSETs work in providing support for children with SEN in settings where Swedish is the medium of instruction.* To address this aim, the thesis includes four studies, each focusing on different aspects of special education in different early childhood education (ECE) settings.

1.1. Motives

The first motive stems from the ambiguity in **policy documents**, regarding supporting young children with SEN who participate in ECEC. Finnish ECEC consists of ECE and pre-primary education. ECE is for children aged 0–6, and pre-primary education is for 6-year-old children. Both settings have their own core curricula (EDUFI, 2014b, 2022). When this research journey started in 2017, there was no unified support system for children participating in ECE; only for children participating in pre-primary education. This ambiguity in support for the youngest children has led to local differences when it comes to supporting children. Up to 2022, every municipality had its own way of organising special education and support provision for children in ECE. In the plan for ECE from 2005, it was simply written that children should receive support but not how and to what extent (Stakes, 2005). To guarantee support for children, a supplement to the Act on Early Childhood Education (1973) was conducted in 2007. In this supplement in the law, it was stated that every municipality has to guarantee access to special educational support in ECEC (Act on Change on Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2006). The core curriculum for pre-primary education was revised in 2014, and a three-tiered support system was implemented (EDUFI, 2014b). ECE received a core curriculum in 2018, including support provision for children with SEN. During this time, due to the differences in the core curricula for ECE, the organisation of support provision varied between municipalities (Eskelinen & Hjelt, 2017). Some municipalities chose to use the three-tiered support system, compulsory for pre-primary education, in ECE, even though it was not mandatory. Other municipalities, on the other hand, developed their own models for organising support provision. Due to the variety of support provisions among municipalities, the need to revise the core curricula for ECE from 2018 became obvious (EDUFI, 2018). From August 1st 2022, the three-tiered support system is applied in ECE through the newest revision (EDUFI, 2022). This means that children now have a unified learning path from the start of ECE until they are 15 years old.

The second motive for selecting this topic is the **sparsity of research** regarding special education in ECEC and, in particular, ECSETs' work and support provision to children. Indeed, there is research conducted regarding ECSETs' work nationally, but the focus is different. Alijoki et al. (2013) and Nislin

et al. (2016) focused on special groups, how quality in the learning environment is created and what type of pedagogical methods are used in the groups. Eskelinen and Hjelt (2017) focused more explicitly on how support for development and learning is conducted. Consultation of personnel is regarded as a common way of supporting personnel in their work with children with SEN (Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019). In addition to consultation, ECSETs' perceptions of their own competence (Holst & Pihlja, 2017), collaboration with families (Rantala et al., 2018) and ECSETs' thoughts about the changing work (Viljamaa & Takala, 2017) are studied. In an international context, Middleton and Kay (2021) and Rosen-Webb (2011) researched changes in work and claimed that work is increasing for ECSETs. Gäreskog and Lindqvist (2020) and Jensen et al. (2022) found that consultation and multi-professional collaboration become more important year by year. Curran and Boddison (2021) supported this claim and further argued that the roles of ECSETs vary across differing educational settings. Gäreskog and Lindqvist (2020) have focused on the work task and perceptions and roles of ECSETs from their own point of view, whereas Gäreskog and Lindqvist (2022) focused on teachers' assumptions of ECSETs' roles. With unclear work descriptions, the lines between different professional roles becomes unclear (Davis, 2019) and implementation of different types of plans or methods becomes more challenging for ECSETs (Richards, 2022).

According to Finnish core curriculum, children have a right to support immediately when personnel notice a need (EDUFI, 2014b, 2022). There is a great diversity of children participating in ECEC, and this leads to the fact that the variation in children's SEN is equally diverse. In the present thesis, children with SEN and, in particular, children with SLCN are the focus. In Finnish ECEC, approximately 17% of children are in need of support provision for language-related challenges (Current Care Guidelines, 2019). The high number of children in need of support for language-related challenges has inspired several researchers to study, for example, the impact storytelling or book reading can have on children with SLCN (Cárdenas et al., 2020; Deshmukh et al., 2019; Justice et al., 2018; Maureen et al., 2021).

In sum, there are studies that raise the challenges ECSETs are confronted with when conducting their work (Gäreskog, 2021; Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020, 2022; Lindqvist et al., 2011; Rantala et al., 2018; Richards, 2022; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Suhonen et al., 2020; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017) and support provision to children with SEN (Brodin & Renblad, 2020; Davis, 2019; Hansen & Broekhuizen, 2021; Holmes et al., 2019; Joner et al., 2022; Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2017). Support provision for children with SEN is assumed to be partly dependent on working conditions for ECSETs; therefore, further research is needed to validate these claims. In addition, the working roles for ECSETs in Finland differ from the role special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) have in other countries. In Finland, ECSETs can have a variety of employment: working in groups, in a day care centre, as an itinerant in a municipality or as a leading consultant. Furthermore, ECSETs are responsible for supporting individual children through

direct work or indirect consultation (Pihlaja et al., 2022). In other words, there is a need to scrutinise the Finnish context since it differs from other countries. The present study is further conducted in areas where Swedish is the medium of instruction, and research within this area is lacking.

Finally, the third motive derives from my **personal interest** in the profession and the challenges that comes with the work. I qualified as an ECSET in 2005 and have been working as an itinerant ECSET for several years. I have struggled with the complexity of the work. What is more, now, as a teacher and researcher at Åbo Akademi University, I see a gap in research and the contextual knowledge affecting ECSETs working in areas where Swedish is the medium of instruction. With this contribution, I aim to highlight the complexity that surrounds the work of ECSETs and hope to contribute to the discussion needed to guarantee all children with SEN their right to support.

1.2. Aim and research questions

Despite the research conducted, a sparsity of research still prevails about the premises influencing ECSETs' possibilities to give support and the actual support children with SEN receive. This reality and children's emphasised right to support provision according to core curricula (EDUFI, 2014b; 2018; 2022) and the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (2018) stem, along with the research context and motives presented above, as a foundation for this thesis.

This thesis consists of empirical material collected from ECSETs and ECEC personnel. My ambition is to illustrate how support provision for children with SEN is offered to them in their regular settings. I have chosen to focus on areas where Swedish is the medium of instruction since earlier research conducted in Finland predominantly addresses areas where Finnish is the medium of instruction (e.g. Heiskanen et al., 2021b; Nislin et al., 2015; Rantala et al., 2018; Suhonen et al., 2020). Furthermore, in the Finnish context, and especially in the capital area, there seem to be more versatile forms for supporting children with SEN, for example, special groups, integrated special groups, small groups and ECSETs employed in the setting (Suhonen et al., 2020). The societal Swedish minority language context is geographically more scattered, which can indicate challenges in allocating special education expertise to ECEC settings.

Accordingly, the overarching aim of this study is to *explore what conditions enable and constrain itinerant ECSETs work in providing support for children with SEN in settings where Swedish is the medium of instruction.* To capture the complexity of the present aim, three research questions were enunciated to guide the study.

1. What frames and constitutes the work and role of itinerant ECSETs'?
2. What kind of support is offered to children with SLCN in different ECEC settings?
3. What views and strategies are used by ECSETs during consultations?

The first research question (RQ1) gives me the opportunity to study the differing premises under which itinerant ECSETs have to conduct their work.

Itinerant ECSETs can work in various ways and have different approaches to supporting children with SEN and personnel working in these settings. The second research question (RQ2) is of a more complex character. I have an ambition to find out what kind of support children with SLCN are provided with in their regular settings. Support provision should, according to core curricula, be offered by personnel working in the settings in collaboration with ECSETs (EDUFI, 2014b, 2022). This means that the empirical data for answering RQ 2 are collected in two different parts, one from personnel working in ECEC and the other from ECSETs. The third research question (RQ3) focuses on consultation, and ECSETs are the respondents in this data collection. ECSETs play an important role in supporting personnel so that they in return can support children in the group.

This thesis comprises two articles, two book chapters and a comprehensive summary (Figure 1). To capture the complexity of the research presented, multiple methods were used in the included studies, and the research design was mixed methods. The first article (Study 1) is explorative o its character and is conducted to gain an overview of ECSETs' work in a context where Swedish is the medium of instruction, addressing RQ1. The focus of Study 1 is to explore what ECSETs view to be characteristics of their work and how specific contextual conditions affect their work. The data for Study 1 are quantitatively driven to gain a general understanding of the premises for ECSETs to conduct their work. Study 1 indicate that children with SLCN comprise the largest group of children in need of support. This led to a focus on children with SLCN in the following two studies. RQ2 is examined through two different lenses: the personnel's lens (Study 2) and the ECSETs' lens (Study 3). The focus of Study 2 is the personnel's perceptions of the types of language challenges children have in their groups. Additionally, the personnel's support for children with SLCN is mapped. Prevalence, specific needs and ways to support children are compared between different types of settings. In Study 3, support provision is further examined through the lens of ECSETs. The focus of Study 3 is how ECSETs describe support given to children with SLCN. The results indicate that ECSETs support children with SLCN through consultation of personnel. In Study 4, the knowledge of how ECSETs experience their consultative role is deepened, as consultation is an important part of ECSETs' work. By researching ECSET conditions surrounding the consultative task, the implementation of consultation, and consultation strategies, RQ3 is answered.

Figure 1

An overview of the studies' content, timeline and data collection methods.
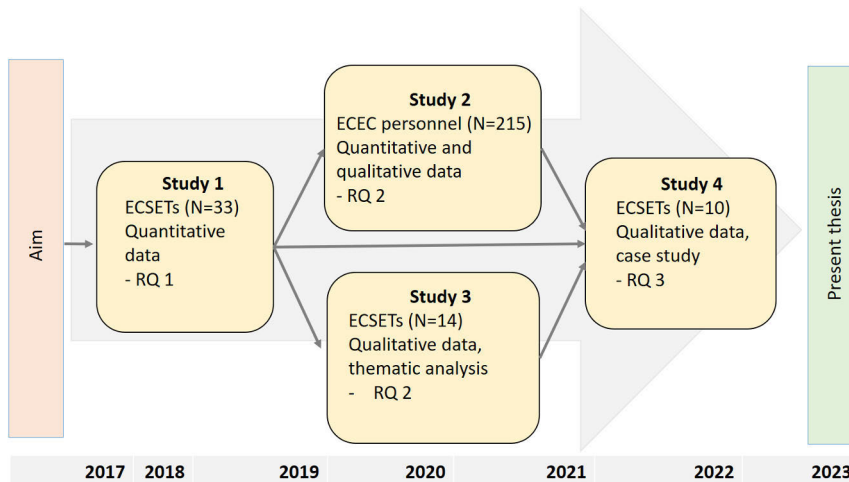
1.3.   Composition of the thesis

This thesis examines the conditions for ECSETs to provide support to children with SEN. After this introduction, which has introduced background and motives, aims and research questions, a chapter in which special education in Finnish ECEC is framed follows (Chapter 2). There is a need to present the Finnish context since this specific context differs more or less from how special education is organised in ECEC in other countries. After this description of the Finnish context, Chapter 3 presents the theoretical perspectives that lay the foundation for the present thesis. This chapter presents the main theoretical perspectives that serve to capture the complexity surrounding the studies in this thesis. To study the phenomenon from different angles, frame factor theory provides me, as a researcher, with the possibility of using frame factors as guidance throughout the research process in this study. Furthermore, Abbott's (1988) system of professions is used as another theoretical perspective for addressing the specifics of the role and the challenges ECSETs face with unclear work roles. Chapter 4 constitutes earlier research on special education in relation to the aims and research questions. Since the present thesis extends over a number of areas, the selection of earlier research focuses primarily on research conducted in an ECEC context. The focus areas in earlier research are inclusive education in ECEC, ECSETs' work and support provision to children with SLCN.

After presenting the theoretical framework and earlier research, the methodological approach and research design are presented in Chapter 5. This study uses a mixed-method approach due to the complexity of the research area. Data collection consists of questionnaires and interviews. After presenting the data collection, the analysis follows. The different methods used are presented in accordance with each study included. This chapter ends up with ethical

considerations, trustworthiness and transparency. Chapter 6 provides an overview of the results of the four studies included in this thesis, which constitute the thesis's empiricism. This is followed by a discussion in Chapter 7 in which I reflect on the results in relation to the aim presented in the thesis. Facilitators and inhibitors for ECSETs to provide support are reported and seen through the lens of the frame factor perspective and the system of professions. The thesis ends with a chapter in which conclusions and implications are discussed. In addition, this chapter includes a methodological evaluation and suggestions for further research. Appendices, the two articles, and two book chapters included in this thesis are found at the end of the comprehensive summary.

2. Early childhood special education within Finnish ECEC

Finland is one of the few countries in Europe that is officially bilingual; and Finnish and Swedish are the national languages. The vast majority of the population (87%) register Finnish as their first language, whereas Swedish is the registered mother tongue of approximately 5% of the population (Statistics Finland, 2020). Although Swedish-speaking Finns are a minority in Finnish society, they have equal rights to use their mother tongue when in contact with authorities. This means that the education system in Finland, from ECE to higher education, consists of two parallel systems: one in Finnish and one in Swedish. The aims of educational policy and national core curricula for both languages are largely identical; the only difference is the language of instruction (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018; Basic Education Act, 1998; EDUFI, 2014a, 2014b, 2022).

The majority of the Swedish-speaking population lives in bilingual municipalities, especially along the southern and western coastlines of Finland. ECE and pre-primary education, where Swedish is the medium of instruction, can be offered in three different types of settings: conventional setting, large-scale bilingual education and small-scale bilingual education (EDUFI, 2014b, 2022). The conventional setting is the most prominent type, meaning that ECEC is provided in the language spoken in the specific area. Second, large-scale bilingual education can be offered in two different ways. Settings offer at least 25% of the activities in another language than the medium of instruction or as total immersion (Björklund et al., 2014; EDUFI, 2014b, 2022; Garvis et al., 2018). The aim of the immersion programme is functional bi- or multilingualism. Total immersion is intended for children from the majority language group (in this case, Finnish), and children usually enrol when they are 4 or 5 years old. In the immersion programme, the amount of Swedish as medium of instruction is offered the most during children's first years in ECEC. The amount of Swedish diminishes as the children grow older, but the immersion programme continues until grade nine (Björklund et al., 2014; Sjöberg et al., 2018). Third, there are small-scale bilingual education settings, which refer to groups where less than 25% of the activities are carried out in a language other than the medium of instruction (EDUFI, 2014b; 2022).

2.1. Organisation of early childhood education and care

ECEC is the first step in the lifelong learning path for the majority of children. In Finland, ECEC comprises ECE for children aged 1–6 and pre-primary education for children aged 6–7. Virtually, all children enrol in pre-primary education because it is compulsory (National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2020). While ECE is non-compulsory and subject to fees, pre-primary education has been free of charge since 2015. Beyond differences in fees, there are also differences in legislation and core curricula between the different stages. Pre-primary

education goes under the Basic Education Act (628/1998), and ECE is guided by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (2018). In Finland, most children (80%) participate in ECE, but compared to other Nordic countries (which have a participation rate of around 96–98%), the participation rate is lower (National Institute for Health and Welfare 2020; Nordic statistic database, 2020). To promote higher participation in ECE, the Ministry of Education and Culture (2021) initiated a project in 2021 called two-year pre-primary education. This means that five-year-old children can participate in pre-primary education without tuition fees. The aim of the two-year pre-primary education is to strengthen equality in education by offering free and compulsory education for all 5–7-year-old children. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education and Culture (2021) with this project wishes to develop the quality of pre-primary education and follow-up transitions between ECE, pre-primary education and basic education.

There are principles on a national level that guide the content of ECEC. One of these guidelines is the principles of inclusion (EDUFI; 2014b, 2018, 2022; UNESCO, 1994), which means that children are primarily participating in ECEC nearest to their home. In the newest steering documents for ECEC in Finland to date, there are clear statements regarding placement for children with SEN (EDUFI, 2022). The revisions in the new core curriculum align with the principles of inclusion (UNESCO, 1994) and the importance of mainstream access for all. Children's right to support provision is assured in the legislation and core curricula for ECEC (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018; EDUFI, 2014b, 2018, 2022). Early intervention is important when it comes to supporting children with SEN. Early intervention in the Finnish context means that children can receive support without any formal assessments. Today, there is a unified support system for all children participating in ECEC and basic education (EDUFI, 2014a, 2014b, 2018, 2022). Since August 2022, ECE has been included in the three-tiered support system that has been used in pre-primary education and compulsory education since 2011 (EDUFI 2014a, 2014b, 2022). The three-tiered support system is a way of guaranteeing that all children with SEN receive the support they are entitled to and aims to create a holistic learning path.

Children's learning paths can vary since there are different ways of supporting children with SEN. Some children who need and receive special support can be recommended to participate in a special education setting. Special education settings for younger children are organised into smaller groups (12 children). In the groups, there are usually five children with greater support needs (Tier 3), while the rest of the children (seven children) have no support needs, functioning as supporting peers. In a Swedish-speaking context, these types of settings are most prominent in the capital area of Finland. Due to the emphasis on inclusion in the nearest ECEC setting, these types of settings are decreasing in number in Finland (Eskelinen & Hjelt, 2017; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). This means that the majority of children are included in regular groups scattered around municipalities.

2.2. The support system in ECEC

Support for children with SEN in ECEC is not something new, but how it is written in legislation and core curriculum is (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018; EDUFI, 2014b; 2022). Earlier notifications regarding support provision for children have been quite general and unspecific (e.g. Stakes, 2005). Current core curricula (EDUFI, 2014b; 2022) state that all children should have an individual *learning plan*. In this written plan, the objectives of the child's growth and learning are specified. The learning plan is prepared in collaboration with the child's guardians and the child. If it is seen as necessary, other experts, such as special education teachers (SETs) or speech therapists, can take part in the preparation of the plan if it is a child with SEN. At the same time, as the plan is prepared, procedures for monitoring achievement and a schedule for reviewing the plan are agreed upon. In addition, solutions related to learning environments, teaching methods, working approaches, collaboration and division of responsibilities between different actors should be noted in the plan.

Many children in ECEC need support during their growth. To offer support, a three-tiered support system is used. The three-tiered support system contains the following support levels: *general support*, *intensified support* and *special support.* Children can go in both directions in the support system, either to stronger and more intense support or from a more extensive support level to a less extensive support level. Common to all support levels is that the support should be evaluated continuously, and if it indicates a change in the need for support, the individual learning plan is updated to respond to the new situation.

In regular ECEC settings, personnel (i.e. teachers, caretakers and assistants), together with ECSETs, are supposed to support children on all tiers. *General support* is usually the first response to children's need for support. According to the law (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018) and core curricula (EDUFI 2014b, 2022), support should be provided directly as a need arises. Support at the general level is usually short-term or not as intense as support at other levels. Personnel work together to organise the best possible support for the child as part of daily activities. General support often means that there is a focus on pedagogical support; clear structure of the day, routines and interaction and communication in a way that is sensitive and accessible for all. Support on this level (Tier 1) is of a preventive character and should be accessible to all children whenever a need is detected.

When children need more support, ECSETs play a more prominent role in planning and executing support strategies and solutions (EDUFI, 2014b, 2018, 2022). If a child needs regular support or various support provisions simultaneously and general support is not enough, *intensified support* will be offered. Intensified support is more substantial than general support and is provided over a longer period. On this level, the support provided for children is based upon the child's specific needs and in ECE the educator formulates a written decision, which is not needed in pre-primary education. In pre-primary

education, the pedagogical assessment lays the foundation for the support instead.

Special support is the strongest support level for children in need of support (EDUFI, 2014a, 2014b, 2022). When children receive special support, it is assumed that these children cannot adequately achieve the goals set for their growth, development and learning. To provide special support in ECE or pre-primary education, the educator should formulate a written decision regarding the provision of special support. The decision on special support shall state the child's primary teaching group, interpretation and assistance services, other required services or special arrangements for the child's learning.

In the core curricula (EDUFI, 2014b; 2022), it is clearly stated that educators need to make written pedagogical statements so that children can receive special support. This statement contains the child's progress and overall situation in learning, what intensified support the child has received and the evaluation of the effectiveness. Furthermore, the child's learning capabilities, interest and strengths related to development and learning are noticed in the statement. The child's requirement of special support is assessed, as well as the arrangements of pedagogical methods, learning environments, guidance, pupil welfare and other measures to support the child. Special support can be offered without a prior pedagogical statement or intensified support if a psychological or medical evaluation shows that the child cannot be thought otherwise due to illness, delayed development, disability or other reasons.

An individual educational plan (IEP) is drawn up for the child to enforce the decision on special support. In an IEP, a description of the support provided is noted. Furthermore, it is important to notice the goals connected to the child's well-being, growth, development and learning. Pedagogical solutions, cooperation with guardians and experts and evaluation of support are highlighted within an IEP. Finally, it is important to remember that when the child receives and has special support (s)he has an IEP and the achievement goals are individual.

2.3. Special education teacher profession in ECEC

The complexity surrounding the SET profession seems to be universal, even though the terminology and assignment vary (Hallett, 2022). In Finland, the term *early childhood special education teacher (ECSET*) is used; in other countries, special pedagogues and SET are the terms used. Special pedagogues are comparable to SENCOs, who have a more overarching responsibility. SETs and ECSETs are similar in that way—their responsibility is on a more practical level, closer to the child. In this study, the focus is on *itinerant* ECSETs who are responsible for early childhood special education and support provision at the municipal level. ECSETs organise, implement and arrange for support for the individual child in family day care or in day care centres in cooperation with guardians, personnel and other specialists (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018). ECSETs are often responsible for several ECEC settings in the municipality.

An ECSET is a qualified ECE teacher who has at least a bachelor's degree in ECE. Supplementary to the ECE degree, they need education in special needs education (SNE) to an extent of a minimum of 60 ECTS. The SNE studies consist of courses covering a comprehensive and complex area of expertise, preparing them to support children with SEN. After their exam as ECSETs, they have several different possibilities to work: as a resource teacher in a regular group, in special education settings or as itinerant ECSETs. Depending on where or in what municipality an ECSET starts to work, (s)he has different responsibilities regarding which children (s)he will support. In some municipalities, ECSETs are responsible for all children in ECEC aged 1–7, while some municipalities have chosen to delegate the responsibility for SNE in pre-primary education (6–7 years old) to basic education SET.

The autonomy among ECSETs is strong in Finland as well as elsewhere. This has led to the fact that the work conducted today in the field is based not only upon working traditions but also on individual preferences (Gäreskog & Lindqvist 2020, 2022; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). This affects the ECSETs' way of working, and traditionally, the work can be divided into two different ways of supporting children: *direct support* for children or indirect support through *consultation. Direct support* for children means that an ECSET works individually with the child or with smaller groups of children with support needs. The direct support is debated since some researchers claim that it is not time-effective nor is it expedient from an inclusive point of view (Alijoki et al., 2013; Brandlistuen et al., 2015; Engvik et al., 2014; Kessel et al., 2019; Jensen et al., 2022; Syrjämäki et al., 2017). Indirect support in the form of *consultation* is becoming increasingly prominent in the work of ECSETs (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020; Pihlaja & Viitala, 2017; Rantala et al., 2018)*.* The basis for consultation is to provide personnel with knowledge and tools for supporting children in their regular groups (Dockrell et al., 2017; Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Rantala et al., 2018). There are several models of consultation, but consultation has two different characteristics and is defined as either expert-driven or participant-driven (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2017; Sundqvist et al., 2014; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). Both models are used, but the expert-driven model seems more common in Finland (Sundqvist et al., 2014).

3. Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical perspectives used in the present thesis. Since the overarching aim of the present study is to explore what conditions enable and constrain itinerant ECSETs work in providing support for children with SEN in settings where Swedish is the medium of instruction, different theoretical perspectives are needed to capture the complexity of the phenomenon. The context studied is multifaceted in many ways: ECSETs work in different types of educational settings, there is a lack of clear guidelines for ECSETs' work and prevailing conditions for ECSETs are diverse (see, e.g. Dobson & Douglas, 2020a, 2020b; Jensen et al., 2022; Mantilla et al., 2022; Richards, 2021). To study the complexity surrounding ECSETs' work and their conditions for providing support, it is important to study the work from a wider perspective.

To grasp this complexity, a theory that takes different perspectives and conditions into account is needed. Hence, I chose the frame factor theory. With this theory, it is possible to examine the different types of conditions affecting the work of ECSETs. These conditions can provide either limitations or possibilities for ECSETs to conduct their work. In addition to external and organisational conditions, internal conditions are an important part since individual motives or internal reasoning can sometimes explain ECSETs' intentions. Because frame factor theory does not address the profession itself, I searched for a theory with which to complement the frame factor theory. Abbot's (1988) system of professions was used to illustrate the complexity surrounding the work role. Abbot (1988) claimed that determining a profession's boundaries can take place on three different levels: the legal level, the public level and in the workplace. This means that frame factor theory and the system of professions address conditions affecting work for ECSETs on similar levels, and a combination of these two theories can add to the understanding of the conditions affecting ECSETs' work. I begin by introducing frame factor theory and how it is applied to this study. Thereafter, I present Abbott's (1988) system of professions.

3.1. Frame factor theory

In this section, I briefly describe frame factor theory as it was implemented by its founders. Frame factor theory has traditionally been used to understand and interpret education. It originated in the work of Dahllöf (1967) and was refined by Lundgren (1972). The researchers were interested in explaining the connections between frameworks for teaching. Frame factor theory primarily focuses on limiting factors within and outside the educational setting that affect teachers' work (Persson, 2014). Lundgren (1972) developed a model to examine how the results of teaching are affected by external conditions surrounding the teaching situation. The model can be seen as a simple linear model where the relations between frames, processes and results are described (Lundgren, 1999). Frame factory theory is mostly used in the school context (e.g. Öberg 2019; Rapp et al., 2017), but research conducted in ECEC has also used frame factor theory

(e.g. Ackesjö, 2015; Steinnes & Haug, 2013). Teachers' actions are explained by examining the prevailing conditions, motives and reasons for the action in relation to the external conditions of what is possible to do.

The consequences of political decisions regarding education and teaching are the areas where frame factor theory is expedient (Lundgren 1972, 1999). With this theory, it is possible to explain how the results of teaching are affected by external conditions, such as the core curriculum and economic or organisational factors (Lundgren, 1972). Organisational factors, on the other hand, can, for example, be time, schedules and group compositions. Furthermore, Lundgren (1972) argued that in addition to external conditions, internal conditions also need to be taken into consideration. Lundgren (1972) listed teachers' assumptions on school, education and learning as internal frame factors. Interestingly, frame factor theory does not speak about explanations in terms of cause and effect; instead, limitations and possibilities for actions and processes are used. Thus, the prevailing conditions in a specific educational setting need to be highlighted in relation to activities and their results (Lundgren 1972, 1999). This implies that a frame factor adds limitations so that certain educational aims are possible for some and impossible for others (Ackesjö, 2015; Lundgren, 1972). Lindblad et al. (1999) found that it is possible to explain the connection between frames for teaching and results among students. They claimed that within specific frames (e.g. time or content), some results are impossible to achieve and that limiting factors, such as time, affect the implementation of teaching (Lindblad et al., 1999).

Frame factor theory is more than 50 years old and has changed over the decades. This is mostly because factors in the early versions of the theory are found to be insufficient or too narrowly studied (Öberg, 2019). Lindblad and Sahlström (1999) raised the issue that there are factors other than these traditional frames that affect how education is conducted. Lindblad and Sahlström agreed that there are external conditions of an organisational character, such as the core curriculum and time resources. Furthermore, they argued that there are internal conditions that teachers create themselves, from their own point of view, within given frames. This aligns with the thoughts of Öberg (2019), who claimed that teachers have various possibilities for interpreting content within different frames.

3.1.1 The frame factor perspective applied to the present study

Lundgren (1999) claimed that there is a scope of action for school and ECEC constituted by three formal frame factors: the rule system (laws), the frame system (resources) and the goal system (curriculum). Itinerant ECSETs comprise a profession working within several educational settings, and the frame factors might be more complex. Therefore, I chose to take a wider perspective on frame factor theory, which leads to the fact that I use the term *frame factor perspective* instead of frame factor theory. Öberg (2019) chose to take the same point of view so that research opportunities are not confined to the three formal frame factors. To examine the processes and prevailing conditions for support provision to

children with SEN, it is not enough to look at support provision and correlate it with the child's SEN or social background; several other factors need to be taken into consideration (Broady, 1999). First, legal conditions set the premises for ECEC. The law (Act on Early Childhood, 2018), steering documents (EDUFI, 2014b, 2022) and principles regarding inclusive education (EDUFI, 2014a, 2014b, 2022; UNESCO, 1994) guide Finnish ECEC. Earlier research has concluded that there are external conditions outside the control of ECSETs that limit their ability to conduct their work (Curran et al., 2017; Richards, 2022). Lundberg (1972) concluded that it is challenging and sometimes even impossible to affect external conditions. Examples of external conditions that ECSETs have challenges to affect are political and administrative decisions regarding group sizes, physical environment and number of ECSETs in the municipality. In addition to these administrative and political frames, other frames limit the ECSETs' ability to provide support. These types of frames are traditions, values, assumptions and group compositions (Brownlee et al., 2016; Garvis & Kuusisto, 2021; Middleton & Kay, 2021).

Internal conditions, such as one's own assumptions and perceptions of the right thing to do, can be affected in different respects, to different degrees and in different ways. Depending on the views of the teacher, it is possible to influence children through different groupings, activities and actions (Brownlee et al., 2016; Hau et al., 2022; Justice et al., 2018), even though the number of children in the group is a factor that teachers cannot affect. As Öberg (2019) concluded, some factors interact and reinforce each other, while other factors compete and oppose each other. From the frame factor perspective, it is possible to reveal the prevailing conditions for ECSETs to provide support to children with SEN by relating not only to frames but also to social and professional circumstances.

Together, external and internal conditions create a comprehensive image of ECSETs' possibilities and limitations for conducting the work. The frame factor perspective connects the external and internal conditions in prevailing conditions for support provision on the terms of the external conditions. This means that even though ECSETs might have another assumption about how they would like to work, specific external conditions can make it almost impossible to implement this assumption. In Figure 2, I illustrate how I interpreted and implemented the frame factor perspective in the present study. My interpretation has a strong resemblance to the reasoning of Hallet (2022) and Smith (2022). Hallet (2022) talked about external and internal conditions that are intertwined and affect the work of SENCOs. Hallet (2022) also raised; the beliefs of individual SENCOs; educational environments and policy level. Smith (2022) raised three areas as vital for SENCOs' abilities to undertake their duties and responsibilities: the legal contract, the psychological contract and contextual variety. I, on the other hand, name them *legal conditions, external conditions* and *internal conditions*. Legal conditions are the foundation of ECEC. Legal conditions consist of laws, steering documents and principles guiding ECEC. These legal conditions affect the external conditions, internal conditions and ECSETs' possibilities and obligations of work.

Figure 2

Interpretation of the frame-factor perspective.
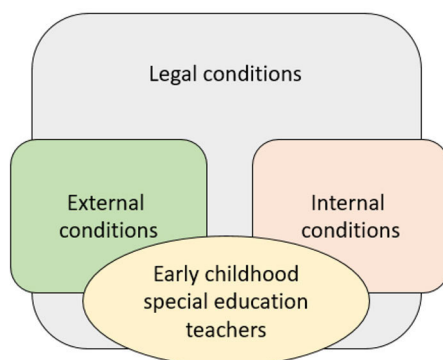
Even though the legal conditions set the prevailing conditions for work, external and internal conditions and ECSETs are all three slightly outside the legal conditions. External conditions involve items of an organisational character: context, settings, support provision, group sizes, resources, collaboration and consultation. A minor part of the external conditions is outside of legal conditions since municipalities have a right to decide on how they organise special educational support. The internal conditions constitute ECSETs' views of the right thing to do and their assumptions about learning and children. Internal conditions are not completely within legal conditions since ECSETs' work can be affected by their own assumptions and views. Finally, even ECSETs are slightly outside the legal conditions due to the autonomy that ECSETs have. They have, at least to some extent, the possibility of deciding themselves regarding how they prefer to work and how they prioritise.

3.2. System of professions

In Finnish ECEC, several types of professionals work with children in ECEC (i.e. teachers, social pedagogues, child carers, child miners, assistants and ECSETs). In his book, Abbot (1988) presented his theory about what a profession is and what constitutes a profession. The simplest explanation is that a profession is defined by the specific work tasks that professionals do (Abbot, 1988), but things are seldom that simple when it comes to the profession within the ECSE (Nelson, 2011; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). Work tasks for ECSETs are of various kinds, depending on regulations for the work (see, e.g. Department of Education, 2022; EDUFI 2104b, 2022), area of responsibility (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Middleton & Kay, 2021; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017), possibilities and/or challenges with collaboration (Jensen et al., 2022; Macleod & Perepa, 2020; Richards, 2021) and even individual views and assumptions (Nelson et al., 2011; Rosen-Webb, 2011; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). One important aspect connected to a profession is its jurisdiction and how a specific profession—in this case, ECSETs—claims its jurisdiction. Abbott (1988) defined jurisdiction as an acknowledgement by

society that a profession has the right to claim legitimacy for or control of its work. This means that work content is to be interpreted by professionals, and they need to make decisions regarding how their own work should be performed (Rosen-Webb, 2011). Gäreskog (2021) and Lindqvist (2013) found that there are challenges for ECSETs claiming their jurisdiction since people from different professions working within ECEC expect different things from ECSETs (e.g. regarding responsibility for children with SEN).

A profession can have various degrees of control over a specific area of knowledge and activity. In the Finnish context, ECSETs most often have a bachelor's degree in education as a foundation—the same as teachers working in the settings. Having the same education as a starting point can make the boundary between the understandings of the different professions' work tasks more diffuse (Gäreskog, 2021). Abbot (1988) claimed that this control is based on their control over work. Full jurisdiction means that a profession has established control over its area within the workplace—at the public and legal levels. Lindqvist (2013) pointed out that ECSETs do not have a clear definition of what the work actually consists of, and they adapt their work in relation to the context. Itinerant ECSETs working in the Finnish context are not formally subordinate to other professions. They have great autonomy and are free to implement work in the way they find most suitable (Nelson et al., 2011; Rantala et al., 2018; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017; Vitikka et al., 2021).

Although ECSETs are not in a subordinate position to other professions, a division of labour is prominent. There is a division of areas of responsibility between different professions supporting children with SEN (Act on Early Childhood Education, 2018; EDUFI, 2014b, 2022). The division of labour is, in a way, connected to intellectual jurisdiction, meaning that one profession has control over a specific cognitive area of knowledge (Abbott, 1988). The specific knowledge and competence that ECSETs possess is highly valued by personnel working in ECEC, even though there might be a gap between personnel's expectations and the ECSET's own perception of their knowledge and skills (Cochrane & Soni, 2020; Richards, 2022).

Personnel in ECEC claim that they see ECSETs as mentors, supporters, guides and someone they can throw ideas to (Gäreskog & Lindqvist 2022; Rosen-Webb, 2011). Advisory jurisdiction is when a profession interprets, modifies and guides other professional groups in their work. Many ECSETs claim that this is one of the most important tasks in their work (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020b; Heiskanen et al., 2019; Jensen et al., 2022). The final, and sixth, jurisdiction is, according to Abbott (1988), client differentiation. This means that different groups of persons (e.g. clients) are divided either between or within the professions. This division of labour is conducted in some formal sense, and it often coexists with patterns of formal jurisdiction.

Abbott (1988) stated that autonomy and unclear guidelines regarding work lead to a situation in which professions must continually defend the rights they have attained. Unclear guidelines and ambiguity related to jurisdiction seem to be universal among professionals who provide support for children with SEN in

their early years (Hallett, 2022; Nelson et al., 2011; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). Except for unclear guidelines and ambiguity, Abbott (1988) argued that professions try to expand their "territory" by claiming adjacent areas. Jurisdiction is therefore not to be seen as static; instead, it can be seen as a constant ongoing process. Furthermore, Abbott (1988) argued that work with jurisdiction or changes in jurisdiction can take place at three different levels: the legal level, the public level and at the workplace. At the legal level, regulations and steering documents affect the profession. Regulations that set premises for the work for ECSETs are their work descriptions, the Act on Early Childhood Education (2018) and core curricula for ECEC (EDUFI, 2014b; 2022). The public level consists of the profession's ability to claim its importance, such as having political discussions or showing how their knowledge has an impact. At the workplace, it is through the profession's needs, resources and communication regarding work tasks that professionals claim jurisdiction or a change within it.

4. Framing the research field

This chapter outlines previous research connected to the present study and consists of both national and international reports, articles and theses. This overview is intended as a way of framing the study. Due to the unique character of Finnish ECSETs and the multifaceted area surrounding the work, there are only a few previous studies with partly the same corresponding focus (e.g. Davis, 2019; Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). The search has been multilingual since all terms have been searched for in Finnish, Swedish and English. The results in Finnish and Swedish are quite few, so I focused more on English. Search terms that have been used in all three languages are as follows: early childhood, early childhood SET, special education, learning challenges and children with SEN. The sparsity of prior research forced me to expand the search criteria to neighbouring areas. Focus has been on special education in ECE, ECEC and pre-primary education. Since the terminology differs between countries' preschools, kindergarten and pre-k are similar terms that were used during the search process. Furthermore, I have searched for different combinations of children's challenges when it comes to learning and development, with a specific interest in language development. Here, I have used the following search terms: language challenges, language difficulties, specific language impairment and supporting language development. When searching for consultation, I included studies from basic education since research regarding consultation in ECEC is sparse. As a complement to consultation, I have also searched for collaboration. Databases that I have used for searching for earlier research during this process are FINNA, DIVA, Google Scholar, ERIC and Google.

To organise previous research, I divided it into the three different frame factors presented in the previous chapter: legal conditions, external conditions and internal conditions. First, the legal conditions consist of laws, steering documents, principles guiding ECEC and the foundations for what the ECSETs, so to say, "are forced to do". Second, the external conditions, which involve items of a more organisational character: context, settings, support provision, group sizes, resources, collaboration and consultation. Third, I relate to internal conditions when addressing assumptions on teaching, learning and responsibilities.

4.1 Legal conditions

Dealing with children in ECEC in need of support for development and learning is not a recent phenomenon, which would indicate that research within ECEC in combination with special education should have received as much attention as special education in basic education, but this is not the case. Harju-Luukkainen et al. (2022) and Palla (2019) raise the fact that the area of special education in ECEC is under-researched from national, Nordic and international perspectives. In the Finnish context, special education should play a prominent role based on

newly updated law and steering documents (Act on Early Childhood Education, 2018; EDUFI, 2014b, 2022; Pihlaja, 2022).

In the new steering document for ECEC in Finland (EDUFI, 2022), there are clear guidelines regarding children with SEN. The core curriculum states, "Every child has the right to receive support in their own group through flexible arrangements" (EDUFI, 2022, p. 58). Furthermore, the increased focus on inclusion sets the ground for work within ECEC (EDUFI, 2022). These revisions in the new core curriculum align with the principles of inclusion (UNESCO, 1994), and the importance of mainstream access for all is emphasised.

Mainstream access for all builds upon participation and equality as central aspects. These fundamental aspects have affected the organisation of support for children with SEN (Pihlaja, 2022). The vision about inclusion, participation and equality puts great demands on personnel working in ECEC; they are expected to be able to provide support to a great variety of needs among children (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022; Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019). Inclusion is studied to a great extent in school settings (Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Juvonen et al., 2019; Nikula et al., 2021) but how inclusion is conducted in ECEC is not researched to the same extent (Laakso et al., 2020). Research has even indicated that ECEC personnel lack knowledge regarding children with SEN (Hannås & Hanssen, 2016; Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022; Pihlaja, 2022) and even lack knowledge regarding inclusive practice (Lundqvist et al., 2016). Despite teachers' good intentions regarding adjusting learning environments or working in smaller groups, their potential lack of understanding of inclusive education can make these situations more excluding than including (Juvonen et al., 2019).

Personnel's positive attitudes towards inclusion and children with SEN are the strongest facilitators for succeeding with inclusion (Mantilla et al., 2022). On the other hand, a negative approach to children with SEN becomes a barrier to inclusion (Ainscow, 2020; Mantilla et al., 2022; Purdue, 2009). In addition to facilitators and barriers, there are factors that make success with inclusion more challenging. Hau et al. (2022) raised the fact that personnel feel that the number of staff (adult–child ratio), the large group size and limited resources for individual child support are barriers to inclusion. These barriers in reality make the work of ECSETs contradictory (Hallett & Hallett, 2017) since their work is dependent on the local interpretation of steering documents and legislation in combination with the context, reality and the place where ECSETs are supposed to carry out their work (Hallett & Hallett, 2017).

Education and in-service training affect personnel's assumptions on children, learning and inclusion. According to the results of Engstrand and Roll-Pettersson (2014), teachers who have taken special education courses during their pre-service or in-service training respond more positively to inclusion. Newly educated SETs for primary schools point out that they feel that their work is limited due to the low priority of special education in schools (Hester et al., 2020; Smith, 2022). SETs argue that if head teachers or leaders at the community level do not support them in their task of making inclusion work, the work itself feels

demanding and burdensome (Hester et al., 2020; Laakso et al., 2020; Smith, 2022).

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, children participating in Finnish ECEC have the right to support immediately when a need is detected (EDUFI, 2014b, 2022). Personnel in ECEC settings are, together with ECSETs, responsible for providing support to children with SEN according to legislation (EDUFI, 2022). The child's right is clear, but how support is implemented in ECEC varies among municipalities (Heiskanen et al., 2021a; Suhonen et al., 2020). This indicates that the inclusive values expressed in the policy documents are not realised in practice.

4.2 External conditions

There seems to be a unified consensus regarding the complexity of the work for ECSETs (Hallett, 2022). This complexity is not found to the same extent among SETs in basic education (Klein & Harris, 2009). The reason for this might be that itinerant ECSETs are to provide support in a variety of settings (child care centres, family day care and pre-primary education) when the SET in basic education mostly provides support in one setting (school) (Klein & Harris, 2009; Middleton & Kay, 2021; Sundqvist, 2012). In addition to this wide variety of settings, itinerant ECSETs have a variety of roles and are supposed to engage in many different activities (Davis, 2019; Klein &Harris, 2009; Rosen-Webb, 2011). ECSETs coordinate identification, assessments and provision of support for children with SEN participating in regular ECEC settings (Curran et al., 2017; Hellawell, 2017). ECSETs see their work as multifaceted and describe it as constituting direct work with children and parents, consulting with personnel, creating materials, dealing with bureaucratic demands and collaborating with all types of experts (Rosen Webb 2011). Curran and Boddison (2021) claimed that ECSETs have to collaborate or adapt to the circumstances in the setting where they work. Personnel's perception of the work role for ECSETs is an important consideration, as it leads to differing expectations of the work that the SENCO is expected to conduct (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2022).

In short, the jurisdiction of ECSETs in relation to teachers or other professions is somewhat unclear. This is partly due to increased professional requirements and changes in the working environment (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Eskelinen et al., 2018; Holst & Pihlaja, 2011; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). Furthermore, the lack of clear guidelines concerning these work roles creates challenges in defining the early childhood special education (ECSE) teaching profession (Davis, 2019; Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2022; Heiskanen et al., 2021b; Nelson et al., 2011; Suhonen et al., 2020; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). This uncertainty regarding work makes ECSETs seek support for clarifying their work roles from local authorities and other ECSETs (Curran et al., 2017). This amplifies that the working culture can have local characteristics, based upon own beliefs, local context and ambitions (Gäreskog, 2021; Klang et al., 2017; Magnússon et al., 2018).

4.2.1. Area of responsibility

There are recommendations for how many children an ECSET should be responsible for. These recommendations are 250 children per ECSET (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2007). Pihlaja (2022) noted that dealing with 500 children with or without SEN is a common responsibility of ECSETs, with a variation between less than 50 children and over 1,000 children (Heiskanen et al., 2021b). This, in turn, affects ECSETs' ways of implementing support for children with SEN. Traditionally, ECSETs' work can be divided into two different areas: direct support for children or indirect support through consultation (EDUFI, 2014b, 2022; Rantala et al., 2018). Direct support for children means that an ECSET works individually with a child or in pairs or smaller groups. Furthermore, direct work with children adds to the assumption and belief that ECSETs are service providers instead of consultants (Nelson et al., 2011; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). One other negative aspect, from a collegial point of view, is that if ECSETs focus predominantly on work with individual children, it is unlikely that they will be viewed as pedagogical experts across the whole municipality (Hallett, 2022), which affects their credibility when it comes to consultation.

4.2.2. Consultation

Research regarding the consultative role in ECEC is still sparse, even though consultation is becoming increasingly prominent in the work of ECSETs (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020; Hallett, 2022). In the Nordic countries, there is a common trend regarding the work of ECSETs; their role is turning from a teacher role towards a consultative role (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020; Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019; Jensen et al., 2022). Klein and Harris (2009) claimed that even though the role of ECSETs changes, consultation is defined and dependent on effective teaming.

Researchers (e.g. Holst, 2008; Rantala et al., 2018; Suhonen et al., 2020; Viitala, 2014) argue that consultation is a key measure when it comes to supporting personnel regarding inclusion and adjusting the learning environment for supporting children with SEN. Consultation, or indirect support to children with SEN, can be delivered with different approaches. There are two different characteristics of approaches: expert-driven and participant-driven (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2017; Sundqvist et al., 2014; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). These two approaches affect other areas simultaneously. With an expert-driven approach, where the consultant is the expert, the teacher's view of the child as the problem might be emphasised (Hermanfors, 2017; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). Furthermore, this approach rarely leads to long-term changes in practice and does not align with the principles of inclusion (Hermanfors, 2017; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015; UNESCO, 1994). The participant-driven approach, on the other hand, has a clear focus on teachers' practices and possible changes in the environment. This approach has a better chance of leading to more sustainable changes in practice (Sundqvist, 2012; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015).

4.2.3. Collaboration

Even though consultation can have different approaches, the basis for consultation is providing personnel with the knowledge and tools to support children in their regular groups (Dockrell et al., 2017; Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Rantala et al., 2018). Personnel sometimes claim that they have trouble finding time for consultation (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2017) due to a lack of time or interest. In addition to this unwillingness, poor conditions, such as a lack of descriptions and definitions of the consultative role in which consultation should be delivered, ambiguities regarding how consultation should take place in practice are prominent (Rantala et al., 2018; Sundqvist et al., 2014). One of the important tasks for ECSETs is to provide personnel with support so that they can develop attitudes and skills with which they, in return, can support children with SEN (Lindqvist et al., 2011; Newman & Rosenfield, 2019). ECSETs need to adjust their way of working according to personnel's competence (Lindqvist et al., 2011). Hence, consultation can be defined as a problem-solving process since it aims to support personnel to deliver adequate support to a child or children in the group (Newman & Rosenfeld, 2019). To approach inclusive practice, researchers have underlined the need for collaborative and reflective consultation where personnel share their knowledge and focus on adaptations and changes needed in the environment rather than on problematising the child (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009; Bladini, 2004; Jensen, 2017; Jensen et al., 2022; Sundqvist, 2012; Sundqvist et al., 2014).

ECSETs need support for providing consultation, and one important external expert with which ECSETs collaborate is the speech therapist. Davis (2019) claimed that this collaboration between ECSETs and speech therapists is important so that ECSETs are able to provide effective support to children. Furthermore, Davis (2019) highlighted collaboration and consultation or training for ECSETs and personnel working in settings as important features of support provision. The actual effects of brief training courses for personnel have varying results based on input and training (Morgan et al., 2017) and individual assumptions (Crowe et al., 2017). Personnel's feeling of the importance of support is connected to how it facilitates their work with support provision. To achieve that feeling among personnel, the support should be effective, easy to use and accessible (Crowe et al., 2017). Barriers are commonly related to practical issues: Is the support easy to conduct? Is it targeting one specific child, and if it should be conducted as isolated learning, are there resources to provide support? (Crowe et al., 2017).

4.2.4. Children's support needs and support provision

In addition to supporting relationships between children, ECEC professionals play an important role in supporting and developing a variety of activities for promoting children with SEN. According to steering documents (EDUFI, 2014b, 2022), personnel are obliged to support children during their time in ECEC. This can be a challenge since there is a great variation of support needs among children. Even though the variation of SEN among children in ECEC is great

(motor difficulties, intellectual disabilities, visual impairments, hearing impairments and so forth), some types are more common. Children having trouble with concentration, attention and socio-emotional functioning are a major group of children with SEN in ECEC (Bekkhus et al., 2022; Perrin et al., 2019). Even though these children seldom get a diagnosis during their time in ECEC, their support needs are obvious (Ketonen et al., 2018; Pihlaja, 2018). Both nationally and internationally, the largest group of children with SEN are those who require support for their language development (Laasonen et al., 2018; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Norbury et al., 2016; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017), so they are the focus of the present thesis.

There are many recurring activities in ECEC irrespective of setting (e.g. storytelling, mealtime and playtime). This means that children's involvement in play and other daily activities needs to be taken into consideration when planning the structure of the day. Storytelling is known to support children's language development (Cárdenas et al., 2020; Deshmukh et al., 2019; Maureen et al., 2021), but Brodin and Renblad (2020) and Maureen et al. (2021) pointed out the importance of personnel's knowledge about how to use storytelling explicitly and teach in a systematic way for it to be supportive. Storytelling is known to support literacy development since children take part in models about how language can be used (Maureen et al., 2018; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Moreover, by sharing narrative activities between personnel and children, personnel lay the foundation for oral language (Cremin et al., 2018; Flynn, 2018). When children are encouraged to create their own stories or work with stories they have listened to, storytelling can promote their writing skills (Maureen et al., 2018; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Nicolopoulou et al. (2015) and Puroila (2019) supported the claim regarding the importance of sharing narratives with others. Children can modify stories that they have heard or even write or tell plays based on familiar tales.

Kultti (2014) pointed out that discussions during mealtimes can provide a good opportunity to support language development among children through different types of discussions. Degotardi et al. (2016), on the other hand, claimed that the prevalence of language support during mealtimes is low, a claim that Klette et al. (2018) supported. They argued that meals, in general, are not used as an opportunity to support children with SEN, as the professional's focus is on serving food, not providing support.

In addition to these planned and organised activities, playtime is a constant reoccurring and present activity in every ECEC setting. Supportive activities in ECEC settings can be seen from different perspectives. Personnel and ECSETs are not the only ones who support children; children are even supported by their peers (Syrjämäki et al., 2019). Having a best friend or friends is important to us all, and for children, it is equally important to have friends in a group where they spend several hours daily. Good relations with peers are important for the future (Shin et al., 2016), for feeling joy (Karjalainen, 2020) and for feeling that you are included in the group (Juutinen, 2018; Syrjämäki et al., 2017). When children

grow older, they have an increasing preference for choosing specific peers with which to interact (Wang et al., 2019).

Children with SEN are more vulnerable when it comes to peer relations (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2019; Mok et al., 2014), and personnel need to be aware of and work consciously with supporting relations among children (Kuutti et al., 2021; Pahigiannis & Glos, 2020). During playtime, depending on the structure of playtime, the same low prevalence of support can be seen during children's free play as during mealtime (Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2017). Professionals often "give children space" to play on their own. In contrast to free play, researchers claim that scaffold play provides opportunities to support and extend children's language skills (Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2017). There are many aspects connected to the child-centred approach, but it can be explained as teachers' attitudes or beliefs about how children learn, what they need to learn and the manner and extent to which teachers intervene and direct children in their learning process (Hur et al., 2016). Chen et al. (2019) and Kuutti et al. (2021) claimed that children with SEN have more challenges with social activities with peers than children without SEN; therefore, they are more vulnerable. Personnel need to recognise and respond to the needs of individual children in support of their development while respecting their autonomy (Georgeson et al., 2015; Shaw, 2019).

Georgeson et al. (2015) and Power et al. (2019) claimed that even though there are many similarities regarding the understanding and meaning of the child-centred approach, such as learning through play and developing activities in response to the interests of the child, the understanding of the concept is not universal. The understanding of the concept is coloured by how personnel express themselves regarding children with SEN. Personnel's expressions about children with SEN say a lot about the approach they have in the learning environment (Heiskanen et al., 2018).

4.3. Internal conditions

The autonomy among ECSET is strong and has therefore led to a situation in which work conducted today in the field is based upon working tradition and individual preferences (Gäreskog & Lindqvist 2020, 2022; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). The pedagogical practice of ECSETs is coloured by their individual values, assumptions on learning and assumptions of children (Brownlee et al., 2016). In addition to these individual preferences, depending on the context in which ECSETs work (Dobson, 2019), the expectations of ECSETs vary (Dobson, 2019; Maher, 2016; Smith & Broomhead, 2019). Expectations are both from ECSETs' own points of view and from personnel's and guardians' points of view. ECSETs' thoughts about their own role and how they can affect the working conditions for themselves are, to some extent, explored (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020, Göransson et al., 2016; Kearns, 2005).

In addition, Gäreskog and Lindqvist (2022) and Göransson et al. (2016) explored ECSETs' assumptions on the typical traits of their work. Personnel and guardians have their own expectations and assumptions on what type of work

ECSETs should conduct and often see ECSETs as experts (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2022; Lindqvist et al., 2011; Maher, 2016). All of these expectations of ECSETs can make them feel overwhelmed and develop a belief that responsibility is high (Maher, 2016; Smith & Broomhead, 2019). Even though others see ECSETs as experts, they do not always have that assumption themselves (Kearns, 2005; Smith & Broomhead, 2019).

Moreover, as a complement to the view of ECSETs as experts, Kearns (2005) found several types of roles ECSETs can take in relation to context and premises: arbitrator, rescuer, collaborator or auditor. As arbitrators, ECSETs focus primarily on helping teachers and guardians clarify concerns and help them feel positive about inclusion. This type of role is highlighted by Mantilla et al. (2022) and Zhu et al. (2021); they claimed that ECSETs play an important role when it comes to making inclusion work for children. ECSETs' positive attitude towards inclusion is a strong facilitator for making it work (Mantilla et al., 2022). Focusing on working with children, but not so much on including personnel in the work, is done by a rescuer (Kearns, 2005). As rescuers, ECSETs spend a lot of time working with children, individually or in smaller groups (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020). In contrast to the rescuer, there is the collaborator. A collaborator has a strong link with personnel; they share practice and are keen on engaging with colleagues in new approaches to teaching and development (Kearns, 2005). In settings in which collaborators work, inclusion is seen as integral to their work. Satisfaction with ECSETs' work depends on functional collaboration and supportive leaders (Ansley et al., 2019; Klein & Harris, 2009; Hester, 2020; Rosen-Webb, 2011). Finally, there are the auditors, who see their role mostly as administrative, in which they monitor children's progress and keep records. Curran and Boddison (2021) found that the majority of SENCOs spend most of their time on administrative tasks. Since Finnish ECSETs have slightly different work roles, the amount of time spent on administrative tasks is noticeable less (Suhonen et al., 2020).

5. Methodological approach and research design

In this thesis, the research topic is studied through the lens of teachers, their lived experience and their views on their reality as ECSETs. To capture the complexity of the phenomenon, a mixed methods approach was adopted. Using mixed methods can contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon in a greater depth (Creswell & Clark, 2011). A mixed methods approach gives the researcher the possibility to increase the accuracy of findings and elaborate initial quantitative findings in more depth (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Ivankova et al., 2006). At the same time, the researcher balances possible shortcomings from using just a single approach (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Creswell & Guetterman, 2020; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). In this thesis, I adopted the description of mixed methods as a research design through which I can collect, analyse and mix both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study (Creswell & Clarke, 2011).

The purpose of this study guided the choice of data collection and analysis procedures. To meet the aim, one of the most important questions that researchers need to ask themselves is what procedures suit the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The four studies included in the present thesis have slightly different approaches because of their diverse characteristics. This is the strength of using mixed methods; as a researcher, it gives me the possibility of capturing the complexity of the phenomenon studied. Studies 1 and 2 contain quantitative as well as qualitative data; Studies 3 and 4 are qualitative studies, and the overall research design is qualitatively driven. I decided to give priority to qualitative data collection and analysis. To gain a more complete and comprehensive picture of the studied phenomenon, there is a need for qualitative and in-depth analyses. I argue that the present research is a mixed methods study with a qualitative dominance since the research relies on a qualitative view of the research process with the recognition of the benefit from quantitative data (Creswell, 2009; Johnson et al., 2007). Furthermore, to position this study within the mixed methods area, the research constitutes an *explanatory sequential design.*

An explanatory sequential design is one of the most common designs used in mixed methods research (Ivankova et al., 2006) and in various types of research (Li et al., 2015). The explanatory sequential design is a two-phase mixed methods design consisting of quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2020; Ivankova et al., 2006). The first phase started with the collection and analysis of quantitative data, focusing primarily on revealing ECSETs' views on work and working conditions. After collection and interpretation of quantitative data, it was possible for the researcher to explore typical cases, examine a key result in more detail or follow-up outliners or extreme cases (Creswell & Guetterman, 2020). Through the qualitative phase, it was possible for me to explore and further interpret the statistical results obtained in the first phase of the research. To enhance the depth of qualitative analysis, thematic analysis, content analysis, narratives and cross-case comparisons are used in the present thesis. These analyses are explained further below. The present study consists of

several phases, and in the figure below, the research process is illustrated (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Illustration of the explanatory sequential design research process.

	Data collection			Data analysis		
	phase	procedure	product	phase	procedure	product
Study 1	Quantitative data collection 2017	Questionnaire (N=33)	Numeric data with elements of qualitative data	Quantitative data analysis	SPSS 26 Frequency	Descriptive statistics
Study 2	Quantitative data collection 2019	Questionnaire (N=215)	Numeric data with elements of qualitative data	Quantitative data analysis Qualitative data analysis	SPSS 26 Frequency, analysis of variances, qualitative content analysis	Descriptive statistics Differences between variables Coding for categories

Aim and research questions

Connecting quantitative and qualitative phases

Study 3	Qualitative data collection 2021	Group interviews (N=14)	Transcribed data	Qualitative data analysis	Thematic analysis Data extract and codes	Descriptive themes
Study 4	Qualitative data collection 2021	Group interviews (N=10)	Transcribed data	Qualitative data analysis	Case study and cross case comparison	Cross-thematic matrix

Summary of collated results

In the following subsections, I will describe methods for collecting data, participants and procedures for analysing each dataset. Furthermore, I will reflect on the assumptions that guided these decisions. This is followed by ethical considerations and a discussion of how these are met in this research. Since qualitative data drive this research, it is important to establish trustworthiness. Trustworthiness and transparency need to be addressed so that I, as a researcher, can show how I minimise the risk of bias and maximise the accuracy and credibility of the present research results.

5.1. Data collection

The methodological approach discussed above sets the foundation for the choice of data collection. The intention with the chosen methods has been to increase the understanding of the complex context within which ECSETs work, which ultimately affects support provision for children with SEN. To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied, this study comprises two main means of collecting data: questionnaires and interviews. The purpose of the questionnaires was to obtain an overview of ECSETs' work and support provision to children with SLCN among a larger group of personnel working in areas where Swedish was the medium of instruction. After gaining a comprehensive view of the phenomenon through questionnaires, detailed insight into ECSETs' experiences and views of support provision to personnel and children was sought through interviews. In Table 1, every studies number of respondents and their work experience is illustrated. The procedures for data collection will be further explained in the following sections.

Table 1
Overview of number of participants and their work experience in each study.

Study	Participants	Work experience	
		Mean	Range
Study 1	N = 33	*M* = 11.26 years	3months-29 years
Study 2	N = 215	*M* = 15.75 years	0 years -42 years
Study 3	N = 14	*M* = 12,86 years	1 year – 27 years
Study 4	N = 10	*M* = 14 years	1,5 years – 33 years

5.1.1 Questionnaires

In Studies 1 and 2, questionnaires were used to collect data. In Study 1, ECSETs were in focus, and in Study 2, ECEC personnel were in focus. Before the questionnaires were sent to the different target groups, each questionnaire was sent to three teachers who volunteered to pilot the instrument regarding content and layout. Based on the feedback, minor changes were made to improve the quality of the questionnaires.

The design of Study 1 is explorative since previous research regarding ECSETs' working conditions is sparse. Due to its character, questionnaires are a preferable way of collecting data in explorative studies (Creswell & Guetterman, 2020). As a starting point, the aim and research questions for Study 1 guided the questionnaire. Several parts of the questionnaire are based on earlier research conducted in the Finnish context (Syrjämäki et al., 2016; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). In addition to earlier research, my own professional knowledge about ECSETs' work, based on previous work experience, influenced the questions in the questionnaire. The questionnaire (Appendix 1) included general background questions related to ECSETs' characteristics: education, qualification, year of exam, place of residence, work experience and number of colleagues working as ECSETs in the municipality. This part was followed by closed-ended questions that focused on their work contexts. Here, ECSETs were asked to estimate the total number of children in ECEC, number of children in need of SEN, how many children they supported, children under assessment and finally the number of children diagnosed. Moreover, the respondents needed to estimate the number of settings for which they were responsible.

This background section is followed by a premade list of different tasks that ECSETs have. They were encouraged to estimate how they devote their working hours to different tasks during a regular week in five intervals (<1 h, 1–5 h, 6-10 h, 11–15 h and >15 h). Several statements that might affect the work of ECSETs were listed on a premade list, and the respondents were asked to determine how much these affected their daily work. ECSETs' views of the elements affecting their work were measured with a four-point scale (large effect, some effect, only a little effect and no effect). Accordingly, there were questions about the number of children on different support levels and what the children's support needs

were (type and severity). Finally, the respondents had the opportunity to comment on or add their own text for clarification.

Study 2 is part of a larger data collection in ECEC, together with other researchers. The general background questions in the joint survey were the same for all participating researchers. The general background questions were related to education, profession, work experience, place of residence, type of setting and the language profile of the setting. After the general background questions, each researcher is responsible for their own individual part (Appendix 2). The aim of Study 2 was to investigate ECEC personnel's perceptions of children with SLCN and the support children received in the groups. Several parts of the online survey were designed based on a literature review (Gyekye & Ruponen, 2018; Salameh, 2018a; Salameh, 2018b; Sjöberg, 2018).

The survey started with a comprehensive charting of personnel's estimation of the number of children with SEN in their groups. Here, respondents were to estimate, in a pre-constructed list, both the difficulties children had and whom they could turn to for consultation regarding support for children with SEN. Furthermore, questions about the use of the three-tiered support system were mapped. Approaching the foci with the study questions concerning language challenges follows. The respondents were urged to note how many children in their group received support for different types of language challenges. To gain a deeper understanding of how personnel support children with SLCN, the respondents were encouraged to describe in what way they supported children with SLCN in their groups. In addition, the respondents indicated how often children with SLCN received support and who was responsible for providing it. Finally, the respondents were asked to describe how the support was implemented for children with SLCN.

5.1.2 Questionnaire respondents

The respondents to both studies were first searched through the municipalities' web pages. Since the focus is on targeting ECSETs and personnel working in areas where Swedish is the medium of instruction in ECEC, the area is limited. Based on official information on municipalities' web pages in 2017, 49 possible respondents were found for Study 1. These respondents worked in urban and rural areas in 30 municipalities. The questionnaire was sent to all ECSETs (49) in autumn 2017. Participation was voluntary, meaning that all who answered the questionnaire gave their consent to participate in the study. The letter sent to respondents included a missive letter (Appendix 3) and an envelope, including a stamped return address, in addition to the questionnaire. In the missive letter, included with the questionnaire, the aim of the study and how data are used and saved during the research process were accounted for. Furthermore, the respondents' rights and confidentiality are highlighted in the missive letter.

The response rate was two-thirds of the possible respondents. In total, 33 itinerant ECSETs working in 22 different municipalities are represented in Study 1. All ECSETs had basic qualifications as ECEC teachers and had supplementary education in SNE (60 ECTS), which qualifies them to work as ECSETs. The

majority of ECSETs (82%) work with all children with SEN under school age, and about one-fifth (18%) of ECSETs work only with children aged one to five years (ECE).

Data for Study 2 were collected in December 2019, targeting personnel who worked in different ECEC settings: conventional groups, large-scale bilingual education and small-scale bilingual education in areas where Swedish is the medium of instruction in ECEC. Day care settings meeting the criteria were first searched through municipalities' web pages. After searching for all possible respondents, a research request was sent to the day care managers of ECEC in the respective municipality.

After receiving the research permit, the survey went out to 31 municipalities and counties in Åland. The link to the online survey went out to day care managers, and they forwarded the link to the online survey to their employees. The respondents who answered the questionnaire represented 22 different municipalities. The total number of respondents was 216. After reading the answers, one respondent was excluded because he or she chose not to fill in anything on the questionnaire (N = 215). The participants in this study were ECEC teachers (60%), child carers (18%), social pedagogues (15%), SETs (2%) and child minders (0.5%). The rest (5%) lacked formal education for working in ECEC. All respondents were women, and the majority of respondents (69%) worked in conventional groups, 16% worked in small-scale bilingual education and 15% worked in large-scale bilingual education.

5.1.3. Group interviews

After gaining a comprehensive understanding of ECSETs' work and how personnel support children with SLCN, an in-depth understanding of how ECSETs support children and personnel was strived for. To achieve a deeper understanding, group interviews were conducted in Studies 3 and 4. In Study 3, data were collected through four focus group interviews. Focus group interviews are beneficial when respondents' discussions provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomena studied (Allen, 2017). Themes for the focus group interviews were influenced with the current research question in mind and the results from the two earlier studies. The respondents received the discussion themes by e-mail two weeks before the interview, so they could reflect on them beforehand. The interview had five themes that the respondents were encouraged to discuss. The five themes were as follows: 'ECSET's area of responsibility', 'how support provision is organised in the municipality', 'ECSET's role in consultation', 'support provision for children with SLCN' and 'multilingualism and SLCN' (Appendix 4).

Data collection for Study 4 was conducted in collaboration with one master's student and a researcher. Each of us conducted one interview using the same manual with questions. The interviews were semi-structured and the themes were prevailing premises and possibilities for the consultative task, the implementation of consultation and the impact of consultation. Depending on the answers of the respondents, each theme had its own follow-up questions

(Appendix 5). The first theme about prevailing premises and possibilities for consultation had questions such as how much of the work is consultation, possibilities (time) to consultation, own competence, challenges and visions about the consultative role. The second theme, implementation of consultation, had a more practical approach. ECSETs were urged to lift how consultation is conducted, what they discuss and how they feel about giving advice, as well as enhance the use of communication skills to encourage personnel to reflect more. The third theme, the impact of consultation, focuses on both the impact on children and personnel. Additionally, the respondents were asked to reflect on how consultation affected their working methods and whether they had any thoughts about how consultation could be developed.

5.1.4. Group interview participants

In the third and fourth studies, the aspiration was to obtain in-depth knowledge about how ECSETs support children with SLCN, directly or indirectly, through the consultation of personnel. Once again, itinerant ECSETs were in focus. For Study 3, we searched for participants who had work experience, had at least one colleague in the municipality and had been working in ECEC where Swedish was the medium of instruction. Previous knowledge about ECSETs' work combined with information on municipalities' web pages was used to find respondents. Possible respondents were contacted by e-mail and invited to participate in the study. Of the 15 ECSETs contacted, 14 agreed to participate in the study. These 14 respondents represented five different municipalities. The focus group interviews took place in the spring of 2021, and due to COVID-19, all the focus group interviews were conducted online. The respondents from the same municipality formed three of the groups, with three participants per group. One group was a mixed group consisting of five participants from three different municipalities. The interviews lasted from 1 hour and 15 minutes to 1 hour and 32 minutes (M = 1 h 26 min).

For Study 4, based upon earlier knowledge (through earlier studies), participants from four different municipalities with similar working conditions were contacted. The respondents were contacted by e-mail and invited to participate in the study. All 10 contacted ECSETs agreed to participate and the group interviews took place at the end of 2021. Data were collected through three interview groups, with three participants in two groups and four participants in one group representing two different municipalities. All interviews were conducted online and lasted between 55 and 70 minutes.

5.2. Data analysis

Since the aim of the present thesis is to *explore what conditions enable and constrain itinerant ECSETs work in providing support for children with SEN in settings where Swedish is the medium of instruction*, nuanced data collection is needed. Therefore, the data collected for the present thesis have various characteristics and methods used to analyse the data. The study began with data of an explorative quantitative character, followed by qualitative data.

5.2.1 Descriptives

Data for Studies 1 and 2 were collected with a questionnaire since the aim in both studies was to gain a general understanding of the phenomenon studied. After the questionnaires were returned, the data for Study 1 were transferred from the physical paper into IBM SPSS 26. Study 2 was conducted online and the data were transferred directly to IBM SPSS.

In Studies 1 (N = 33) and 2 (N = 215), descriptive statistics were used for summarising frequencies, allowing similarities and differences between, for example, different prevailing conditions and support provision to become visible. Tables and figures are common when a researcher wants to present descriptive statistics (Creswell, 2014; Denscombe, 2018). In relation to the specific research question, the results are presented with mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, range or percentage. In Study 1, to compress the long list of statements, the statements were merged into overarching categories. In Table 2 below, the content of each summarised category is illustrated.

Table 2

Clarification of the content of summarised categories.

Summarised category	Included statements
Own professional values	Own professional ambition, assumptions of children and assumptions of learning
Children's support needs	Number of children with SEN, children's SEN and children's individual plan for learning
Personnel approaches	Personnel's knowledge, expectations and ambition
Network support	Multi-professionals (access to multi-professional collaboration and child's access to therapies), guardians and colleagues
Contextual conditions	Total number of children, number of settings, job description core curricula (for ECE and pre-primary education), education policies and travel time during work hours

In addition, in Study 2, there was an interest in examining whether any significant statistical differences existed between the three different contexts studied. To achieve this, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. ANOVA allows for the analysis of one dependent variable, which was enough in the present study. With one-way ANOVA, it was possible to investigate differences in language challenges among children participating in different kinds of settings. Then, a homogeneity test of variance was conducted, and the post hoc test revealed group differences between the different settings. Furthermore,

data on support provided for children with language challenges were analysed using qualitative content analysis, which is further described below.

5.2.2. Content analysis

As a complement to the statistical analysis of group differences, a general understanding of how support is offered to children was sought. The number of respondents (N = 215) provides a general understanding of the support provided, even though open-ended questionnaires do not provide the same depth as an interview can. The respondents' answers were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Denscombe, 2018; Jacobsson & Skansholm, 2019). The inductive analytical approach (Table 3) was inspired by Elo and Kyngäs (2008).

Table 3
An overview of how the content analysis was conducted.

Phases according to Elo and Kyngäs (2008)	How the analysis was conducted in the present study
Preparation phase	
Selecting the unit of the analysis	One specific question in the questionnaire function as unit for analysis *"Describe how you on a daily basis support children with language challenges?"*
Making sense of the data as a whole	Reading the data several times for getting a general impression of the data.
Organising phase	
Open coding	By making notes and underlining important statements or meaningful words, all aspects of the content are covered.
Coding sheets	Notes and underlined words were collected on a separate sheet.
Grouping	Words or statements that are similar are colour coded as a first broad coding
Categorisation	By reading and organising the codes and interpreting their meaning, codes are collapsed into categories.

Abstraction	Categories with similar meaning were grouped together as subcategories. Several subcategories were placed under the main category.
Reporting the analysis process and the results	
Model, conceptual systems, conceptual map or categories	Five categories emerged from the analysis: language support, activity support, non-language support, differentiated support and multi-professional support.

The content analysis started right away when the open-ended answers were cut out from the larger data and arranged in a table. By reading the data carefully, an impression of the data as a whole was obtained. Words and sentences connected to the research question were highlighted, and written comments were included in the text. At this stage, I aimed to have a wide perspective on the coding to describe all aspects of the content. My notes and headings were moved to a separate coding sheet. When I started grouping the codes, a specific focus was on codes being similar or dissimilar since opposites can belong to the same group. These potential opposites provided means to describe the phenomenon, to increase understanding and to generate deeper knowledge. By interpretation, I came to a decision regarding which codes belonged to the same category. Since the ambition was to examine how the teachers supported the children in the group, the categories responded to that question. General descriptions of the different topics were formulated by generating categories; these subcategories were placed under the main categories. The main categories were named using content-characteristic words. After checking the main categories and subcategories against the collated data, the final report was written coherently, highlighting the most important findings from the data.

5.2.3. Thematic analysis
Study 3 was based on data from focus group interviews, and a thematic analysis was conducted following the steps mentioned by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) and Maguire and Delahunt (2017) have listed six steps to conducting a solid thematic analysis. In Table 4, a general description of how the analysis was conducted in Study 3 is presented.

Table 4
An overview of how the thematic analysis was conducted.

Phases according to Braun and Clarke (2006)	How the analysis is conducted in the present study
Familiarising yourself with data	The researcher verbatim transcribed all interviews. By re-listening and simultaneously reading the transcripts, transcripts were checked for accuracy and a sense of the data as a whole was achieved.
Generating initial codes	The research questions guided the initial coding; all relevant features were colour-marked in the transcript.
Searching for themes	When collating codes into potential themes, the coloured codes were used as a starting point for potential themes.
Reviewing themes	Checking that the themes worked in relation to earlier marked codes and to the data as a whole. We ended up with four themes.
Defining and naming themes	Refining themes and the names of the themes were finalised and defined by their specific content and scope.
Producing the report	The themes were written down and presented through descriptions with carefully chosen excerpts from the transcript.

The work with analysing the data started when the focus group interviews were conducted. As a researcher conducting interviews yourself, you get a first impression about the data already during the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Even though I had some prior knowledge, I found it important to immerse myself in the data. By transcribing, reading and rereading the transcription while simultaneously listening to the recorded interviews, a deep understanding of the content of the data was obtained (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

After familiarising myself with the data and generating some initial thoughts and ideas about interesting aspects of the data, the actual work with coding started (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The coding itself is part of the analysis since data hereby are organised into meaningful groups. The research question function as a starting point for coding. When reading the data,

I searched for as many codes as possible. When the data were coded, I ended up with 276 identified codes that needed to be sorted into potential themes. Below is an example of a corpus of codes and the process of how they were collated and merged into themes (Table 5).

Table 5
An overview of how data extracted from the transcripts are coded for and collated into themes.

Data extract	Coded for	Sub-themes	Themes
'I have my own priority list that I follow'	Unofficial list	Prioritisation	
'Settings with children aged 1-3 are not visited'	Lack of time	Prioritisation	Processes and procedures for support provision
'First comes children on special support and intensified support'	Level of support	Three-tiered support	
'Guardians should be made aware of the situation as soon as possible'	Guardians rights	Cooperation with guardians	
'Teachers know children the best and should be engaged in writing the plan'	Teachers knowledge	Children's plan	Cooperation and professionalism as prerequisites for support provision
'In the plan it is written who is responsible for what when it comes to supporting children'	Responsibility	Shared responsibility	

These themes were checked against collated extracts for each theme, making sure they formed a coherent pattern. Some of the themes did not have enough data to support them, and they collapsed into each other, meaning that two separate potential themes formed one theme. After reviewing and refining the themes, I ended up with four themes: (1) cooperation and professionalism as prerequisites for providing support; (2) processes and procedures for providing support; (3) consultation for personnel enabling support for children in a group; and (4) adjusting support based on each child's individual needs. The themes

were defined by their specific scope and content. The final step was to produce the report. Through the narratives, a coherent, logical and interesting story is told from ECSETs' point of view regarding support provision for children with SLCN. The narratives are supported by extracts from the data.

5.2.4. Case study
Data analysis for the case study was conducted in an abductive fashion with a focus on the research questions and the theoretical framework but without using a hypothesis or predetermined codes (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In this study, the respondents in the three interviews were seen as separate cases. Multiple cases are considered more compelling and provide more robust evidence (Yin, 2018) and therefore three (multiple) cases was chosen. Even though cases are linked together, they all have their own story to tell (Stake, 2006). The analytical process in this study consists of four steps: gaining an overview, finding themes in each case relevant to the research questions, developing case narratives and developing themes by a cross-case analysis (Yin, 2014). The first step was gaining an overview of the data by listening to the interviews and transcribing them. The master's student transcribed one interview, and I transcribed the two others.

By reading and re-reading, the transcriptions enabled us to obtain an understanding of the individuality of each case. Initially, we tried to understand each case in an inductive manner without using the theory. The second step focused on themes in each case relevant to the research questions. Here, the researchers read and reread the transcripts, and trends and themes were searched for based on the research questions. First, each researcher made individual comments and summaries on the essence of each case. These individual notes, marks and comments were then individually summarised to identify the essence of the preliminary results. The researchers read each other's summary, compared results and co-wrote all to one single summary. The case analysis was written as a narrative report for each case. In the case descriptions, quotations were used to illustrate common trends and themes within the cases. The understanding of the three cases was followed up with a cross-case analysis. In the cross-case analysis stage, we used theory to interpret the respondents' descriptions and to reach an understanding of the shared patterns, differences and themes among the case narratives (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014; 2018).

5.3   Ethical   considerations,   trustworthiness   and transparency

Before and during a research journey, there were values that I, as a researcher, needed to consider (Hammersley, 2018). There are several questions regarding research ethics that should be fulfilled for achieving good research practice since research ethics is part of the researcher's self-control (Hammersley, 2018; Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [TENK], 2012, 2019). One important value when it comes to research is truth in connection with the

production of knowledge. Producing new knowledge is central when it comes to arguing for the importance of the present research. The importance and need for the present research should be clearly stated to all participants. Feasibility and relevance, as well as the importance of my research, is a red thread that should follow the researcher during the whole process, from the drafting of the research plan to the final report—in this case, the present thesis. Ethical considerations have been constantly addressed. As a researcher, I have a responsibility to protect my respondents from harm, to treat them equally with respect and to respect their rights. I outline ethical considerations guided by the guidelines for responsible research published by TENK (2012, 2019); furthermore, I raise other ethical aspects that are important in the different studies included in this thesis.

TENK (2019) has listed three general ethical principles that should guide research with human participants: respecting the dignity and autonomy of the respondents, respecting material and immaterial cultural heritage and biodiversity and finally, conducting the research such that it does not cause significant risks, damage or harm to participants, communities or other subjects of research. These general ethical principles coincide with the core demands set by the Swedish Research Council (2017) and the guidelines on the responsible conduct of research drawn up by TENK (2012). The core demands that have guided this thesis are information, consent, confidentiality and use of collected data. The demand for information means that the participants are to receive enough information regarding the research so that they know what the research is concerning, what the aim is with the research and how results are processed, analysed and presented (TENK, 2012). Furthermore, the participants have the right to choose whether they want to participate in the research, which is the demand for consent. Furthermore, the demand for confidentiality means that information about the participants should be treated as strictly confidential; the participants' privacy must be protected. Finally, the demand for use means that the collected data can only be used for research purposes. How ethical considerations and demands are met in each article included in the present thesis is described below.

The first study, in which the focus was on ECSETs' work and working conditions, consisted of a survey. This survey was sent directly to potential respondents working in areas where Swedish was the medium of instruction. With the survey, there was a letter annexed where I, as a researcher, explained the aim of the study, how collected data would be used and for what purpose. Furthermore, I guaranteed that the respondents' answers would remain confidential. By resending the survey with answers back to me, I assumed that the respondents gave their consent to participate in the research. In the annexed letter, my contact information was given; the participants could withdraw from the study if they wanted to. To guarantee anonymity for the respondents in Study 1, specific details (e.g. children's diagnosis or circumstances) were not included in the final report since these specific features are a risk for recognition of the respondents or the children they might refer to.

Study 2 is of a more quantitative nature, and here, three researchers collected data simultaneously. Before the questionnaire went out to the ECEC personnel, a research permit was sent to all leaders in ECEC in areas where Swedish was the medium of instruction. In these permits, the aims of the studies, methods for collecting data and how the data would be used and reported were exposed. Leaders in ECEC returned the permits to the researchers. After this, an online survey was sent to all leaders in ECEC, and they distributed the online link to their personnel. In the survey, there was an information letter regarding the research in which all necessary information was included. By answering the questionnaire, the respondents agreed to participate in the study.

Studies 3 and 4 consisted of group interviews with ECSETs. The ECSETs were contacted directly by the researcher. When the respondents were contacted, the aim was presented to them. Because these interviews were conducted online, there were no written permits for participation in the studies. Instead, the permit for Study 3 was collected by video and voice. The researcher asked all the participants if they wanted to participate and told them about their right to withdraw from the interview. The researchers in each interview collected permits for Study 4. These permits are on voice files. Finally, the confidentiality of the participants was secured by excluding aspects that would allow for the recognition of participants or settings in their respective contexts.

The data for Study 1 were collected on paper, and they are saved in a secure place behind locked doors according to the regulations regarding safekeeping. All data collected for the rest of the studies are saved on the university's server behind passwords.

Ensuring the trustworthiness of the research is important throughout the entire process of conducting qualitative research. Trustworthiness in research can be described as ensuring that the research design, method and conclusions are explicit. A common approach is to rely on the criteria for validity set by Lincoln and Guba (1985), who stated that trustworthiness in qualitative studies can be established through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Because the present research uses a mixed methods approach, the approach to validity based upon Lincoln and Guba (1985) suits well. Although the methods vary in the present thesis, the elements of trustworthiness can be seen as universal. As in any research paradigm, the aim of rigour in research is to minimise the risk of bias and maximise the accuracy and credibility of research results (Johnson et al., 2020; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). When it comes to bias, the present research is interpretive, and the researcher and co-researchers have to be self-reflective about their roles in the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020).

As a researcher, I collect the data and if biases are not adequately addressed, the quality of data is affected and subsequent research results (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020). In addition to bias, the research findings should be plausible and trustworthy. For a researcher, this is crucial because it shows the alignment between research questions, data collection, analysis and results. In the present research, the analysis process and results are described in sufficient

detail so that the reader gains a clear understanding of how the analysis was carried out, consisting of its strengths and limitations. Elo et al. (2014) argued that the description of the analysis process and results are important factors for achieving credibility. When descriptions are thick, other researchers can follow the same procedural steps, even though they might reach different conclusions. By providing sufficient information, dependability is established. Confirmability is provided through detailed descriptions of the relationship between the data and the findings. This relationship is accounted for by using quotes to consolidate the interpretations. Transferability means that the findings can be transferred to other settings, which requires detailed descriptions of the context and how the context might have shaped the findings. TENK (2012) further argued that to achieve trustworthiness in research, the research must be conducted according to ethical principles.

6. Overview of the results of the studies

In this chapter, an overview of the results from the original studies (1–4) is presented. This thesis goes from an exploratory view, describing work conditions for ECSETs, to an in-depth focus on support provision for children with SLCN. All articles focus on teachers' views on support or premises for support in the regular ECEC setting, which means that the practice of teachers serves as the object of my research. This overview constitutes the aim, research questions and results for the four included studies in the present thesis. For further reading, all articles are attached and can be found at the end of this thesis.

6.1. Study 1

The aim of the first study was to examine itinerant ECSETs' views of the elements affecting their work with supporting children with SEN in Swedish medium early childhood and education settings in Finland. The focus of this study was to widen the understanding of ECSETs' work, and the first research question—"How do itinerant early childhood special education teachers view the contextual conditions affecting their work?"—was posed. The results show that there is great variation in how ECSETs can implement support provisions. First, the area of responsibility differs between ECSETs, which has a direct effect on work. The number of settings an ECSET can be responsible for ranges from 6 settings to 54 settings (mean [M] = 22.85; standard deviation [SD] = 11.27). As the number of settings varies, so does the total number of children for which each ECSET is responsible (M = 302.36; SD = 168.11; min = 85; max = 725). One ECSET (3.1%) is responsible for 50–99 children. One-fourth of ECSETs (24.2%) are responsible for 100–199 children, and more than half of ECSETs (57.5%) are responsible for 200–499 children. Finally, 15.2% of ECSETs are responsible for 500–1,000 children.

ECSETs mention that as many as 21% of children in need of support fall outside the ECSETs' support provision. The proportion of children who need support in tiers 2 or 3 is 14%, and the actual number of children receiving support ranges from 10 to 90 (M = 44.27; SD = 22.30). The challenges children face related to learning and development are estimated by the ECSETs. First, ECSETs highlight that young children often have multifaceted challenges, and it is not easy to determine the primary challenge. According to data provided by ECSETs, the largest group of children (33.6%) in need of support provision have language development difficulties. Slightly fewer children were observed to have concentration difficulties (27.2%). Furthermore, socioemotional difficulties are common in ECEC; 14.3% of children with SEN have difficulties in this area. These three areas are most common among children with SEN participating in regular ECEC. Furthermore, motor difficulties (5.9%), autism spectrum disorders (5.2%), intellectual disabilities (3.6%), chronic diseases (2.5%), physical disabilities (2.5%) and visual and hearing impairments (< 2%) are mentioned.

In addition to the area of responsibility and children's challenges, ECSETs' own professional values affect their work highly. ECSETs view that their own professional values—more precisely, their own professional ambitions—affect their work the most. Interestingly, different elements affect ECSETs' work very differently (e.g. travel times during the work day have a large effect on 15.2% of the ECSETs). An equal number of ECSETs claim that travel time during the workday have no effect on their work.

To further address the aim, a second research question was posed: "What characterises the work of itinerant early childhood special education teachers?". ECSETs enjoy strong autonomy, and because of this, they have the opportunity to work in the way they prefer. The preferred way of working might be affected by working conditions, but not always. The characteristics of ECSET work are divided into five categories: consultation (of personnel or whole teams), support provided to children (individually or in small groups), meetings (with guardians or multi-professionals), administrative work (planning and transfer time) and developmental work (core curricula, further training or development work). According to the respondents, the consultation of personnel and direct work with children are the tasks on which they spend the most hours weekly. The majority of ECSETs spend 1–5 hours weekly on consultation. It is worth mentioning that 12.1% of ECSETs spend more than 15 hours on consultations weekly. In addition, it is worth highlighting that 15.2% of ECSETs spend either more than 15 hours weekly or less than one hour weekly on direct support for children with SEN. In general, developmental work is the task on which ECSETs spend the least time during a regular work week.

In summary, several elements affect the possibilities for ECSETs to provide support for children with SEN. These elements are concrete conditions, internal assumptions and preferences. Based on the results of the present study, ECSETs' autonomy and prevailing conditions can support or prevent children's right to support.

6.2. Study 2

The aim of this study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of the prevalence of the various language challenges and the support children receive when participating in conventional settings, large-scale bilingual education or small-scale bilingual education in ECEC. To investigate the prevalence of language challenges among children, the research question "What kind of language challenges do teachers report, and is there a difference between conventional, large-scale bilingual and small-scale bilingual educational settings?" was asked. The results indicate that personnel working in ECEC settings estimate that 17% of children participating in ECEC need support for their language development. In the groups, the number of children with language challenges ranges between 0 and 11 (M = 2.71; SD = 2.27). Reasons to support needs vary, but the most common mentioned challenge is children having a mother tongue other than the medium of instruction. The study is conducted in three different contexts, and in small-scale bilingual settings, 30% of children are in need of support for language

challenges. In conventional settings, every fourth child (25%) needs language support. In large-scale bilingual settings, the percentage is the lowest (15%). The number of settings is unevenly distributed, and an ANOVA is conducted to find potential differences between settings. The ANOVA revealed that a significant difference was evident between the three contexts in relation to general language challenges ($F(2, 164) = 3.088$, $p = 0.05$), challenges in understanding ($F(2, 164) = 4.411$, $p = 0.01$) and pronunciation challenges ($F(2, 162) = 5.644$, $p = 0.00$). A post hoc analysis revealed differences between large- and small-scale bilingual education in all categories.

Furthermore, to study how children are supported, a second research question was posed: "What types of support do teachers provide for children with language challenges in the three different settings?". Five categories emerged from the analysis: language support, activity support, non-language support, differentiated support and multi-professional support. The respondents explain language support as awareness of language use (e.g. correcting inaccurate use of language, reflecting on children's comments in the correct way, using explanations and naming to support children's understanding and enable them to learn new words).

Second, activity support is carried out during planned activities during the day. These planned activities are book reading, singing, rhyming or other planned activities targeting language. Third, non-language support means that the respondents use pictures, physical material, signs as support and body language as support to the spoken language. Fourth, differentiated support is highlighted as an important support method. This means that personnel actively work with small group activities and individually adjusted content. Finally, multi-professional support is offered by ECSETs, speech therapists or extra helpers in the group. Some differences can be found between the different contexts. Book reading ($F(2, 212) = 3.233$, $p = 0.04$) is used more in conventional settings than in large-scale bilingual education. Specific planned language activities ($F(2, 212) = 3.549$, $p = 0.03$) are significantly more used in small-scale bilingual education than in conventional education. Finally, small-scale bilingual education uses signs as support ($F(2, 212) = 3.400$, $p = 0.04$) more frequently than large-scale bilingual education does.

To sum up, what has been found in this study is that children with language challenges exist in all types of settings. There seems to be a discrepancy between large-scale and small-scale bilingual education regarding the number of children reported to have challenges within specific areas of language development. When it comes to support for language challenges, all settings use the same type of support to provide children with what they need. Book reading is mentioned most frequently in conventional settings, and signs as support and specific language activities are mentioned most frequently in small-scale bilingual education.

6.3. Study 3

The aim of the present study was to examine support for children with SLCN provided in regular ECEC settings. The specific research question was as follows: "How do ECSETs describe the conditions for providing support to children with SLCN who receive regular ECEC?" The results indicate that four themes illustrate how ECSETs described support provision for children with SLCN: (1) cooperation and professionalism as prerequisites for support provision, (2) processes and procedures for support provision, (3) consultation for personnel enabling support for children in the group and (4) adjusting support provision according to the child's individual needs.

First, cooperation and professionalism seem to be necessary for functional support for children with SLCN. ECSETs are dependent on ECEC teachers noticing children with SEN and contacting guardians. When guardians give their consent, teachers contact ECSETs. Guardians are important partners and sources of information; therefore, it is important to have good relations and mutual understanding with them. Furthermore, speech therapists are valued partners since ECSETs can consult speech therapists to provide specific guidance to personnel who work daily with children. Furthermore, ECSETs support teachers when they are writing children's plans, such as when it comes to documenting support arrangements, responsibilities and content.

Second, the assessment of children's need for support is a shared responsibility; ECSETs and teachers do it together. Assessments, together with the children's individual plans, function as a foundation for support provision. These individual plans cannot be static; they should be updated continuously. Children who require special support are prioritised when it comes to support provision. In addition, there are some clearly expressed and some unwritten rules for prioritising support for children with SLCN. Children in pre-primary education are prioritised along with children whose support provision is already in progress. Last in line are children aged 1–3 years, leading to the fact that they are often left without actual support. Sometimes, ECSETs are requested by the head of ECEC to do specific work tasks that also take away time from the actual support provision.

Third, the importance of consultation was highlighted. All personnel receive consultation but the extent and how often varies. ECSETs urge personnel to join them when they are working with a child to get an impression and direct consultation about possible ways of working in these situations. This seldom happens, and consultation usually happens after ECSETs have worked with a child. Consultations are, in most cases, based on ECSETs' own experience or other experts' recommendations or advice. The majority of ECEC personnel value the consultation they receive from ECSETs, but some see ECSETs and consultation as just extra work. These different views are strongly connected to the personnel's own knowledge and interest in supporting children with SLCN.

The fourth is the adjustment of support provision according to the child's individual needs. Good relations, mutual trust and respect between children and personnel are key to creating optimal possibilities for learning. Activities

planned to support children with SLCN should be organised with a child's specific preferences in mind. Depending on the challenges, children have different solutions, and options are to be considered (e.g. working individually, with a peer or smaller group). Except for these more specific training sessions, daily support is most important. Therefore, personnel working in the group play an important role when it comes to supporting children with SEN. Personnel need to be aware of the importance of communication, offering new words and concepts to children through spoken language supported with key word signs and pictures. ECSETs counsel personnel on how they can think about certain tasks so that the activity effectively supports children with SLCN.

This study aimed to explore how ECSETs describe the support given to children with SLCN participating in regular ECEC. The themes arising from the data contain elements indicating successful work, as well as potential pitfalls.

6.4. Study 4

The aim of this study was to examine how ECSETs experience their consultative role. To address the aim of the present study, two research questions were created: "How do ECSETs experience the prevailing conditions surrounding the consultative work task?" and "How do ECSETs experience the implementation of consultation and the use of consultation strategies?"

The results of the present study show that even though ECSETs have similar contextual and working conditions, the implementation and strategies for consultation vary. The three different cases constitute the following narratives: frustrated knowledge sharers, adapted and collaborative quick fixers, and satisfied reflection supporters.

The first case is characterised by ECSETs' frustration over prevailing conditions for consultation. ECSETs feel that they are forced into the role of knowledge sharing instead of a more process-orientated consultation. There is diversity in what ECSETs and personnel working in groups find most important when it comes to supporting children. ECSETs see the value and importance of a more structured and process-oriented consultation in which they use communication skills rather than advice. The ECSETs further claim that personnel and heads of ECEC do not understand the value of a more long-term consultation process. Personnel, on the other hand, expect ECSETs to be present in the group and to support the child directly. ECSETs experience that direct work with the child in the group strengthens the credibility and trust personnel have in them as consultants.

The second case is characterised by the ECSETs' adaptability to the situation and the personnel working in the group. ECSETs mention that they work as co-teachers, consultants, service providers or communicators trying to support personnel's needs. Furthermore, the work and consultative role of ECSETs vary depending on personnel's needs, knowledge and interest in supporting children with SEN. ECSETs point out that visits to the groups are important for the consultation since consultation happens continuously and naturally after working with children individually or in their groups. ECSETs are striving to

develop more structured consultation strategies but often end up giving quick fixes and concrete tools to use.

The third case is characterised by the ECSETs' contentment about the possibilities for implementing consultation. This group express consultation as one work task that is clearly stated in their work description. This group furthermore claims that the head of ECEC supports them and understands the importance of consultation since the head has organised possibilities for more process-oriented consultation for the entire team working in a group. The respondents use a wide range of consultation strategies with an emphasis on reflection for strengthening personnel in their own affirmation in their competence. Shared responsibility is highlighted since ECSETs depend on personnel's insights regarding children to be able to offer appropriate consultation.

By comparing themes and patterns in the case narratives through the lens of theory and earlier research, two themes become visible: (1) poor conditions - weak jurisdiction for conducting the consultative task and (2) balancing between quick fixes and the use of reflection as a consultation strategy.

6.5. Concluding remarks

The four studies included in the present thesis contribute in different ways to untangle the overarching aim. ECSETs' roles and work conditions are studied from a comprehensive angle, focusing on the contextual conditions affecting their work. Furthermore, ECSETs' subjective impressions of work conditions are explored through group interviews, focusing on the work they conduct and how they support children with SLCN. Personnel working in these settings play an important role when it comes to daily support for children with SLCN. ECSETs need information from personnel so that they can support children directly or indirectly. For personnel to be able to support children, they might need consultation from ECSETs. Views and consultation strategies used by ECSETs for providing personnel with tools and methods to support children with SLCN are crucial for targeted support provision to children. All four studies together demonstrate the importance of every part of the support system functioning optimally. The smallest flaw in the support system can lead to great challenges for children if their needs are not met.

7. Discussion

The aim of the present thesis is to explore what conditions enable and constrain itinerant ECSETs' work in providing support for children with special educational needs in early childhood and care settings where Swedish is the medium of instruction. To meet this aim, three overarching research questions were formulated: What frames and constitutes the work and role of itinerant ECSETs? What kind of support is offered to children with SLCN in different ECEC settings? What views and strategies are used by ECSETs during consultations?

In this concluding chapter, I address the aim and research questions through a synthesis of the results from all included studies (1–4) in relation to the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework, the frame factor perspective and theory of professions guide the conceptual constructs. The results show that ECSETs' jurisdiction varies because of facilitators or inhibitors in legal, external or internal conditions. Even though the steering documents (EDUFI, 2022) and law (Act on Early Childhood, 2018) have recently been reformed, there is a lack of clarity in these documents regarding the ECSETs' work and role. There seems to be a gap between the intentions and implementation of policy documents at the municipal level because of a lack of clear guidelines. Professional jurisdiction is partly set at the legal level and, to some extent, fixed and static, but local authorities have the possibility to interpret the policies and implement them in practice. As a result, because local circumstances vary, it makes it difficult for ECSETs to claim jurisdiction (cf. Abbott, 1998).

As noted earlier, the legal conditions set the ground for ECSETs' work. On a more overarching level, one could claim that the ambiguity regarding ECSETs' work and role provides possibilities under the right circumstances. The results in the present thesis show a critical point: if the circumstances are good, they function as facilitators, but if the circumstances are challenging, they naturally become barriers instead. In this synthesis, focus is on the specific context where ECSETs work, the external conditions and internal conditions and how these reflect on the ECSETs' jurisdiction, focusing on the characteristics raised by the respondents. By comparing patterns in the four included articles and interpreting these patterns through the lens of the theoretical framework, six themes addressing the research questions became clear: collaboration, supportive leaders and environment, autonomy and flexibility, diminished work role, insufficient resources and nonengaged personnel. These themes are presented under the two following headlines: *facilitating conditions for itinerant ECSET work* and *inhibiting conditions for ECSET work* (Table 6).

Table 6

Themes related to facilitators or inhibitors.

Facilitator	Study	Inhibitor	Study
Collaboration	1,2,3,4	Diminished work role	3,4
Supportive leaders and environment	2,3,4	Insufficient resources	1,2,3,4
Autonomy and flexibility	1,3,4	Nonengaged personnel	1,3,4

7.1. Facilitating conditions for itinerant ECSET work

Facilitating and inhibiting conditions are often opposites, and in this part of the thesis, I have chosen to address those elements that support ECSETs' work, that is, the facilitators for support provision. To highlight the variations within each theme, possible inhibitors are mentioned within some of the themes. In general, if ECSETs work under the right circumstances, they should have good conditions for strong jurisdiction, but working with people is seldom this straightforward.

7.1.1. Collaboration

The theme of collaboration can be seen more or less in all the included studies. In Studies 3 and 4, when collaboration is discussed as a possibility, it is often combined with positive descriptions of the characteristics among personnel. High motivation, knowledge and understanding are common words used when there is functional collaboration. There seems to be a need for fruitful professional relationships between all involved in the work regarding supporting children with SEN. The different professions working in ECEC create relations and develop and adapt these according to each other's competences. The results in Studies 3 and 4 indicate that ECSETs depend on personnel's knowledge regarding the child and rely on teachers' relationships with the children's guardians when it comes to enacting possible support measures. Teachers, on the other hand, rely on ECSETs' competence in support provision and collaboration with external experts. Dockrell et al. (2017), Lindsay and Strand (2016) and Rantala et al. (2018) show the importance of sharing knowledge and tools for being able to provide support. It is important to note that this exchange of knowledge needs to be two-way.

Consultation is one way of collaborating, and the results in Studies 1, 3 and 4 show that ECSETs have different possibilities to implement consultation. These possibilities depend on external and internal conditions. In Studies 3 and 4, the external conditions are often connected to time and the possibilities for personnel to take time away from the group. Personnel claim that they are needed in the group with the children and cannot take the time to discuss and reflect together with the ECSET. Ahlefeld Nisser (2017) found similar results

regarding prioritising consultation. By focusing more on consultation, ECSETs can support personnel in providing explicit support to children with SEN, and in this case, motivated personnel want to receive consultations for optimising support provision to children. Furthermore, through organised and well-implemented premises for consultation, the ECSETs in Studies 3 and 4 support personnel's professional self-esteem by addressing their knowledge and competence. In Study 4, it becomes clear that there is satisfaction among some of the ECSETs with the working conditions in relation to the consultative tasks.

In Study 1, the results show that just one-tenth of ECSETs primarily focus on consultation during their work week. This is not in line with results by Gäreskog and Lindqvist (2020), who show that most ECSETs spend most of their work time on consultation. Heiskanen and Viitala (2019) indicate that, because of the reduced number of special education groups, the consultation-based work for ECSETs should be strengthened. At the same time, shared responsibility between personnel and ECSETs is emphasised as an important part of succeeding with consultation and, in the end, to provide efficient and appropriate support for children with SEN. Trust and time for reflection are key to shared responsibility.

Internal conditions (such as one's own assumptions and perceptions) affecting consultation and collaboration are often related to ECSETs' work experiences. The results from Studies 1 and 3 indicate that ECSETs with less work experience often focus more on working individually with children instead of focusing on consultation. In Study 3, the results show that this is mostly because of these ECSETs feeling more secure and in control when working with children than personnel. This is a challenging balance act because if ECSETs focus the most on the individual work with children, this will be reflected in the trust personnel have in ECSETs competences (Hallett, 2022; Nelson et al., 2011; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017).

In addition to the personnel's trust in ECSETs' competences, in all four studies, the personnel's competences and their knowledge and motivation to support children affect the work of ECSETs. Relations, sharing practices and engaging with personnel stand out in Studies 3 and 4. In groups where personnel are motivated to learn and immediately try out ECSETs' suggestions, the ECSETs themselves get professional satisfaction from collaboration with personnel. These are environments that ECSETs like to visit because they know that their work is appreciated. To succeed with support provision, a joint mission and actual involvement for all personnel working in the child's environment is important. Kim and McIntyre (2019) have found similar results indicating that all personnel should be involved in succeeding with support provision.

Collaboration – diverse vision of jurisdiction
Collaboration is a strong facilitator for providing support for children with SEN. Even though one could assume that functional collaboration would mean that ECSETs have strong jurisdiction, this is not always the case. Abbott (1988) claims that a joint mission and good relations among personnel create the strongest bonds between professions; simultaneously, it can create strain between

professions. Strain between professions is apparent in Studies 3 and 4, where the results show that the premises for consultation vary because of external and internal conditions. In Studies 3 and 4, the external conditions are the personnel's unwillingness to set time aside for consultation, and this is something that creates strain between ECSETs and personnel. ECSETs' assumption of the importance of consultation and personnel's prioritisations do not align. Study 4 indicates that two-thirds of ECSETs have challenges claiming their jurisdiction in the settings due to different views on the importance of consultation.

Internal conditions or ECSETs' own assumptions and perceptions also influence the jurisdiction. The results in Studies 1 and 3 show that ECSETs with less work experience often focus more on supporting children directly than providing consultation. ECSETs focusing on direct support often feel more in control of their work, while personnel's trust in ECSETs' special educational competences can be reduced. Nelson et al. (2011) and Viljamaa and Takala (2017) have found similar results, further claiming that ECSETs working directly with children are seen more as service providers. A lack of trust from personnel makes it challenging for ECSETs to claim full jurisdiction. A lack of trust from personnel and ECSETs' preferences regarding work can be a cause of a lack of collective work culture. The results in Studies 3 and 4 indicate that some ECSETs feel that ECEC personnel want ECSETs to take on a larger (or total) responsibility for children with SEN. This implies that the personnel want to take a step back in their own profession and expand the 'territory' for ECSETs.

7.1.2. Supportive leaders and environment

In Study 4, the results show that leadership in ECEC is strongly connected to ECSETs' opportunities for implementing consultation in ECEC settings. A supportive leader can enhance personnel's views of the importance of consultation. Ansley et al. (2019) and Hester et al. (2020) have found similar results, identifying supportive leaders as crucial for succeeding with different work tasks. According to the results in Study 4, if consultation is part of ECSETs' work description and there is a clearly conveyed focus on the importance of consultation from the leaders in ECEC, the time needed for consultation is prioritised. A mutual trust in each other's competence and a willingness to support time for reflection and discussions gives personnel the satisfaction of finding solutions themselves through reflective discussions. The results in Studies 1, 3 and 4 indicate that consultation should and could have a more prominent role in ECSETs' work, but support from ECEC leaders is important.

Within ECEC groups, there are teachers who are responsible for the pedagogical work; these can be seen as the leaders of the group. Study 2 focuses on the support for children with SLCN participating in ECEC, and here, a difference can be seen across different settings. Large-scale bilingual education reports the lowest number of children with SLCN, indicating that personnel's awareness and daily work with language supportive activities affect their perceptions and assumptions regarding children with SLCN, as Genesee (2015),

Gort (2019) and Nic Aindriú et al. (2020) argue. Another possible reason for the lower number of children with SLCN in large-scale bilingual education could be the context. Guardians make a conscious choice to apply for their child to participate in a bilingual context, and it might be that guardians do not apply to this type of setting if they feel that their child might have challenges with language development.

Supportive leaders and environment – emphasised vision of jurisdiction
Under the right circumstances with supportive ECEC leaders, some ECSETs could be considered to have full jurisdiction, meaning that they have control over their work (Abbott, 1988). The results in Study 4 show that there is clear support from leaders and that ECSETs have established control over this area within the workplace and at the public and legal levels. Consultation is mentioned in the work description for these ECSETs, and they have developed working methods that reinforce their profession. Supportive leaders enhance personnel's views on the importance of consultation, but this is not enough for ECSETs to claim full jurisdiction. In addition, ECSETs need to have a clear vision of how consultation should be conducted and to implement consultation in a realistic way. In Study 4, one-third of the ECSETs note being satisfied with their possibilities and premises set by leaders to actively focus on and prioritise consultation. Here, full jurisdiction can be seen, and it is a combination of supportive leaders giving possibilities to personnel and ECSETs to focus on consultation, but it also includes ECSETs having a clear vision of how they want to work with consultation, which is an important aspect for being able to claim full jurisdiction.

7.1.3. Autonomy and flexibility
The role of an ECSET varies greatly because of the contextual conditions (e.g. number of children, settings), but the role is also affected by ECSETs' individual views and assumptions. The results from Studies 1, 3 and 4 show that the ECSETs' own ambitions and assumptions regarding children and learning affect their way of working. The results from Studies 3 and 4 show that the majority of ECSETs claim that they can work according to their own preferences, directly with either the child or focusing more on consultation. Some of the ECSETs in Studies 1 and 3 are forced into a consultative role due to the large area of responsibility. ECSETs have professional autonomy within the frames given by legal and, to some extent, external conditions. However, expectations or directions from others sometimes challenge professional autonomy. The results in Study 3 show that ECSETs sometimes feel that they are trapped between their own priorities and their employers' decisions.

In all the included studies, flexibility, sensitivity and adjustment are approaches to work that ECSETs and personnel seem to value. Per the results from Studies 2, 3 and 4, being flexible and adjusting to the situation and premises are important for providing support to children. This flexibility is often connected to children's characteristics and special educational needs. The

indications from Study 3 imply that ECSETs have increased chances of adjusting and adapting their work to the specific needs of a child because they do not have the responsibility for the group as a whole.

In addition to adjusting work in relation to children's needs, in Studies 3 and 4, the ECSETs raise the importance of being sensitive and adjusting to personnel and their premises. The knowledge about personnel, their way of working and their competences to support children with SEN make ECSETs adjust their way of working in different settings. Lindqvist et al. (2011) argue that an adjustment in one's way of working is crucial for making collaboration and support provision work. Some personnel want 'quick-fixes'; others want to receive consultation so that they can get a deeper understanding and knowledge about how to support children with SEN. The results in Studies 3 and 4 show that most ECSETs try to meet everybody's needs on the individual level.

A common feature among ECSETs is that their vision regarding, for example, consultation changes when they experience the everyday work in ECEC because they focus on adapting to the needs of personnel. Adapting how they work can provide the possibilities for consultation because the sensitivity towards the specifics in a situation is in focus, trying to give everybody what they want or need. On the other hand, adapting to the situation can create limitations, such as when consultation is somewhat unstructured and personnel prioritise other tasks instead of consultation. In these types of situations, it is important that ECSETs bring up the importance of consultation. Several researchers (e.g., Holst, 2008; Rantala et al., 2018; Suhonen et al., 2020; Viitala, 2014) have argued that consultation is a key measure when it comes to adjusting the learning environment for supporting children with SEN participating in ECEC.

Autonomy and flexibility — individual vision of jurisdiction
In all the included studies, one's own individual assumptions and perceptions appear more or less in relation to the issues raised. ECSETs have strong autonomy and the possibility to conduct their work according to their own preferences and external conditions. These external conditions (e.g., area of responsibility or settings) sometimes affect the work so much that there is no room for ECSETs to adapt their work according to their own preferences. In Study 3, the results show that, even though ECSETs are not subordinate to someone, they can be obliged to conduct other work in ECEC. This means that ECSETs' jurisdiction is relatively weak because their special educational expertise is not acknowledged.

In Study 3, the assumption of jurisdiction is raised. When ECSETs are flexible with their supporting role, the personnel's understanding of the ECSET profession blurs. This can lead to erasing the line between different professions (Abbott, 1988). Those ECSETs who adjust, however, claim importance in the workplace because they focus on interpreting and modifying according to the context. The way of working is somewhat unclear, but the content of the consultation is in line with what Abbott (1988) calls advisory jurisdiction.

7.2. Inhibiting conditions for ECSETs' work

Barriers in the work context for ECSETs to conduct their work can be found at all levels: legal, external and internal. There are inhibitors that stand out, and those are presented here under three different themes: diminished work roles, insufficient resources and nonengaged personnel.

7.2.1 Diminished work role

First, frustration can arise from ECSETs being forced by ECEC leaders into a diminished consultative role, focusing on supporting children directly instead. This manipulation of the consultative role indicates to ECEC personnel that ECSETs' direct work with children is more important than consultation and that personnel do not value consultation. In return, this influences the expectations personnel have of ECSETs; the personnel start to expect that ECSETs support the child instead of the personnel in the group. This is not in line with recommendations in the steering documents (EDUFI, 2014b, 2022) or earlier research where consultation and collaboration are seen as important for succeeding with support provision (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020).

Second, for some ECSETs, support provision to children is an aspect guided by official and unofficial priority lists regarding which children to prioritise when it comes to support provision. Children's age is an example of this unwritten prioritisation; according to employers, children in pre-primary education should be prioritised before younger children. These types of agendas create internal conflicts because those obligations set by others and the ECSETs' own assumptions on what should be in focus, do not always align. In Study 3, the results show that by setting obligations not connected to special education, ECSETs' expertise is not acknowledged, so their role as SEN experts is diminished.

Third, the ECSETs themselves sometimes depreciate their own role. The results from Study 3 show that some of the ECSETs accept doing work that is not related to their area of expertise. This is further reinforced with some of the results from Study 4, where the ECSETs argue that they sometimes prioritise work according to leaders' suggestions instead of following their own conviction of what would be best for the child.

Diminished work role – reducing jurisdiction
One of the practical limitations of support provisions is related to the ambiguity regarding ECSETs' work. Because of this ambiguity, ECSETs' jurisdiction is weak on a legal level, public level and even sometimes on a workplace level. This becomes apparent in Study 3, where the ECSETs express frustration over the fact that they are not in control over their own work. Leaders in ECEC can impose other work tasks that are not necessarily related to support provision and do not acknowledge the expertise of ECSETs.

The results in Studies 3 and 4 show that internal conflicts occur when ECSETs do not have full jurisdiction. One can argue that ECSETs have failed to claim their importance at the workplace level because they are forced into diminished work roles. This phenomenon can be seen in Studies 3 and 4 when ECSETs are obliged to conduct other tasks not related to support provision. When leaders put this type of work on ECSETs, ECSETs do not have jurisdiction on the legal or public levels. Furthermore, it shows disrespect for the work role, which is easily conveyed to the rest of the personnel, meaning that ECSETs' jurisdiction is weakened even at the workplace level.

7.2.2. Insufficient resources

As mentioned earlier, the results show great variation in the area of responsibility. In Study 1, ECSETs are responsible for a range between 6 and 54 settings ECEC settings. This variation corresponds well with the range (1–50) reported by Heiskanen et al. (2020). In Studies 3 and 4, a few ECSETs with a manageable area of responsibility express satisfaction and content with their working conditions; they feel that they have the time to support children, meet with personnel and properly conduct their work. More commonly occurring in Studies 1, 3 and 4 are ECSETs expressing frustration over their working conditions. This frustration arises from several different issues: the large responsibility, challenges with collaboration and how support is provided to children with SEN. Furthermore, a high number of children with various SEN sets high demands on ECSETs' competences.

The strongest limitation for providing support to children with SEN is the ECSETs' high level of responsibility. A high level of responsibility entails the number of children, number of settings, expectations and assumptions and so forth. According to the findings in Study 1, approximately 14% of children participating in ECEC need support for development and learning, which corresponds with national figures (Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017; Statistics Finland, 2020). The number of children needing support is high, and the results indicate that the resources are insufficient. Nearly half of the ECSETs in Study 1 report a higher number of children per ECSET than the recommended 250 children, here according to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2007).

In Studies 2 and 4, the most prominent limitation is a feeling of a lack of time. Not all ECSETs have time or possibility of supporting all children, nor do they feel that there is enough time for consultation. From the personnel's point of view, the number of children and different types of demands put pressure on their work, which may result in the need to prioritise work. Hence, the results from Study 1 show that one-fifth of children with SEN are outside of the ECSETs' support system. Ginner Hau et al. (2022) and Hallett and Hallett (2017) have also raised large areas of responsibilities as factors negatively affecting support provision and inclusion for children with SEN.

Insufficient resources – challenging jurisdiction

Insufficient resources, or having a large responsibility, affect ECSETs work. In Studies 1, 3 and 4, frustration over the conditions for providing support appears. This frustration indicates that ECSETs have weak jurisdiction because of their large responsibility. When there is a large workload, the boundaries between professional jurisdictions can disappear at the worksite (Abbott, 1988). The results from Study 1 reveal that one-fifth of children with SEN are outside of the ECSET support system. This implies that support is to be provided by others, meaning that the boundaries for the work of different professions are challenged and renegotiated. The conclusion is that a large responsibility does not give ECSETs the possibility to claim full jurisdiction regarding their work.

The results from Studies 1, 3 and 4 show that for those ECSETs working in municipalities where the ratio of ECSETs to children is too high, these ECSETs have not been able to claim jurisdiction on a legal or political level and are having trouble claiming it on the workplace level. The feeling of a lack of time for support provision creates frustration while limiting ECSETs' possibilities to provide support. In addition, the results from Studies 3 and 4 indicate that ECSETs can have full jurisdiction in some of the settings but not in others. In settings where ECSETs have full jurisdiction, this mostly occurs because of functional collaboration and personnel's competences.

7.2.3. Nonengaged personnel

Motivated personnel are seldom a problem; the challenge is personnel who are not interested in supporting children with SEN. When personnel are not interested in supporting children with SEN, a gap in support provision occurs. According to the results in Study 3, the personnel function as a type of gatekeeper for children receiving support because the personnel are the link between the child with SEN and ECSETs. When the personnel lack knowledge and interest, they do not see the children in need of support, and ECSETs do not receive information about the child's needs. Although the policy documents convey inclusive values and a shared responsibility among ECEC personnel, the results in Studies 3 and 4 indicate that a lack of interest and knowledge among personnel for supporting children with SEN are barriers to making inclusion work, hence making the work of ECSETs even more difficult. This aligns with earlier research in which interpersonal skills and values have been highlighted as important for the success of inclusion (Hanssen, 2018; Middleton & Kay, 2021; Palla & Vallberg Roth, 2022; Syrjämäki et al., 2017).

The results in Studies 1, 3 and 4 indicate that it is not always guaranteed that the children will get the support they need because of reasons related to interest and knowledge among personnel. Hannås and Bahdanovich Hanssen (2016) and Syrjämäki et al. (2017) have found similar results, arguing that personnel's lack of interest in supporting children with SEN is a challenge. The limitations here, as raised by the ECSETs in Studies 1, 3 and 4, are that, sometimes, the personnel lack specific knowledge of how to execute activities so that they can provide support to children with SEN. In contrast, in Study 3, the ECSETs raise the issue

that, sometimes, personnel try support briefly or use it inconsistently and they experience that it does not work. This means that personnel's endurance to continue with support provision can become a limitation. There is a risk that support is implemented on a superficial, general level and that the results strived for are not possible to achieve.

Another strong limitation for providing support is apparent in the results of Studies 3 and 4: there seems to be some resistance regarding working jointly with personnel claiming they have no children in need of support in their group or wanting the ECSETs to visit the setting. There is a unified feeling of negativity surrounding these settings: nothing works; it is just more work for the personnel; and ECSETs are seen as a burden. In contrast, these settings are probably the ones that need the most support from ECSETs when it comes to guaranteeing children's rights to support.

Nonengaged personnel – demanding conditions for claiming jurisdiction
As earlier concluded, ECSETs depend on the knowledge personnel have regarding children's need for support provision. If personnel have a negative attitude towards ECSETs or support provision, the situation becomes challenging for all involved. If personnel are not interested in collaboration with ECSETs, the personnel can diminish the jurisdiction for ECSETs while expanding their own jurisdiction.

Furthermore, Abbot (1988) mentions client differentiation as one area in which a profession can have various degrees of control. In Studies 1, 3 and 4, the personnel's lack of interest, motivation and knowledge in providing support for children with SEN becomes obvious. The ECSETs address this lack of competence in different ways: in relation to the child in need of support or in relation to the personnel working in the group. Addressing the individual child and its characteristics can be seen as a type of expansion in the area of the profession, simultaneously diminishing the jurisdiction of ECEC teachers. In this case, ECSETs take full responsibility for supporting the child. When ECSETs instead focus more on supporting personnel, they try to strengthen their jurisdiction by organising the work regarding support provision.

8. Conclusion

Special educational support for children with SEN is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, so it was important for me to explore the context from different angles and on different levels. By synthesising the result and theoretical anchoring in the previous chapter, here I will address areas in the working context for ECSETs that needs to be considered when discussing support provision to children with SEN. I will then proceed to reflect on the strengths and limitations of the chosen methodology and finally, give some suggestions for future research.

So what have I learned from this research journey? A whole lot, I would argue. I have gained insights into the complexity of the work of providing support to children with SEN. Support provision is not exclusively dependent on one single item; there are many factors in the environment that have a large impact on how work is conducted. Some of these factors are facilitators for support provision, and some of them become inhibitors. Strong facilitators for support provision are collaboration, supportive leadership and environment, and autonomy and flexibility. Quite naturally, inhibitors are the opposite (Ainscow, 2020; Mantilla et al., 2022; Purdue, 2009), but also the context where ECSETs are supposed to carry out their work can become a barrier. Especially when looking at a diminished role, insufficient resources and non-engaged personnel, I understand that these circumstances can become inhibitors.

Based on research conducted in Finland, I argue that there is an equivalence issue regarding the employment of ECSETs. Studies conducted within the same area show that, in the capital area, where Finnish is the medium of instruction, the ECSET–child ratio is quite different (Suhonen et al., 2020). In both language contexts, there are different types of ECSETs employed, working as itinerant, working in a setting, working in a regular group or working in a special group. All these different types of ECSETs add to the complexity of clarifying their roles and work. In addition to different employment, ECSETs are different as individuals and prefer to work in their own way. Earlier research (Kearns, 2005) has lifted the different types of roles ECSETs could have, each of them focusing on the way ECSETs have worked. I would like to argue that, based on the present study, there is an additional role that appears: the adjuster. This kind of ECSET adjusts to all types of circumstances and can take on various roles, here depending on the situation. They are not in charge of the situation; instead, they adjust their role, are flexible and follow the flow based on the conditions. Being adjustable can be a strength but at the same time it can be a weakness.

Furthermore, I would like to briefly address the barriers that have appeared in the present thesis. ECSETs have expertise within special education that should be used within this area. Here, it is important that the ECEC leader supports ECSETs in their work and gives them the possibilities to work according to their professional competence. The work for ECSETs would be clearer for all if there was a written or outspoken conveyed focus on their work. In the present thesis,

this clarity could be found only in one case, but here, the ECSETs also were satisfied with the work conditions.

Insufficient resources might be more complex to adjust, even though the first thing would be to employ more ECSETs in municipalities where the area of responsibility is higher than recommended. Resources are tightly connected to professional jurisdiction; there needs to be a balance between personnel, children and ECSETs. The most urgent issue to address is the fact that there are children outside of the ECSETs' support system. Even though the legislation and core curriculum of today indicate the child's right to support, ECEC, as it functions today, cannot meet these ideals. Children's support provision depends on a fully functioning system; the smallest deficiency in the support chain can lead to some children falling between the support systems.

Even though insufficient resources might be challenging to address nonengaged personnel are even harder to address. Here, the leaders of ECEC once again have an important role in supporting personnel and providing good working conditions. However, leaders cannot change personnel's feelings. Because children with SEN are vulnerable and depend on a functional support system around them, it is important that the personnel working with children really want to work with them.

Finally, I argue that there are several elements supporting the vision of a joint mission: collaboration, shared responsibility, trust in others' competence and a satisfaction surrounding parts of the work. On the other hand, there are several elements addressed in the present thesis that emphasise the feeling of support provision being an impossible mission: high responsibility, lack of knowledge, lack of understanding and weak leadership. With the updated legislation (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018), new core curriculum for ECEC (EDUFI, 2022) with the emphasis on the three-tiered support system children should have all possibilities to receive the support they have the right to.

8.1 Methodological considerations

The four studies included in the present thesis and this comprehensive summary itself aim to depict the complexity of itinerant ECSETs' work and support provision for children with SEN. The phenomena studied are complex and multifaceted, and in attempting to grasp as many possible aspects related to the aim, I have chosen to use a mixed methods research approach. When conducting research, I, as a researcher, must make many choices continuously regarding, for example, choice of theory, data collection, respecting the confidentiality of respondents and making conscious choices regarding how to present the data from the studies. The variation of the methods used can be seen as a strength because several aspects are analysed from different perspectives, but at the same time, the variation of the methods presented some challenges and limitations.

To start to untangle the complexity regarding the profession and support provision provided to children with SEN, a qualitatively driven mixed methods approach was used. My specific interest was to study areas where Swedish is the

medium of instruction because this is an under-researched area. By narrowing the area of interest, the possible number of respondents was reduced. One challenge with the first study where ECSETs' work was investigated was that, because of the low number of respondents, in-depth or quantitative analyses of a more comprehensive character were not possible. With larger data, it could have been possible to find indications of, for example, the patterns in working preferences in relation to responsibility and ambition. Even though the results from Study 1 do not allow for generalizability, they illustrate the working conditions for ECSETs in 2017. This emerging understanding of ECSETs' work led to the following studies, where a more generalizable and in-depth understanding of support provision was searched for.

By collecting data of a quantitative character with in-depth information, a nuanced picture of support provision for children with SEN was searched for. Study 2 consists of a questionnaire sent to all ECEC leaders in areas where Swedish is the medium of instruction. The leaders then sent the questionnaire link to their employees, so I had no possibility to influence how the questionnaire was spread in the municipalities. The questionnaire for Study 2, which was quite comprehensive, might be the reason why the answers to the open questions are shortly written. This means that I had to interpret data carefully and not over interpret since the risk of misinterpretations increases when the written answers are short (Denscombe, 2018). The risk for misinterpretations during interviews is of a different character than the ones in the questionnaire, but still, they are equally present. Questions might be coloured by me as a researcher, and my interpretations are likely to be affected by my own experiences (Denscombe, 2018). As a researcher, I need to take an objective role during all processes and report the results in a correct way. By reasoning around the methods used and offering transparency of the process, the trustworthiness of research can be achieved.

Because the interviews are conducted with groups, there is already a challenge; there might be an imbalance of power between the respondents. The respondents' personalities and experiences affect the amount of space they claim during an interview. As an interviewer, it is my responsibility to ensure that everybody's voice is heard. To obtain information from the entire group and ensure the richest data, some areas need to be addressed (Wiklund et al., 2017). If some of the respondents seem to dominate the group, the interviewer should encourage all respondents to participate. This is a delicate balancing act because the interviews had open-ended questions, and the respondents reflected freely and in an unscheduled order. This means that I had to balance between the directive interviewer role and role of moderator; sometimes, I had to direct a question to a specific participant so that all voices were heard.

8.2. Suggestions for future research and directions

There is an obvious need to continue research in special education in the context of ECEC because this area is under-researched. The present thesis is the first step to putting special education in early childhood education on the map in areas

where Swedish is the medium of instruction in ECEC. A minority aspect has been included, and that specific aspect has affected some of the results, for example, the number of possible participants and area of responsibility. The present study focuses on itinerant ECSETs' work in Swedish medium settings. It could be of interest to study special education teachers in ECEC as a group in a larger context. Here, the focus could be on what defines the profession and what the underlying causes are for the employment of different types of ECSETs in the municipalities. A comparison of the effect of support provided by itinerant or one ECSET employed in the setting could be one way to address the inequality existing within access to ECSETs.

The results from the present study indicate that there are differences in how special educational support is organised and prioritised between municipalities, at least before August 2022. Because all children have the same rights to learning and development during their educational path, irrespective of their residence, the new core curriculum for ECE (EDUFI, 2022) challenges the traditions of support provision in municipalities. With a unified support system for children with SEN, even longitudinal studies from an early age are possible. The implementation of the three-tiered support system in ECE is an important area to further study.

The results in the current thesis indicate that there are ECSETs who are satisfied with their work conditions, even though the majority of ECSETs are not. It would be of interest to further study what makes these ECSETs satisfied with their work; what external and internal conditions need to coincide for this satisfaction to appear? Supportive leaders are one thing, but there needs to be something more because, even if ECSETs have supportive leaders, they are not completely satisfied with their work conditions.

Consultation in ECEC is becoming increasingly prominent in a national and Nordic context (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020; Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019; Riis Jensen et al., 2022). The lack of research conducted within this area raises the importance of studying it further. The results in the present thesis imply that consultation is—and will become—an even more important way of supporting personnel working with children with SEN. Therefore, different ways of implementing consultation and the affect of the consultation would be of interest to study further.

The aim of the present thesis was to explore what conditions enable and constrain itinerant ECSETs' work in providing support for children with special educational needs in early childhood and care settings where Swedish is the medium of instruction. The present thesis illuminates a specific context, showing the challenges and possibilities in that context. From a wider perspective, special education in ECEC needs to be researched on a broad basis so that we can go from a mission impossible to joint mission.

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Appendicies

1. Utbildning

Jag är behörig specialbarnträdgårdslärare ☐
Min grundutbildning är :_____
Jag fick min examen år: _____
Jag fick min specialbarnträdgårdslärarexamen:_____

2. Arbete

Jag jobbar i (stad/kommun):_____
Jag jobbar: Heltid_____
Deltid_____%
Jag har jobbat inom specialdagvården _____år.
Vi är flera i staden/kommunen som jobbar inom specialdagvården Ja ☐ Nej ☐
Om du svarade ja, hur många? _____
Av dessa är _____ambulerande specialbarnträdgårdslärare,
_____ jobbar som specialbarnträdgårdslärare i grupp.

Inom mitt ansvarsområde finns det uppskattningsvis (ange antal) _____barn.
Jag uppskattar att antalet barn som är i behov av mitt stöd är:_____
Jag uppskattar att antalet barn som får stöd av mig är: _____
Jag uppskattar att antalet barn under utredning är:_____
Jag uppskattar att antalet barn med diagnos är:_____

Jag ansvarar för flera olika verksamhetsställen

Förskolegrupper	_____st
Daghemsgrupper, barn i åldern 3-5	_____st
Daghemsgrupper, barn i åldern 1-3	_____st
Gruppfamiljedaghem	_____st
Familjedagvård	_____st
Övrigt: _____	_____st

3. Arbetstidsanvändning

Jag fördelar uppskattningsvis min arbetstid under en genomsnittlig arbetsvecka
enligt följande:

	<1h	1-5h	6-10h	11-15h	>15h
Individuellt arbete med barn	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Föräldrakontakt	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Möten med personal på avdelningar	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mångprofessionella möten	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Resetid, under arbetstid	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Planeringstid	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Läroplansarbete	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Utvecklingsarbete	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Egen kompetensutveckling	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Annat _____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Kommentera gärna: _____

_____

4. Ramar för arbetet

Nedan följer en rad påståenden, vilka eventuellt i olika grad påverkar det vardagliga arbetet. Kryssa för den ruta som enligt dig bäst motsvarar din uppfattning.

	Påverkar mycket	Påverkar delvis	Påverkar lite	Påverkar inte alls
Befattningsbeskrivningen	☐	☐	☐	☐
Antalet barn i staden/kommunen	☐	☐	☐	☐
Antalet barn i behov av stöd	☐	☐	☐	☐
Vårdnadshavarnas förväntningar	☐	☐	☐	☐
Personalens förväntningar	☐	☐	☐	☐
Min professionella ambition	☐	☐	☐	☐
Personalens ambitioner gällande barnen	☐	☐	☐	☐

Personalens kunskap	☐	☐	☐	☐
Stadens/kommunens utbildningspolitik	☐	☐	☐	☐
Kolleger inom specialdagvården	☐	☐	☐	☐
Restid under arbetstid	☐	☐	☐	☐
Barnens stödbehov	☐	☐	☐	☐
Antal verksamhetsställen	☐	☐	☐	☐
Planen för småbarns-pedagogik	☐	☐	☐	☐
Planen för förskole-undervisningen	☐	☐	☐	☐
Barnets plan	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tillgång till mångprofessionellt samarbete	☐	☐	☐	☐
Barnets möjlighet till terapier	☐	☐	☐	☐
Min barnsyn	☐	☐	☐	☐
Min syn på lärande	☐	☐	☐	☐

Kommentera gärna:

_____

_____

5. De olika stödformerna

Inom mitt verksamhetsområde finns uppskattningsvis, inom de olika stödformerna, följande antal barn i behov av stöd:

        Intensifierat stöd / Specialpedagogiskt stöd   _____
        Särskilt stöd / Mångprofessionellt stöd   _____

Av de barn som finns inom de olika stödformerna arbetar jag direkt med
        _____ inom Intensifierat stöd / Specialpedagogiskt stöd
        _____ inom Särskilt stöd / Mångprofessionellt stöd

Inom de olika stödformerna handleder jag barn indirekt genom handledning av personal (uppskatta antalet barn)

Intensifierat stöd / Specialpedagogiskt stöd _____

Särskilt stöd / Mångprofessionellt stöd   _____

6. Orsaker till varför barn behöver stöd

Uppskatta antalet barn som beroende på olika svårigheter behöver intensifierat stöd / specialpedagogiskt stöd eller särskilt stöd/mångprofessionellt stöd

	Intensifierat stöd	Särskilt stöd
Specifika språksvårigheter	_____	_____
Annat modersmål	_____	_____
Socioemotionella svårigheter	_____	_____
Koncentrationssvårigheter	_____	_____
Uppmärksamhetsstörning	_____	_____
Motoriska svårigheter	_____	_____
Autismspektrum	_____	_____
Synnedsättning	_____	_____
Hörselnedsättningar	_____	_____
Fysisk funktionsnedsättning	_____	_____
Utvecklingsstörning	_____	_____
Kronisk sjukdom	_____	_____
Annat _____	_____	_____

Övrigt att tillägga

_____

_____

Varmt tack för Din medverkan!

Jag skulle vara väldigt tacksam om du fyllde i Dina kontaktuppgifter för eventuell fördjupande intervju:

Namn:_____

Födelseår:_____

Epost: _____

Telefon:_____

Bakgrundsinformation

1. Min utbildning är:

2. I barngruppen jobbar jag som:

3. Min sammanlagda arbetserfarenhet inom småbarnspedagogik och förskoleundervisning (i antal år):

4. Språklig bakgrund: Jag är själv enspråkig/tvåspråkig/flerspråkig

        Om annat, vad?

5. Den svarandes arbetsplats: Jag jobbar på: daghem/förskola

6. Antal barn i gruppen (skriv bara siffror):

7. Barnen i gruppen är huvudsakligen: 1-3 år, 1-5 år, 3-5 år, 6-7 år

8. Gruppens verksamhetsspråk är:

9. Språklig profil i daghemmet/förskolan:: Har daghemmet/förskolan någon speciell, språklig profil? Nej/ tidigt fullständigt språkbad i de inhemska språken/ annan omfattande småbarnspedagogik på två språk / mindre omfattande (språkberikad) småbarnspedagogik på två språk

        Om daghemmet/förskolan har en speciell, språklig profil, vilka språk handlar det om?

        enbart svenska / enbart finska / enbart ett annat språk än finska eller svenska / finska och svenska / finska och ett annat språk än svenska / andra språkkombinationer

Egen del i enkäten

38. Vilka olika typer av stödbehov har barnen? Ange hur många barn som har det specifika behovet.

        Hur många barn i behov av stöd finns det totalt i din barngrupp? / Språkliga utmaningar / Koncentrationssvårigheter / Socioemotionella svårigheter / Autismspektrum / Motoriska svårigheter / Annat 1 / Annat 2

39. Vem kan du få stöd av i ditt arbete med barn i behov av stöd? (Du kan välja fler alternativ) Speciallärare inom småbarnspedagogik / Speciallärare inom den grundläggande utbildningen / Talterapeut / Fysioterapeut / Ergoterapeut / Handledare från någon förening eller stiftelse / Annan / Ingen

40. Används trestegsmodellen för stöd?

Ja / Nej

41. Om det finns barn med någon av följande utmaningar i din barngrupp, notera på vilken nivå de får stöd samt hur många barn (antal) det är på de olika nivåerna, intensifierat eller särskilt stöd. Ange siffran 0 om det inte finns något barn med den specifika svårigheten.

Intensifierat stöd

Språkliga utmaningar / Koncentrationssvårigheter / Socioemotionella svårigheter / Autismspektrum/ Motoriska svårigheter / Annat 1 / Annat 2

Särskilt stöd

Språkliga utmaningar / Koncentrationssvårigheter / Socioemotionella svårigheter / Autismspektrum/ Motoriska svårigheter / Annat 1 / Annat 2

42. Ange hur många barn i din grupp som får stöd på de olika nivåerna (enligt indelningen intensifierat eller särskilt stöd). Ange med siffran 0 om det inte finns något barn i din grupp med de olika utmaningarna.

Intensifierat stöd

Allmän språkförsening / Specifika språksvårigheter / Svårigheter med språkförståelse / Uttalssvårigheter / Dyspraxi (munmotoriska svårigheter) / Stamning / Annat hemspråk / Annat

Särskilt stöd

Allmän språkförsening / Specifika språksvårigheter / Svårigheter med språkförståelse / Uttalssvårigheter / Dyspraxi (munmotoriska svårigheter) / Stamning / Annat hemspråk / Annat

43. Beskriv vad som görs i er grupp i vardagen för att stödja språkutvecklingen hos barn med språkliga utmaningar?

44. Hur ofta får barnet planerat och individuellt riktat stöd för sina utmaningar? Notera endast de barn som är i behov av stöd i din grupp samt skriv in vilken typ av utmaning de har.

> Stöd för barnet
>
> Varje dag / 2-3 dagar i veckan / 1 gång i veckan / varannan vecka / var tredje vecka / en gång i månaden / en gång per termin / en gång i året / aldrig

45. Vem ger i huvudsak stöd till barnet? Kryssa för alternativ, notera att barnen har samma nummer som frågan ovan.

> Lärare / barnskötare / Assistent / speciallärare / terapeut / handledare / annan
>
> Vid annan, ange vem.

46. Beskriv kort hur stödet ser ut för de olika barnen.

47. Ange vilket språk barnet erhåller stöd för sina utmaningar på.

> Svenska / finska / barnets hemspråk / annat / Vid barnets hemspråk eller annat, skriv in vilket språk.

48. Hur väljer ni vilket språk stödet ges på?

Åbo Akademi
Pedagogik och
välfärdsstudier

Bästa specialbarnträdgårdslärare

Specialpedagogik inom småbarnspedagogik och förskola har under de senaste åren blivit allt viktigare. I planer för småbarnspedagogik och förskola framkommer att barn har rätt till ett tidigt och rätt riktat stöd samt vikten av att de olika stödformerna används.

Forskning inom området specialpedagogik och barnpedagogik är tidigare inte gjorda på svenska i Finland. Grunden till att just detta blir fokusområden är att jag till min utbildning är specialbarnträdgårdslärare och har arbetat som ambulerande i några år. I dag arbetar jag som universitetslärare på Utbildningslinjen för barnträdgårdslärare och denna forskning skall i slutändan resultera i en doktorsavhandling.

Jag intresserar mig särskilt för ambulerande specialbarnträdgårdslärarens arbete, vilka faktorer som styr arbetet samt likheter och skillnader som förekommer inom yrket runtom i Svenskfinland. *Syftet med studien är att fördjupa kunskapen om vilka förutsättningar som är avgörande för hur ambulerande specialbarnträdgårdslärarens arbete inom småbarnspedagogik och förskola tar sig uttryck.*

Det jag verkligen behöver är Din hjälp för att få en korrekt bild av hur arbetet tar sig uttryck runtom i Svenskfinland. Undersökningen riktar sig till alla ambulerande specialbarnträdgårdslärare som arbetar på svenska. Forskningsresultatet är tänkt att presenteras i fyra olika artiklar, av vilka den första har en kartläggande karaktär. Utgående från enkätsvaren hoppas jag även ha möjlighet att göra fördjupande intervjuer med några av er.

Din kunskap och dina erfarenheter inom området är ett viktigt bidrag och jag är mycket tacksam om du tar dig tid att fylla i enkäten.

Alla svar behandlas konfidentiellt, inga namn eller annat som kan kännas igen kommer att nämnas i kommande publikationer. Jag hoppas verkligen att just Du tar dig tid att svara på mina frågor.

<div style="text-align: center">

Har du frågor så tag gärna kontakt.

Häsningar Eva Staffans

</div>

Eva Staffans

Eva.Staffans@abo.fi

Skriftlig information (webenkät)

Hur länge har du arbetat som speciallärare?

Hur ser ditt arbetsfält ut?
>
> Antalet grupper du ansvarar för?
> Uppskattat antal barn i behov av stöd som du stöder?

Hur många barn skulle du uppskatta att du stödjer när det kommer till språk?
>
> Vilka språkliga behov har barnen som du stödjer?
> Kan du uppge antal barn med olika språkliga utmaningar:

Alternativ?

Vilken arbetsuppgift använder du mest tid till under en normal arbetsvecka?
>
> Hur stor del av arbetstiden upptar denna arbetsuppgift?

Samtals/Tema frågor

I nästan alla barngrupper finns det barn som är i behov av stöd för sin utveckling inom olika områden. Behovet av ett mångprofessionellt samarbete är tydligt i många kommuner. Hur ser ni på olika professioners (speciallärares och lärares) särdrag och ansvarsområde?

>
> Vad är det som skiljer professionerna åt?
> Vad är de olika ansvarsområdena för de olika professionerna?
> Hur ser arbetsgången ut när det finns barn av behov av stöd i en grupp?
> Vem ansvarar för att barn i behov av stöd "fångas upp" och får det stöd de har rätt till?
> I vilken mån upprätthåller specialläraren kontakten till personal och daghem där det finns barn i behov av stöd?
> I vilken mån upprätthåller specialläraren kontakten till personal och daghem där det inte finns barn i behov av stöd?

I vårt samhälle så är det vanligt att vårdnadshavare har sina barn i pedagogisk verksamhet åtskilliga timmar under en vecka. Detta innebär att daghemmet har en viktig roll när det kommer till stöttning av barn. På vilket sätt organiseras stöttningen gällande språk för barnen med utmaningar i den vardagliga verksamheten?

>
> På vilket sätt organiseras stöd i gruppen för barn med språkliga utmaningar?

Vilken typ av arrangemang görs i lärmiljön för att stötta barnet?
Vilka olika aktiviteter erbjuds för att stötta barnet i den vardagliga verksamheten?
Finns det personal som jobbar individuellt med barnet och hur ser det arbetet ut?
På vilket sätt syns stöttningen i aktiviteter?
På vilket sätt genomsyrar stöttningen verksamheten?
Vad är speciallärarens roll i det vardagliga stödet som barnet erhåller?
Kan du ge exempel på hur språklig stöttning organiseras för barn som är i behov av stöd?

Speciallärare och lärare i grupp har olika kompetenser. Specialpedagogik ingår endast som en liten del i lärares utbildning vilket gör att handledning av personal blir en viktig arbetsuppgift för specialläraren. Personal behöver ibland handledning för att kunna stötta barn i gruppen. Hur genomförs handledningen av personal?

Arbetsfördelningen mellan speciallärare och personal när det gäller stöd för barnet?
Vilken typ av stöd får läraren/personalen i grupp för att stötta barnet?
Hur genomförs handledningstillfället?
Vad baserar sig handledningen på?
Vem i personalen tar del av handledningen?
Hur görs hela teamet medvetna om stöttning/metoder/arrangemang mm?
Kan du ge exempel på hur ett handledningstillfälle kan se ut?

Det finns många skillnader i hur speciallärare arbetar. Något som dock framkommer väldigt ofta är den individuella handledningen/arbetet med barn. Detta är något som många speciallärare jobbar med varje vecka. Hur tar den individuella handledningen gällande stöttning av språket sig uttryck?

Handleds barnen individuellt eller i grupp av speciallärare?
Hur vanligt är det att specialläraren handleder barnen individuellt?
Vad är orsaken till att specialläraren väljer att fokusera/ eller inte på individuell handledning av barn?
Vid vilka tillfällen kan det vara fördelaktigt att handleda individuellt?
Vid vilka tillfällen kan det vara fördelaktigt att handleda som grupp?

94

Vad är fokus vid dessa tillfällen?
Kan du ge exempel på hur arbetar ni med de barn som är i behov av språkligt stöd?

I många grupper syns mångkulturaliteten väldigt tydligt. Språklig mångfald är en rikedom, men kan även ge utmaningar för barnet och personalen i gruppen. Grupper har ett språk som är deras undervisningsspråk, vilket kan vara ett främmande språk för barnet. Dessa barn kan även ha utmaningar när det kommer till språkinlärning. Hur resonerar ni kring det språkliga stöd som barnet får?

Hur resonerar speciallärare kring att stötta barnets alla språk?
Hur tas barnets modersmål i beaktande när det kommer till att stötta språket?
Vilka förutsättningar finns/saknas för att stötta barn med annat hemspråk än det som används i gruppen?
På vilket språk väljer speciallärare att stötta barn med annat modersmål än verksamhetspråket?
Om specialläraren har kompetens för att stötta barnets olika språk, vad är det som avgör vilket språk barnet får stöd på?
På vilket sätt styr barnens språkliga utmaningar val av språk för stöttning?
Kan du ge ett praktiskt exempel på detta?

F1 Hur upplever speciallärare rådande ramar och möjligheter för att handleda?

Hur stor del av ert arbete utgörs av konsultation/handledning?

Hur upplever ni rådande möjligheter för att möta personal i konsultativa samtal? (tex tidsanvändning)

Hur upplever ni er egen kompetens när det gäller att fungera som konsulterande speciallärare?

Vilka utmaningar upplever speciallärarna när det gäller den konsultativa rollen?

Vilka möjligheter finns det för speciallärare inom småbarnspedagogiken att utvecklas i sin roll som konsulterande speciallärare? Hur tänker ni att att rollen kan eller borde utvecklas?

F2 Hur genomför speciallärarna konsultationstillfällen med personalen?

Hur genomför ni konsultationen i praktiken? Berätta om ett typiskt konsultationstillfälle!

Vad diskuterar ni under ett handledningstillfälle? Utgår ni från ett individperspektiv? Eller utgår ni från ett relationellt perspektiv?

Hur upplever ni på betydelsen av att ge råd under konsultationssamtalen?

Hur upplever ni betydelsen av att använda samtalsfärdigheter och att få personalen att reflektera under konsultationstillfällena?

F3 Vilken betydelse upplever speciallärarna att handledningen har?

Hur upplever ni att konsultationen påverkar barnen som har behov av specialpedagogiskt stöd?

Hur upplever ni att konsultationen påverkar personalen inom småbarnspedagogiken?

Hur upplever ni att konsultationen påverkar er själva och era arbetssätt?

Hur upplever ni att kvaliteten på konsultationen kunde bli bättre?

Avslutande frågor:

Har ni något att diskutera?

Hur upplevde ni det att diskutera er konsultativa roll i den här gruppintervjun?

Original publications

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1

Mission Impossible?
Finnish Itinerant Early Childhood Special Education Teachers' Views of their Work and Working Conditions

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ABSTRACT: Providing support to children in their younger years is prominent in Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC), as most children need some form of support for learning and development during this stage. Itinerant early childhood special education teachers (ECSETs) are important resources in providing support to children with special educational needs (SEN). Previous research in Finland addresses areas where itinerant ECSETs predominantly work in contexts where Finnish is the medium of instruction. Therefore, it is of interest to examine itinerant ECSETs' views of elements affecting their work with supporting children with SEN in Swedish-medium ECEC settings. This research is explorative to its character and data was collected through a questionnaire sent to all itinerant ECSETs working in Swedish-speaking regions of Finland. Descriptive statistics were used to depict the work conditions for ECSETs'. The results show that ECSETs own professional ambition and children's support needs affect the work the most. Furthermore, inequality in ECSETs working conditions

have direct consequences for practice. This study concludes with a discussion of how ECSETs' working conditions influence the support that children receive and areas that should be addressed to ensure equal and efficient learning for all children.

Keywords: *early childhood education and care, early childhood special education, itinerant, special education teacher*

Introduction

In recent decades, there have been ongoing discussions on the importance of early intervention and support provision in early childhood education and care (ECEC) (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017). However, research in this area remains sparse compared with studies on special education, which has recently received much attention (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022; Palla, 2019; Pihlaja, 2022).

Providing early support for the development and learning of children in ECEC is aligned with the principles of inclusion (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2014, 2022; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994). One core issue concerning inclusion is children's right to high-quality education and pedagogical processes that support inclusion (Alijoki et al., 2013; Brandlistuen et al., 2015; Engvik et al., 2014; Syrjämäki et al., 2016; van Kessel et al., 2019). To achieve high-quality ECEC for children with special educational needs (SEN), personnel must possess competencies for identifying and addressing children's individual needs in an inclusive setting (Hannås & Hanssen, 2016; Lundqvist et al., 2015; Marinósson & Bjarnason, 2014). Riis Jensen et al. (2022) emphasise that making inclusion work requires a shift from focusing on children's challenges to identifying new ways of supporting diversity. In most cases, ECEC teachers need support for this demanding task. Lindqvist et al. (2011) argued that personnel do not always possess the competencies needed to support children with SEN and need support from early childhood special education teachers (ECSET). ECSETs (called *special education needs coordinators* [SENCOs] in other countries) are key figures

in ensuring early identification of and provision of support to children with SEN participating in regular ECEC settings (EDUFI, 2014, 2022). ECSETs provide professional support and consultation to ECEC personnel, thus giving them the knowledge and tools necessary for supporting children in regular groups (Dockrell et al., 2017; Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Rantala et al., 2018). Professional support and consultation require functional collaboration. However, collaboration may be challenging.

ECSETs' work roles are multifaceted and difficult due to increased professional requirements and constant changes in the working environment (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Eskelinen et al., 2018; Holst & Pihlaja, 2011; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). Middleton and Kay (2021) point out that diverse contextual conditions, such as the number of settings, number of children with SEN and cultural values and beliefs, add to the complexity of ECSETs' work roles. Furthermore, a lack of clear guidelines concerning these work roles creates challenges in defining the early childhood special education (ECSE) teaching profession (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2022; Heiskanen et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2011; Suhonen et al., 2020; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017).

Given the scarcity of research on special education in ECEC, especially the working conditions of ECSETs, there is a need to deepen the understanding of the elements affecting ECSETs' working conditions. Finland is, according to its constitution, a bilingual nation with largely identical educational policies and core curricula in both languages (EDUFI, 2017). This would indicate similar roles and conditions for Finnish ECSETs, irrespective of the language of instruction. However, Finnish research regarding ECSETs' work (e.g., Heiskanen et al., 2021; Nislin et al., 2015; Rantala et al., 2018; Suhonen et al., 2020) addresses areas where ECSETs predominantly work in contexts where Finnish is the medium of instruction. In the Finnish context there seems to be more versatile forms of work for supporting children with SEN, e.g., special groups, integrated special groups, small groups and ECSETs employed in the setting (Suhonen et al., 2020). The Swedish context is geographically more scattered compared to the majority language context, possibly indicating challenges in allocating special education expertise to the ECEC settings. Very little is known about the Swedish context and therefore there is a need to

illuminate ECSETs' working conditions and support provision for children with SEN in ECEC where Swedish is the medium of instruction.

ECEC in Finland

As Finland has two national languages, Finnish and Swedish, the educational policy and core curricula for both languages are largely identical; the only difference is the language of instruction (EDUFI, 2017). ECEC is the first step in the lifelong learning path for most children. In Finland, ECEC comprises early childhood education (ECE) for children aged one to six and pre-primary education for children aged six to seven. Most children (75%) participate in ECE, and virtually all children enrol in compulsory pre-primary education (Vipunen, 2021). While ECE is non-compulsory and subject to fees, pre-primary education (for six-year-olds) has been free of charge since 2015.

A significant change regarding support provision within Finnish ECE took place in autumn 2022. The three-tiered support system guiding support provision in pre-primary and basic education also became obligatory in ECE (EDUFI, 2022). The three-tiered support system consists of general, intensified and special support. General support is the first response to children's needs. Support on this level is often short-term and focuses on routines, the structure of the day and accessible communication and interaction for all (EDUFI, 2014, 2022). If a child needs support on a more regular basis or various support provisions simultaneously, intensified support is offered. The strongest support level is special support, and if a child receives this, it is assumed that the child cannot achieve the goals set for their growth, development and learning according to the general curriculum. The goals are, in this case, individual according to the child's individual learning plan (EDUFI, 2014, 2022). They have their own individual learning plans with individual goals to achieve.

The idea behind the unified support system is to achieve equality and guarantee that all children, regardless of their place of residence, receive early and adequate support (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018; EDUFI, 2014, 2022). Personnel working in

ECEC are responsible for providing children with opportunities to develop and learn according to their individual characteristics in regular ECEC settings (EDUFI, 2014, 2022).

Support provision, ECSETs' work and children's support needs

In addition to regular ECEC staff, personnel with education and competencies within special needs education (SNE) are needed to support children with SEN (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017; EDUFI, 2014, 2022). ECSETs are qualified ECEC teachers who have at least a bachelor's degree and supplementary education in SNE (minimum 60 ECTS)(Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018). There is a joint responsibility to provide support among ECSETs and personnel working in the groups (EDUFI, 2022). This means that ECSETs organise and implement special educational support at the municipal level and arrange for support for the individual child in family day care or in day care centres in cooperation with families, personnel and other specialists (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018). ECSETs are often responsible for several ECEC settings scattered around the municipality. Those who work in this way are called *itinerant ECSETs* and this way of working is the most common way of working (Heiskanen et al., 2021). There are recommendations for the number of ECSETs regarding children participating in ECEC. Pihlaja (2022) mentions that 500 children per ECSET is a common number. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2007) recommends that for every 250 children participating in ECEC, there should be at least one ECSET to guarantee that the needs can be met. Heiskanen et al. (2021) raise the fact that the variation regarding responsibilities varies greatly. They found that 37.1% of ECSETs (N = 200) are responsible for 200–499 children, 27.3% have 100–199 children, 22.2% have under 50 children, 9.8% have 50–99 children, 2.2% 500–1000 children and 1.5% have over 1000 children they are responsible for. This means that 68.1% of ECSETs are responsible for more than 100 children (Heiskanen et al., 2021). Furthermore, ECSETs are responsible for are in average 12 settings each. National authorities and teachers'

unions point to the continuously growing need for ECSETs in ECEC (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020; The Trade Union of Education in Finland [OAJ], 2020).

The job descriptions for itinerant ECSETs can vary depending on their area of responsibility and specific work descriptions in a municipality (Heiskanen et al., 2021; Suhonen et al., 2020). Furthermore, researchers raise the fact that ECSETs' autonomy affects how each ECSET plans and executes their work (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2022; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017).

Itinerant ECSETs are key figures in supporting personnel working with children with SEN (Heiskanen et al., 2021). The rise of inclusion within ECEC and pre-primary education has changed the work of ECSETs because of the rapidly decreasing number of segregated special education settings, meaning that most children with SEN participate in regular ECEC settings (Eskelinen et al., 2018; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). Making inclusion work in regular ECEC settings requires a focus on learning environments and removing contextual differences (Hermanfors, 2017; Rantala et al., 2018). Hence, more focus should be directed towards changing the operational culture rather than concentrating on child-centred methods because the latter removes the focus from environmental challenges that are important for making inclusion work (Hermanfors, 2017). Activities should be planned for all children so the focus is not children with SEN per se but how the difficulties encountered can be resolved (Suhonen et al., 2016). Furthermore, the implementation of inclusion highly depends on support from the heads of ECEC and personnel's previous knowledge, interest in and experiences with working with children with SEN (Holst, 2008; Laakso et al., 2020; Viitala, 2014).

The support needs among children in ECEC vary and are multifaceted. However, most children, both nationally and internationally, with SEN in ECEC require support for language difficulties (e.g., Laasonen et al., 2018; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Norbury et al., 2016; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017). Language difficulties in the early years arise for various reasons, such as delays in language development and speech and language disorders. Another major group with SEN in ECEC is children experiencing difficulties in concentration, attention and socio-emotional functioning. These children seldom obtain

a diagnosis, but their support needs are obvious (Ketonen et al., 2018; Pihlaja, 2018). In addition to these larger groups, there are children with motor difficulties, intellectual disabilities, visual impairments and hearing impairments. Nationally, about 10% of ECEC children receive intensified or special support (Statistics Finland, 2020; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017). The purpose of support on tiers two and three is to provide children with holistic, systematic and multi-professional assistance for development and learning. In special support, special education or counselling is more intense, and instruction is mostly individualised, with each child having individual learning goals (EDUFI, 2014, 2022).

ECSETs' fundamental responsibility is supporting children with SEN, which can be conducted in various ways. The two major ways of supporting children with SEN in Finnish ECEC are direct or indirect support (EDUFI, 2014, 2022; Rantala et al., 2018). Direct support for children usually means that ECSETs work individually with children, supporting them in different ways. Nelson et al. (2011) and Viljamaa and Takala (2017) found that many ECSETs are more comfortable working directly with children and view themselves more as service providers than consultants. Consultation, or indirect support for children with SEN, can be delivered with various approaches and a more expert- or participant-driven approach. The expert-driven approach might strengthen the teacher's view of the child as the problem, rarely leads to long-term changes in practice and does not align with the principles of inclusion (Hermanfors, 2017; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015; UNESCO, 1994). The participant-driven approach focuses on teachers' practices and possible changes in the environment. This can lead to more sustainable changes in practice (Sundqvist, 2012; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). When supporting personnel regarding inclusion and adjusting the learning environment to support children with SEN, Holst (2008), Rantala et al. (2018), Suhonen et al. (2016) and Viitala (2014) argue that consultation is a key measure.

Aim and method

The aim of this study is to examine itinerant ECSETs' views of elements affecting their work with supporting children with SEN in Swedish-medium ECEC settings. The specific research questions addressed to meet this aim are as follows:

1.   How do itinerant early childhood special education teachers view the contextual conditions affecting their work?

2.   What characterises the work of itinerant early childhood special education teachers?

Data collection and participants

The study was conducted in areas in Finland where Swedish is the medium of instruction. This choice enabled us to obtain data from an under-researched area and, thus, made a comparison of the findings with those of previous national and international research possible. Itinerant ECSETs were chosen as participants because they are responsible for supporting all children with SEN in a municipality. The aim was to reach all itinerant ECSETs in all 30 municipalities with Swedish-medium ECEC. Contact information to ECSETs was obtained from municipalities' web pages. Based on official information from these web pages, 49 possible respondents were found. A questionnaire was sent to all itinerant ECSETs in the municipalities (N = 49).

Because previous research on itinerant ECSETs' working conditions is sparse, this study is explorative, which determines its design. A questionnaire of a survey's character provides comprehensive data, which is preferable when a study is explorative (Creswell & Guetterman, 2020). The aim of the study and the research questions guided the questionnaire, which is partly based on earlier studies conducted in Finland. From the work of Syrjämäki et al. (2016), questions about arrangements, activities and teamwork were chosen. Questions about how support is implemented were adapted from Viljamaa and Takala (2017). Professional knowledge about ECSETs' work through earlier work experience also influenced the questions in the questionnaire. The questionnaire included general background questions related to teachers' characteristics (e.g., education,

qualification and work experience). Closed-ended questions focused on the work context (e.g., number of ECEC settings in the municipality and number of children with SEN in the municipality), children's support needs (type and severity) and work content (elements affecting ECSETs' work). ECSETs' views of the elements affecting their work were measured with a four-point scale: large effect, some effect, only a little effect and no effect. How ECSETs devote their working hours to different tasks was divided into five time intervals: < 1 h, 1–5 h, 6–10 h, 11–15 h and > 15 h.

Around two-thirds (N = 33) of the ECSETs returned the questionnaire. These respondents represented 22 out of 30 municipalities. Some municipalities have more than one ECSET, so the number of respondents exceeds the number of municipalities. Day care managers from two municipalities responded that they use external ECSE service providers and could not answer the questionnaire, whereas the ECSETs from six municipalities did not respond. The respondents were evenly distributed across regions. Therefore, the data can be considered representative of the parts of Finland where Swedish is the medium of instruction in ECEC.

In most municipalities (82%), ECSETs work with all children with SEN under school age. In about one-fifth (18%) of the municipalities, the ECSETs work only with children aged one to five years. In these municipalities, the special education teacher from basic education supports children with SEN that participate in pre-primary education. All 33 respondents were women, and most (65%) were between 40 and 60 years old (M = 50.38 years). The ECSETs had varying lengths of work experience in ECSE, ranging from three months to 29 years (M = 11.26 years). All had basic qualifications as ECEC teachers and had supplementary education in SNE (60 ECTS), which qualifies them to work as ECSETs.

Data analysis

The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS 27. The study is small scale, and we report our results using descriptive statistics (percentages, means and standard deviations).

The first research question concerning the contextual conditions for itinerant ECSETs is answered with descriptive statistics in Table 1. The categories in the table are summarised based on the pre-constructed categories in the survey (contextual conditions, children's support needs, personnel approaches, own professional values and network support). In Table 2, regarding ECSETs' responsibility, the descriptive statistics consist of means, standard deviations and the minimum and maximum number of settings or children, as determining the differences between respondents' contextual conditions is interesting. Children's special educational needs are reported in percentages.

The second research question addresses itinerant ECSETs' work characteristics. Time spent on disparate tasks is measured with a five-point scale: 1 = < 1 hour, 2 = 1–5 hours, 3 = 6–10 hours, 4 = 11–15 hours and 5 = > 15 hours. Work-related items were listed, such as working with children and meeting with personnel or guardians. Time for travelling between settings, planning and evaluating work and further training was also listed. The results are presented as percentages.

Research ethics

All research involving persons, in this case ECSETs, must meet a set of ethical considerations. The research ethics principles in Finland (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2019) were followed for each part of the study. The respondents' consent to participate in this study came naturally when they chose to answer the survey. They were informed about the aim of the study through written information attached to the same letter as the survey. Furthermore, each respondent received information on how the results would be processed, analysed and presented in this study. Finally, the confidentiality was secured by excluding aspects that would allow the recognition of the subjects or settings in the respective contexts. Data were kept on the university's server and protected with passwords.

Results

The aim of this study was to examine itinerant ECSETs' views of elements affecting their work in supporting children with SEN in Swedish-medium ECEC settings in Finland. The results reveal contextual and teacher-related factors affecting the ECSETs' task of supporting children with SEN. Below, the results are presented according to the two research questions.

ECSETs' views of the contextual conditions affecting their work

The first research question focused on the contextual conditions affecting ECSETs' work. The results are presented according to the categories in the questionnaire: contextual conditions (job description, education policies, core curricula, number of children, number of settings and travel time during work hours), children's support needs (number of children with SEN, children's SEN and children's plans), personnel approaches (knowledge, ambition and expectations), ECSETs' own professional values (professional ambitions, assumptions of children and assumptions of learning) and network support (guardians, colleagues and multi-professionals). The ECSETs' perceptions of the elements affecting their work are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1 ECSETs' perceptions of how varying elements affect their work

CATEGORY	LARGE EFFECT	SOME EFFECT	ONLY A LITTLE EFFECT	NO EFFECT
Own professional values	**75.8%**	**22.2%**	**2%**	
professional ambition	81.8%	18.2%		
assumptions of children	72.7%	24.2%	3%	
assumptions of learning	72.7%	24.2%	3%	
Children's support needs	**71.1%**	**27.8%**	**2.1%**	
number of children with SEN	81.8%	18.2%		
children's SEN	78.8%	21.2%		
children's plan*	51.6%	45.2%	6.5%	
Personnel approaches	**52.5%**	**40.4%**	**7.1%**	

knowledge	69.7%	27.3%	3%
expectations	48.5%	48.5%	3%
ambition	39.4%	45.4%	15.2%
Network support	**37.4%**	**47.5%**	**14.1%**	**1%**
multi-professionals	60.6%	33.3%	6.1%
guardians	24.2%	63.6%	12.1%
colleagues	27.3%	45.4%	24.2%	3%
Contextual conditions	**35.2%**	**40.8%**	**20.4%**	**3.6%**
number of children	57.6%	36.4%	6.1%
number of settings	48.5%	45.4%	6.1%
job description	39.4%	33.3%	27.3%
core curricula	30.3%	45.4%	22.7%	3%
education policies**	18.2%	54.5%	18.2%	3%
travel time during work hours	15.2%	30.3%	39.4%	15.2%

Note * = 1 respondent missing, ** = 2 respondents missing

According to most ECSETs, their own professional values and children's support needs are elements that affect their work highly, whereas contextual conditions and network support do not affect their work very much. The number of children with SEN and professional ambitions are the most frequently mentioned elements affecting their work. In general, travel time during work hours does not seem to affect ECSETs' work. Conversely, about 15% of ECSETs claim that travel time significantly affects their work.

ECSETs' responsibilities

ECSETs have responsibilities in several settings which can be spread throughout the municipality and consist of ECE and pre-primary education. As the number of settings varies significantly, so does the number of children for whom ECSETs are responsible (Table 2). When ECSETs have numerous responsibilities for many children, the number of children with SEN whom they need to manage also increases. Consequently, some children with SEN do not receive support from ECSETs.

TABLE 2 ECSETs' obligations in terms of number of settings and number of children

NUMBER OF	M	SD	MIN	MAX
Settings	22.06	10.7	6	54
Children	302.36	168.11	85	725
Children with SEN	44.27	22.30	10	90
Children with SEN receiving support	34.94	17.78	10	70

On average, ECSETs are responsible for 22 (range: 6–54) settings scattered within a municipality or city. As the number of settings varies significantly, so does the number of children that ECSETs handle. The average number of children with or without SEN for whom ECSETs are responsible is 302. One ECSET (3.1%) has the responsibility for 50–99 children. One fourth of ECSETs (24.2%) have responsibility for 100–199 children. More than half of the ECSETs (57.5%) are responsible for 200–499 children in the settings. Finally, 15.2% of ECSETs are responsible for 500–1000 children.

Children's special educational needs

ECSETs highlight that children often have multifaceted challenges, especially when children are young. Consequently, determining their primary challenges is difficult. According to ECSETs, one-third of children (33.6%) with SEN have language development difficulties. Children with concentration difficulties are the second-largest group (27.2%) of children with SEN in ECEC. Socioemotional difficulties are also common in ECEC; 14.3% of children with SEN have difficulties in this area. Less common are motor difficulties (5.9%), autism spectrum disorders (5.2%), intellectual disabilities (3.6%), chronic diseases (2.5%), physical disabilities (2.5%) and visual and hearing impairments (< 2%). The proportion of children with SEN (intensified or special support) across all municipalities was 14%. The number of children who received intensified or special support per ECSET ranged from 10 to 90 (M = 44, SD = 22.301). There was a noticeable disparity between the number of children with SEN (M = 44; N = 1.461) and the actual number of children who received support (M = 34; N = 1.153). This difference is equivalent to the total number of children, with 21% requiring support. This means that every fifth child is outside the support system provided by the ECSETs.

Characteristics of ECSETs' Work

The second research question focuses on the characteristics of the itinerant ECSETs' work. The results are divided into five categories: consultation (of personnel or whole teams), supporting children (individually or in small groups), meetings (with guardians or multi-professionals), administrative work (planning and transfer time) and developmental work (core curricula, further training or evaluation). The results are presented in Table 3, which shows the respondents' perceptions of how they spent their working hours, presented with the total percentage per category. Under the five categories, the associated subcategories show the distinctions within each category.

ECSETs distribute their working hours into several tasks during the day. Their main work is to support children with SEN. How this is implemented varies among respondents; some work individually with children, whereas some focus on giving consultations to personnel working in groups (Table 3).

TABLE 3 How ECSETs spend their working hours during a regular workweek

TASK	< 1 H WEEKLY	1–5 H WEEKLY	6–10 H WEEKLY	11–15 H WEEKLY	> 15 H WEEKLY
Consultation	**7.6%**	**54.5%**	**25.8%**	**6.1%**	**6.1%**
of personnel		45.5%	36.4%	9.1%	9.1%
whole teams	15.2%	63.6%	15.2%	3%	3%
Supporting children	**20%**	**36.9%**	**23.1%**	**12.3%**	**7.7%**
direct individual support	15.2%	24.2%	27.3%	18.2%	15.2%
support in small groups*	24.2%	48.5%	18.2%	6.1%	
Meetings	**22.7%**	**63.6%**	**10.6%**	**3%**	
with guardians	21.2%	57.6%	15.2%	6.1%	
multi-professionals	24.2%	69.7%	6.1%		
Administrative work	**18.2%**	**63.6%**	**18.2%**		
planning	9.1%	60.6%	30.3%		
transfer time	27.3%	66.7%	6.1%		

Development work	38.5%	52.1%	8.3%	1%
core curricula work*	48.5%	42.4%	6.1%	
further training*	36.4%	45.5%	12.1%	3%
evaluation, documentation*	27.3%	63.6%	6.1%	

Note: * one respondent missing (N = 32)

According to respondents, the consultation of personnel and direct work with children are the tasks on which they spend the most hours weekly. All ECSETs offer consultations at least one hour weekly. Most ECSETs (55%) spend one to five hours weekly on consultation, and some ECSETs (12%) spend more than 15 hours weekly on consultation. Furthermore, direct individual support for children stands out; of the ECSETs (15%) spend either more than 15 hours or less than one hour on direct support. In general, developmental work is the task on which ECSETs spend the least time during a regular work week.

Summary of key results

To understand the complexity of ECSETs' work and responsibilities, diverse aspects and elements must be emphasised. First, the ECSETs reported that the one issue affecting their way of working was their professional ambitions. According to the ECSETs, other highly rated elements affecting their work are their assumptions of learning and their viewpoints of children. This, in combination with the number of children with SEN and their special educational needs, most shapes the work for ECSETs. The part of working conditions that divided the respondents the most was time for transitions during the day. Some argue that this affects their work a great deal, and equally many say that it has no effect. Furthermore, the number of children with SEN that ECSETs are responsible for also affects their way of working. The variation in the number of children each ECSET is responsible for ranges from 10 to 90. Most children (79%) with SEN receive support from ECSET in day care settings, which means that every fifth child (21%) is outside the ECSET support system.

The tasks that ECSETs are supposed to implement during a regular work week vary greatly. With the high autonomy that ECSETs possess, this leads to the fact that the actual work conducted in municipalities varies. Some ECSETs focus many of their working hours on consultation, while others focus equally much on working individually with children with SEN. An ECSET is supposed to implement many tasks during a work week. Therefore, they, in general, spend one to five hours on most tasks.

Discussion

In this study, we strive to contribute to the research on ECSETs' multifaceted work. The aim of this research is to examine itinerant ECSETs' views of the elements affecting their work with supporting children with SEN in Swedish-medium ECEC settings. The results show that ECSETs have various work conditions. Through the lens of earlier research, two categories addressing the research questions are presented: *demanding conditions – due to general premises or individual ambitions* as well as *autonomy – possibility and challenge.*

Demanding conditions – due to general premises or individual ambitions

The first research question focused on ECSETs' views of the contextual conditions affecting their work. The contextual condition that stands out is the variety of the number of children that ECSETs supervise. Pihlaja (2022) points out that commonly there is 500 children with or without SEN per ECSET. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2007), the number is as low as 250 children, which means that there are contradictory recommendations regarding ECSET work. This contradiction reinforces the ambiguity regarding the work. In the present study, one-fifth of ECSETs have greater responsibilities than 500 children. If one follows the recommendation of one ECSET per 250 children, as many as 16 of 33 have a larger responsibility than recommended. This indicates that, for 17 ECSETs, the workload is reasonable. However, for those who are responsible for up to 90 children with SEN, this workload is unreasonable. Middleton and Kay (2021) and Viljamaa and Takala (2017) note that, for example the area of responsibility and a lack of resources weaken ECSETs' abilities to cope with their workload and add to the complexity of ECSETs' work. Furthermore, several researchers (Dockrell et al., 2017; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Rantala et al., 2018) claim that ECSETs need excellent SNE competencies to support personnel in ECEC settings since the ECE groups are diverse. ECSETs are responsible for children with frequent, as well as less frequent, difficulties and disabilities. Accordingly, due to ECSETs' heavy workload, they must

prioritise, endangering children's equal rights to early and appropriate support. The number of failures to provide some children with the support to which they are entitled is alarming. According to ECSETs, as many as one-fifth of the children with SEN are outside of their system of support provision. This exclusion was also mentioned by Eskelinen and Hjelt (2017) and Viljamaa and Takala (2017). Requirements in policy documents and legislation concerning children's rights to early support are not met in some municipalities because of the heavy workload of some ECSETs.

Earlier research has indicated that ECSETs' work roles are multifaceted and challenging because of increased professional requirements and constant changes in the working environment (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Eskelinen et al., 2018; Holst & Pihlaja, 2011; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). Furthermore, according to ECSETs, their own professional ambitions affect the way they work. If personnel and ECSETs have the same high ambition regarding support provision for children with SEN, it is the best possible premise for children. Therefore, functional collaboration is crucial for ECSETs when providing personnel with the knowledge and tools to support children in regular groups (Dockrell et al., 2017; Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Rantala et al., 2018). This means that if expectations are not met, new challenges might arise from these conflicting ideas (Riis Jensen et al., 2022).

Autonomy – possibility and challenge

The second research question focused on the characteristics of ECSETs' work. Unclear guidelines for ECSETs' work and autonomy enable ECSETs to work in the way they find most suitable according to their work responsibilities. Nelson et al. (2011) and Viljamaa and Takala (2017) underscore that unclear guidelines regarding ECSETs' work might make the accomplishment of their tasks more challenging. However, Alijoki et al. (2013) claimed that professional autonomy is a significant job resource that might contribute to ECSETs' work well-being. This study illustrates that there are clear variations in how ECSETs work. One-fifth of the respondents spend more than 10 hours weekly on direct individual support provision to children, which aligns with the results from Suhonen et al. (2020). Nelson et al. (2011) and Viljamaa and Takala (2017) argue that many teachers

view themselves as service providers and are most comfortable working directly with children. Furthermore, a reasonable workload might favour child-centred work. However, working individually with children is time consuming and might not always promote inclusion for a child with SEN in a regular setting. In contrast, one-fifth of ECSETs spend less than one hour weekly on direct individual support for children. These ECSETs focus more on personnel consultations. This result aligns with the findings of Gäreskog and Lindqvist (2020) that Swedish SENCOs are engaged in consultations.

In this study, roughly one-fifth of the ECSETs spent a considerable part of their working hours weekly on consultations. Half of these ECSETs spend more than 15 hours weekly on consultations, and the rest spend 10–15 hours weekly. Consultations play a key role in supporting children. Personnel must gain knowledge, methods and tools for supporting children in a regular group (Dockrell et al., 2017; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Rantala et al., 2018). Personnel's knowledge of and interest in SNE influences how ECSETs work, which enables or constrains support provision for children (Hannås & Hanssen, 2016; Syrjämäki et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated a discrepancy between children's need for support and the actual support offered. The organisation of ECSE in municipalities and the workload of ECSETs are likely to play a part. There seems to be a difference in responsibility compared to ECSETs working in areas where Finnish is the medium of instruction to ECSETs participating in the present study. Suhonen et al. (2020) studied ECSETs' work in ECEC settings in the capital. In their study, one ECSET is employed in each day-care setting, meaning that these ECSETs are responsible for one to four groups and a maximum of five children with SEN per ECSET. In areas where Swedish is the medium of instruction, the ratio is very different. On average, one ECSET was responsible for 22 groups and 44 children with SEN. Furthermore, when comparing present results with Heiskanen et al. (2021) regarding number of children an ECSET is responsible for, there is a noticeable

difference. According to Heiskanen et al. (2021) as many as one third of ECSETs are responsible for less than 100 children each, in present study the number is 3.1%. In addition, the number of ECSETs responsible for more than 500 children is higher in present study (15.2% compared to 3.7%). This implies an imbalance and that special education resources in Swedish areas are limited in many municipalities. Every municipality should review the situation within the ECSE and make the necessary reforms. Furthermore, the work role of ECSETs should be clearer so the distribution between responsibilities is evident. ECSETs should focus more on consultations and supporting personnel to make changes to the learning environment. This, however, implies that regular ECEC personnel need more knowledge about special education and support provision for children in an inclusive setting.

This study's findings advance the understanding of the working conditions and challenges within ECSETs' work. The ECSETs' workload is heavy because of the high number of children needing continuous and extensive support, and ECSETs must have comprehensive professional knowledge of how to support children and personnel. In conclusion, the tasks of ECSETs are demanding (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Middleton & Kay, 2021; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017), and gaining an in-depth understanding of the complexity, conditions and challenges of their work is important because a highly functioning ECSE contributes to all children's development and learning. Considering the results of this research, we conclude that the workload of ECSETs ranges from manageable to difficult, even impossible.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, in a national context, the sample consisting of 33 itinerant ECSETs was small. Seen in a context where Swedish is the medium of instruction, the sample is somewhat generalisable to this context. Second, given the small sample and the nature of the study, it was not possible to draw generalisable conclusions. Nonetheless, this work provides a basic understanding of the conditions affecting ECSETs' ways of working. It represents a first step towards a more nuanced view of the

possibilities, challenges and limitations faced by itinerant ECSETs in their daily work in the realm of ECEC where Swedish is medium of instruction.

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2

Chapter 17

Teacher Perceptions of Language Challenges Among Children in Three Different Language-Medium Settings in Finland

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Abstract Research has shown that among the challenges children face in an increasingly global and multilingual society, language development is the most common one in early childhood education and care (ECEC). In Finland, the current national core curriculum for ECEC has introduced different bilingual education models. This article focuses on the participation of children with language challenges in different ECEC contexts where Swedish is the main medium of instruction. This study examines three settings: conventional education, large-scale bilingual education and small-scale bilingual education. The data form part of a larger survey and are analysed using a mixed methods approach. According to the findings, the percentages of children who need support for language challenges differ between the different settings. Various methods for supporting children's language are used. Books are used the most in conventional settings, whereas specific language activities and signs as support are used the most in small-scale bilingual education settings. Teachers' knowledge about challenges within monolingual or bilingual children's language development is necessary for correctly directed support.

Keywords Bilingual education · Finland · Language learning · Early chilhdood

Introduction

By its very constitution, Finland is a bilingual country, and Finnish and Swedish are its national languages. Most of Finland's population (87.3%) are Finnish speakers, 5.2% are Swedish speakers and 7.5% speak other languages (Statistics Finland, 2020). The aims of educational policy and national core curricula for both languages are largely identical; the only difference is the language of instruction. The core curricula emphasise a holistic education that guarantees learning and development for all children, regardless of their individual backgrounds, for example, in terms of culture and language (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, 2018). Here specifically, ECEC in Finland comprises early childhood education for children aged 1–6 and preprimary education for 6-year-old children. According to the National Institute for Health and Welfare (2020), 77% of children aged 1–6 participate in early childhood education, which is subjected to tuition fees. Since 2015, preprimary education (for 6-year-old children) has been compulsory and free of charge.

In ECEC, children with language challenges constitute the largest group of children in need of special education support in Finland (Aivoliitto, 2020; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017) and elsewhere (Nic Aindriú et al., 2020). International and national studies (Norbury et al., 2016; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017; Salameh, 2018a) regarding

children with language challenges have mostly focused on the prevalence and risk factors of language challenges among monolingual children. Bilingual settings have commonly been perceived as unsuitable for children with language challenges (Salameh et al., 2018).

Studies on language challenges among children participating in ECEC with different language emphases are scarce because these studies usually focus on either monolingual (e.g., Aivoliitto, 2020; Korpilahti & Pihlaja, 2018) or bilingual children (e.g., Gyekye & Ruponen, 2018; O'Toole & Hickey, 2012; Paradis, 2007). To complement earlier studies, the current study examines different settings where Swedish is the main medium of instruction. This study therefore investigates teachers' perceptions of the prevalence of language challenges and the support received by children with language challenges in conventional education, large-scale bilingual education and small-scale bilingual education in ECEC.

Conventional, Large-Scale Bilingual and Small-Scale Bilingual Education Settings

The most common setting for ECEC in dominant Swedish-speaking and bilingual Finnish–Swedish environments is the conventional setting. A conventional setting, in terms of language, means that there is no specific focus on learning other languages. Teachers in a conventional setting use Swedish as the medium of instruction. Another setting is large-scale bilingual education, which has two models. The first is language immersion, which is a teaching model developed in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s. Immersion, which was introduced in Finland in 1987, is intended for children from the majority language group: Finnish. The Swedish immersion programme used in Finland is early total immersion, meaning that instructions are given in Swedish only during the children's first years in the programme (Björklund et al., 2014; Sjöberg et al., 2018). The immersion programme usually begins when children are aged 4 or 5 and continues until grade 9 of comprehensive school. The aim of immersion is functional bi- or multilingualism, which emphasises communication skills in every teaching situation. In the second model, large-scale bilingual education takes place in settings where at least 25% of the activities are implemented in a language other than the medium of instruction (Björklund et al., 2014; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, 2018; Garvis et al., 2018). Bergroth (2007, 2015) concluded that at least in Finland, the parents of children who participate in large-scale bilingual education are at the same educational and socio-economical level as other parents. On the other hand, the parents of children participating in large-scale bilingual education usually work in scientific, technical or humanistic areas, where language is seen as an important ability.

The final setting the current study examines is small-scale bilingual education settings, which refer to groups where less than 25% of the activities are carried out in a language other than the medium of instruction. This setting provides natural opportunities for children to be acquainted with a foreign language (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, 2018). In the current study, settings where there is a specified language model, such as the Moomin Language School and language shower, were included in this group.

Language Challenges in ECEC

In ECEC, developing and supporting children's language development has traditionally been viewed as a main aim. Stories, fairy tales, rhymes, discussions and many other activities in ECEC contribute to improving children's language skills and widening their vocabulary. ECEC curricula focus on language as one of the content areas (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, 2018). The foundation for developing good language and interaction skills is established in a child's early years. Learning a language is closely linked to social development, and children need supportive adults to develop good communication skills. Not all children make the same progress; thus, it is important to recognise the early signs of divergent language development (Korpilahti & Pihlaja, 2018; Larsson, 2019).

According to researchers such as Korpilahti and Pihlaja (2018), Salameh et al. (2018) and Sjöberg (2018), language challenges can be divided into four different domains: phonology, grammar, semantics and pragmatics. The phonology domain includes phonemes, speech rhythm and prosody; the grammar domain includes morphology and syntax but also small words such as prepositions, conjunctions and pronouns; the semantics domain includes lexical aspects and the meaning of words; and the pragmatics domain is about how the language is used in communication, but it also accounts for nonverbal communication. Depending on which domain is affected and to what extent, children can have light, moderate or severe challenges. The most common challenges involve phonology because young children are not always able to produce all sounds.

Nordberg and Jacobsson (2019) examined how teachers and special education teachers in Swedish ECEC assess and follow up on children's communication development. The teachers expressed uncertainty about following up on children's language development because they had insufficient knowledge of the assessment instruments or work methods; these results are consistent with those of Arnesen et al. (2019) and Dockrell et al. (2017), who noted that identifying the resources to help children with language difficulties was a particular area of concern.

Language Challenges in Relation to Settings

One way for children to become bilingual is by participating in large-scale bilingual education, which is often done through immersion. Nic Aindriú et al. (2020) studied the prevalence of special educational needs (SEN) in immersion education in Ireland; the authors focused mostly on children in primary schools but also reported results related to children aged 4–6. Their results show that children aged 4–6 had a higher percentage of specific speech and language disorders compared with schoolchildren (Nic Aindriú et al., 2020). Smolander et al. (2016) noted the difficulty of recognising language challenges among second language (L2) learners because the challenges they face as part of natural language development can be similar to those of monolingual children with language challenges. These similarities do not necessarily indicate language challenges but represent natural progress in children's language development. Gyekye and Ruponen (2018) stated that it is important to take into consideration social and language factors that affect multilingual children's language development.

The use of standardised assessments is common in many settings. However, assessing bilinguals is more complex (O'Toole & Hickey, 2012). O'Toole and Hickey (2012) conducted research on language challenges among bilingual children, highlighting the need to develop accurate profiles that differentiate language difficulties from typical L2 learning. Salameh et al. (2002) noticed a difference between how monolingual and bilingual children with suspected language challenges were referred for assessment; they found that teachers referred more bilingual children for assessment compared with monolingual children. According to Salameh (2018c) and Thordardottir et al. (2015), children often make progress in the surrounding language, regardless of whether it is their mother tongue. Therefore, it is important to find functional forms of support for all languages spoken by the child.

Genesee (2015) scrutinised the myths surrounding bilingualism and early language learning, as well as the misconception that dual-language learning approaches are not advisable for children with learning challenges. Genesee (2015) concluded that there is no empirical evidence to justify restricting children with language challenges from learning different languages; Gort (2019) and Paradis (2007) arrived at a similar conclusion.

Support for Language Challenges

The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (2018) and the guidelines of the Finnish National Agency for Education (2014, 2018) have emphasised children's right to receive support. ECEC personnel must support children's opportunities to develop and learn according to their individual needs. Support should be given continuously and consistently to children during their time in ECEC.

Every municipality's local curricula for ECEC is based on national core curricula, meaning that local differences in curricula exist, but most have the following three support tiers: general support, intensified support and special support. Every child is entitled to general support, which is the first response to children's need for support and requires no assessments or formal decisions. Children's needs are met using tools, materials and learning programmes suited to their individual needs. Intensified support, the second level, is for children who need additional reinforcement. Intensified support is based on a pedagogical assessment, which forms the basis for children's individual learning plans. The solutions related to learning environments, flexible teaching groups, collaborative teaching and part-time special needs education are common. For children who need even more support, special support is a possibility. The purpose of special support is to provide children with holistic and systematic support for development and learning. In special support, special education or counselling is more intense, instruction is mostly individualised, and the child has individual learning goals (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The current study investigated teachers' perceptions of the prevalence of the various language challenges and support children receive when participating in conventional settings, large-scale bilingual education or small-scale bilingual education in ECEC. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. What kind of language challenges do teachers report, and is there a difference between conventional, large-scale bilingual and small-scale bilingual educational settings?
2. What types of support do teachers provide for children with language challenges in the three different settings?

Method

The current study's sample came from a larger online survey, and the data were analysed using mixed methods. The analytical process comprised several phases, here based on the research questions. The survey included general background questions. With these questions, for example, the respondent's education, examination and work experience could be charted. In addition, the number of children participating in their group was asked for. The respondents answered these questions with open answers. The survey also asked about the children's need for support for language challenges. Common language challenges were listed in the survey. The respondents stated the number of children in their group that needed support for some of the specific challenges mentioned. Listed challenges included pronunciation, general or specific language impairment, dyspraxia, stuttering and/ or having a home language other than the medium of instruction. To complement the listed language challenges, the respondents had the possibility to fill in other alternatives as an open answer.

The respondents were asked to describe how they supported language development for children with language challenges in their daily work. Specific questions related to this theme were as follows: 'Can you describe what is done in the group in everyday activities to support the language development among children with language challenges?' 'Describe how the support is implemented for children with language challenges?'

The online survey was designed based on the research questions and literature review. Parts of the survey were adapted from the studies by Gyekye and Ruponen (2018) and Salameh (2018a), who categorised different language challenges. The survey used questions from Salameh (2018b) about how to map language challenges among multilingual children and from the study by Sjöberg et al. (2018) about different ECEC language models.

Participants

The link to the online survey was sent out in December 2019, and a follow-up reminder was sent in January 2020. The link to the online surveys went out to all day care managers responsible for Swedish medium ECEC and immersion. The managers forwarded the link to the online survey to their employees. The link to the survey was sent to 31 municipalities in the mainland and to the counties in Åland, which is a Swedish-speaking Finnish province located in the Baltic Sea. Because the respondents in the current study were from 22 different municipalities, the sample can be seen as representative of the parts of Finland where Swedish was the medium of instruction in ECEC in 2019. Of the 216 surveys that were returned, one was excluded because of an incomplete answer (N = 215). All the respondents in the survey were women. The majority (57%) were educated as ECEC teachers, 18% were educated as child carers in ECEC, and 15% were social pedagogues. Three percent had a master's degree in education, 2% were special education teachers in ECEC, and 0.5% were family day care

childminders. Five percent lacked formal qualifications for working in ECEC. The respondents had an average teaching experience of M = 15.75 years (SD = 10.66).

The majority of the teachers (69%) worked in groups where Swedish was the language of instruction. Sixteen percent worked in small-scale bilingual education, and 15% worked in large-scale bilingual ECEC.

Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained. The quantitative data collected about the number of children in need of support for language challenges were analysed with IBM SPSS 26 and reported using descriptive statistics. Quantitative data are preferred when a researcher wants to get an overview and generalisable data (Patel & Davidson, 2011). A one-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) was used to determine whether any significant differences existed between the three different contexts. Only significant differences in the two research questions are reported.

Data on the support provided for children with language challenges were analysed using a qualitative content analysis (Bryman, 2018; Denscombe, 2018; Jacobsson & Skansholm, 2019). Data were first sorted according to the different contexts. After sorting the data, written answers were read several times to obtain a general impression. As a next step, categories were created based on current data, which was carried out by marking important keywords and grouping data with the same meaning into codes.

Results

This section first presents the results regarding the most common language challenges reported from the three language settings, including the differences between language challenges and different settings. The section then presents the findings on how children with language challenges are supported in conventional education, large-scale bilingual education and small-scale bilingual education. Finally, the differences between the different groups are reported.

Language Challenges Among Children in Different Settings

Of all the children (3405) reported in current study, the teachers reported that 17% (582) faced challenges with their language skills. Of these, the most frequently reported challenge was having a mother tongue other than the medium of instruction (26%). Other quite common challenges included pronunciation (20%) and general language challenges (19%), followed by specific language challenges (16%)
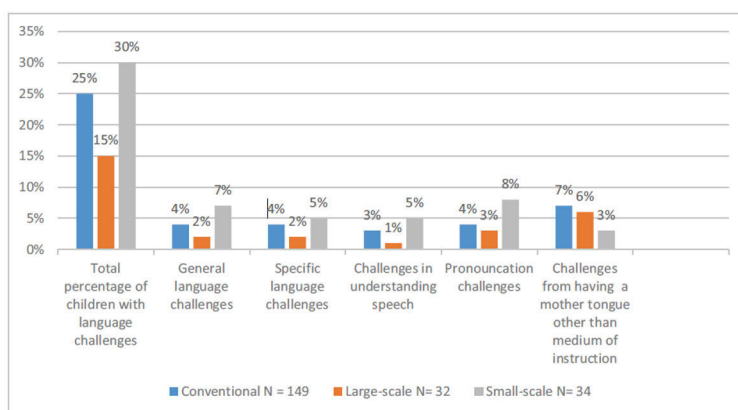
Fig. 17.1 Prevalence of language challenges in different contexts

and challenges in understanding (13%). Other less common language challenges included dyspraxia (5%) and stuttering and other, with less than 1% each.

The prevalence of language challenges by category differed between the three language contexts (Fig. 17.1). Small-scale bilingual education groups had the highest percentage, in which 30% of the children were in need of support for language challenges (M = 3.68, SD = 2.40). Large-scale bilingual education groups reported that 15% of children were in need for support for language challenges (M = 1.66, SD = 1.89). In conventional groups, every fourth child (25%) needed support for their language challenges (M = 2.71, SD = 2.23).

A significant difference was evident between the three contexts in relation to general language challenges (F(2, 164) = 3.088, p = .05), challenges in understanding (F(2, 164) = 4.411, p = .01) and pronunciation challenges (F(2, 162) = 5. 644, p = .00). A post hoc analysis revealed the differences between large- and small-scale bilingual education in all categories. Most children were reported as having challenges in small-scale bilingual education settings.

Teachers Provided Support for Children with Language Challenges

The majority of the teachers (82%) supported the children's language learning in some way; the remaining 18% said that they did not have any children with language challenges in their group or that the children were so young they did not know yet. The majority of the teachers (91%) in small-scale bilingual education reported that they had children in need of language support compared with (84%) in conventional settings and 62% in large-scale bilingual education. The following section presents the results on how support for children's language challenges was offered. A qualitative content analysis was carried out on the reported answers. Five categories emerged from the analysis: language support, activity support, nonlanguage support, differentiated support and multiprofessional support.

Language Support

One of the most commonly mentioned methods of supporting children's language development was having daily discussions and conversations. Many respondents said they talked clearly and gave short instructions to support children's understanding. In many municipalities, there was a strong tendency to use the local dialect at work. Therefore, a few respondents mentioned that standard Swedish should be used as the medium of instruction. The teachers highlighted that when it comes to language learning, their correct and nuanced language use supported children's language development. Paying attention to reiterating and reflecting on children's comments in the correct way was a common way of supporting the children. Some teachers mentioned that they corrected the children's inaccurate language use and that they used explanations and naming to support the children's understanding, enabling them to learn new words. Following up or checking that the child has understood, for example, instructions, correctly was another strategy the teachers used to support the children.

Activity Support

According to the respondents, reading was the most common way of supporting the children's language development. Reading can be done individually with the child or in smaller groups. Depending on the children's age or ability, books were used in different ways. Sometimes, pictures were the most important element, and the discussions revolved around a picture. Other times, the focus was more on learning new words and working with text and pictures. Simply listening to stories helped support creativity because the children could create their own images by listening. Creating stories was used as a way to make the children tell a story and listen to it. Many of the respondents mentioned singing and rhyming as language-supportive activities. These activities were considered supportive because they allowed the children to use new words and play with language and its structure. Melody and rhythm sometimes make it easier for children to use the language. In planned activities focusing on language, the children can play traditional games or just play together. Some of the respondents also mentioned using specific models for supporting language, such as the Bornholm model and local language strategies. Other respondents mentioned using applications, crafts, puzzles, problem solving and physical training.

Nonlanguage Support

Many of the respondents said that different strategies related to the linguistic landscape were needed to support children's language development. The most common way to support children was to use pictures to support spoken language. The pictures could be accompanied by written text and used during activities for various purposes, including clarifying instructions, supporting the understanding of sequences and helping children concentrate on what was important. Physical material, such as dolls, teddy bears and colours, were used to complement the pictures, mostly during storytelling. A few respondents mentioned "the sound" environment in their groups. Some

said that their children practised listening to different sounds and discriminating between them. Other respondents mentioned that their environment was planned with the acoustics in mind.

The respondents saw themselves as role models and said that they should pay attention to other signs apart from verbal language. Signs as support were found to be used in many settings along with other supportive methods, such as body language and miming. Eye contact, which can show that the teacher is present and supportive of the children's communication efforts, was also a way of supporting the children. The respondents also said that being a good, active listener was important.

Differentiated Support

One frequently used strategy was to divide the group into several smaller groups during the activities. The methods or criteria for grouping could vary greatly. The groups could be divided according to the children's ability to benefit from stories with varying degrees of complexity. The seating arrangements could influence the children's ability to focus on a specific task. The respondents stated that structure in everyday work was important for the children. Some teachers said that everyday support in all activities was the most important form of support because it covered all the children. The content was often adjusted according to the children's abilities; likewise, time was usually adjusted by giving the children more time to think about, analyse and process the content. Many teachers attempted to work with and support each child on an individual level, meaning that many children were assigned individual tasks or received individual tutoring from the teachers. For instance, the children who needed support for their pronunciation could receive support individually or in a group activity, such as during circle time.

Multiprofessional Support

Early childhood special education teachers supported children in the group in different ways. Some early childhood special education teachers worked individually with children who needed support. Some focused on counselling teachers in the group so that the teachers could support the children in their daily work. Speech therapists and phoneticians also tutored teachers in ECEC. Extra helpers in the groups were not that common, but in a few groups, they were hired to provide support for a particular child; extra helpers were more commonly included in the group to provide general support for all children. Having more adults in the group provided teachers with more opportunities to focus on different children in various contexts.

Differences in Provided Support Between the Contexts

The results indicate that the contexts differed in terms of the support received by the children. Word-based answers were given numeric values; they were converted from qualitative to quantitative data. This change made it possible to test for significant differences between contexts. A closer examination of the different provisions

of support revealed some significant differences. Within the activity for support, reading books ($F(2, 212) = 3.233$, $p = .04$) differed between the contexts. A post hoc analysis revealed a difference between conventional and large-scale bilingual education: reading books as a form of support was used more in conventional settings than in large-scale bilingual education. Specific planned language activities ($F(2, 212) = 3.549$, $p = .03$) also differed between the contexts. These planned activities were used significantly more in small-scale bilingual education than in conventional education.

Finally, within nonlanguage support, there was a difference between the contexts. Signs as a form of support ($F(2, 212) = 3.400$, $p = .04$) differed between large-scale and small-scale bilingual education according to a post hoc analysis. Small-scale bilingual education used signs as support more frequently.

Discussion

The current article has investigated teachers' perceptions of the prevalence of the various language challenges and support children receive when participating in conventional settings, large-scale bilingual education or small-scale bilingual education in ECEC. Earlier studies (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017) have reported that, in general, 16% of children in ECEC need support for various challenges, for example, concentration difficulties, socio-emotional difficulties or language challenges. In the current study, teachers working in ECEC reported that as many as 17% of children in their groups needed support for language challenges only, leading to the conclusion that the total number of children in need of support must be noticeably higher than the national statistics indicate. The high percentage in the current study may be because the study focused on teachers' assumptions regarding children's challenges, meaning that the children were not diagnosed or assessed for specific language challenges. Teachers' perceptions were reported subjectively, and no formal schedule was followed. One other reason for the high percentage of children who needed support for challenges arising from, for example, having another home language is that the teachers often misjudged the time needed to acquire a new language. According to Salameh et al. (2018), it takes one to two years to develop enough knowledge of a new language to use it in everyday life.

According to the results, the percentage of children in need of support for language challenges varied between the different settings, from 30% to 15%. The lower number in large-scale bilingual education can partially be explained by the myth about bilingualism that large-scale bilingual education is not suitable for children with challenges. The parents of children with challenges should probably still not place their children in large-scale bilingual education. The lower percentage of children in need of support for language challenges may also be because of teachers' conscious way of working and assessing children's language development (Genesee, 2015; Gort, 2019; Nic Aindriú et al., 2020; Paradis, 2007). Teachers working in large-scale bilingual education settings are used to supporting children's language development all the time because this is the aim of large-scale bilingual education. This could also explain why children are not perceived as having language challenges. As a supplement, parents placing children in large-scale bilingual education seem to have a clear perception about the importance of mastering several languages (Bergroth, 2007, 2015).

The teachers reported how they supported children with language challenges in different contexts. Teachers must, according to the Finnish National Agency for Education (2014, 2018), provide children with language input

and varied and authentic opportunities to use each language. The quality and quantity of such input and opportunities matter. Reading books was common in all the settings and aligned with the curricula focus on language as one of the content areas, where stories were one of the examples used. Besides the spoken language, the teachers reported nonlanguage ways of supporting the children's language. The most common methods in all the settings was using pictures to support the spoken language. Signs as support were used in all settings but mostly in small-scale bilingual education, indicating why small-scale education has the lowest rate in having a mother tongue other than the medium of instruction. Signs as support often give a clue as to what is meant by the spoken words, and many signs are international, meaning that independent of their mother tongue, children might understand some keywords.

The current study has shown that teachers working in different contexts perceived language challenges differently, but the methods for supporting children with language challenges were similar between the contexts. The results suggest the importance of training all the teachers on the appropriate assessment of and interventions for children with language challenges, here with a special focus on the similarities and differences in language development between monolingual, bilingual and multilingual children.

Conclusion

From a Nordic perspective—as well as internationally—many teachers and children in ECEC face similar challenges and possibilities. Most societies are becoming more multicultural over time. This has led to a growing number of languages spoken in ECEC groups. Both nationally and internationally, language challenges are the most frequently reported challenges children face during their time in ECEC. Hence, children with language challenges constitute the largest group of those in need of special education support. According to the teachers working in ECEC, children whose mother tongue was different from that used as the medium of instruction formed the largest group of children in need of language development support. A majority of children with language or other challenges were found to be included in regular groups in ECEC. When it comes to supporting their language development, the important key issues are the environment, teachers and didactics. The current study includes a focus on how ECEC groups with different language foci perceive, assess and support children with language challenges.

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3

Supporting Children with Speech, Language and Communication Needs: Finnish Early Childhood Special Education Teachers' Views

In today's society, the need for functional communication is essential from an early age. However, many children struggle with speech, language and communication during their time in early childhood education and care (ECEC). This paper examines early childhood special education teachers' (ECSETs) views on how children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are supported in regular ECEC. The empirical data comprised four focus group interviews with 14 itinerant ECSETs. A thematic analysis was used to examine the teachers' support strategies. The following four themes related to the research question were identified after an iterative process of coding and close reading of data: (1) cooperation and professionalism as prerequisites for providing support; (2) processes and procedures for providing support; (3) consultation for personnel enabling support for children in a group; and (4) adjusting support based on each child's individual needs. The study provides insight into providing support for children with SLCN and related challenges. The results indicate several areas that work well in providing support during specific activities and for certain group compositions. However, potential pitfalls include ECSETs' workload and lack of knowledge and motivation among ECEC personnel to support children.

Keywords: early childhood education; SLCN; support; special education teacher

Introduction

Developing effective communication skills is important for children for many reasons, e.g., learning, making friends, feeling included, making yourself understood and expressing opinions. Most children acquire effective language and communication skills without challenges, but some need additional support. Children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) comprise the largest group of children in need of special education support in early childhood education and care (ECEC), both internationally (e.g., Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Nic Aindriú et al., 2020; Norbury et al., 2016) and nationally in Finland (e.g., Laasonen et al., 2018; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017; Author 2), where approximately 17% of children in ECEC have language-related challenges (Current Care Guidelines, 2019; Author 2). The terminology for young children's challenges related to language is extensive and inexplicit, with over 130 distinct sets of terminology in existence (Bishop, 2013). This diversity has developed because a complex process is required to identify and diagnose young children whose language development is falling behind that of their peers (see, e.g., Bishop, 2013; Dockrell et al., 2017; Dockrell & Howell, 2015; Hanssen, 2018). Lindsay and Strand (2016) argued that it is more important to identify and determine children's need for support than to make a specific diagnosis, and we embrace this idea. For this paper, the SLCN concept is used as an umbrella term (Dockrell & Howell, 2015) for various kinds of language-related challenges – not to refer to a single and uniform difficulty, but rather to employ the concept as a general term that covers most challenges connected to language development. The term SLCN encompasses the myriad language challenges that children face on various levels, from great difficulties, e.g., needing support from speech therapists, to milder cases, e.g., pronunciation challenges.

Support strategies for children with SLCN vary across and within countries, and include options, e.g., segregated support within regular ECEC settings (Kuutti et al., 2021). In

most Northern and Western countries in Europe, children with language-related challenges receive support within regular ECEC. This poses challenges for ECEC personnel and those tasked with developing support procedures.

Hanssen (2018) and Heiskanen et al. (2018) have argued that education personnel's knowledge and understanding influence the kind of support that children receive. This implies the importance of early childhood special education teachers (ECSETs) offering professional support and consultation to ECEC personnel, thereby providing them with the knowledge and tools they need to support this particular group of children (Dockrell et al., 2017; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Rantala et al., 2018). ECEC personnel, as well as ECSETs themselves, view ECSETs' work role as multifaceted and challenging amid increased professional requirements and constant changes in the working environment (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Holst & Pihlaja, 2011; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017).

Several researchers have noted the importance of supporting children's speech, language and communication (SLCN) in ECEC (see, e.g., Dockrell et al., 2015; Lervåg et al., 2017; Author 1). Early support has been found to decrease the risk of future education and social problems (Dockrell et al., 2015; Kim & McIntyre, 2019; Lervåg et al., 2017). Within ECEC, routine situations often are mentioned as possible facilitators for supporting language development. Routine ECEC situations that often are highlighted include meal times (Barnes et al., 2020; Degotardi et al., 2016; Klette et al., 2018, play time (Holmes et al., 2019; Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2017) and story time (Cárdenas et al., 2020; Deshmukh et al., 2019; Justice et al., 2018; Maureen et al., 2018, 2021; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). These are all potential possibilities to support language development among children, but as Hagen et al. (2017) and Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2015) concluded, interventions are effective, provided they are intensive and prolonged. To sum up, to achieve properly targeted support, personnel need knowledge

about children's challenges and methods on how to support each individual child (Hanssen, 2018; Martinez et al., 2021; Palla & Vallberg Roth, 2020; Syrjämäki et al., 2017).

Although previous studies have reported significant findings on the importance of supporting children with SLCN, much remains to be learned regarding teachers' daily language input and children's language outcomes. Therefore, the current study aims to shed light on Finnish ECSETs' views on supporting children with SLCN who participate regularly in ECEC settings.

The Finnish Context

ECEC is organised differently depending on the country, e.g., education qualifications for personnel vary greatly (Nislin et al., 2015), and this directly affects the support that children receive. In Finland, children receiving ECEC have the right to support whenever a need is detected, and personnel are responsible for supporting children (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018; Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2014, 2022). ECEC, being an essential part of children's lifelong learning and growth, is the foundation of the Finnish education system. Finnish ECEC comprises early childhood education (ECE) for children ages one to six years and pre-primary education for six-year-olds. Although ECE is subject to tuition and fees, the vast majority (77%) of children participate in ECE before starting pre-primary education (National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2020). Virtually all six-year-old children enrol in pre-primary education because it became compulsory in 2015 and, therefore, free of charge (National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2020).

Children receiving ECEC are entitled by law (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018) and core curricula (EDUFI, 2014, 2022) to receive early development and learning support, which is provided in accordance with the principles of inclusion and as part

of high-quality ECEC activities (EDUFI, 2014, 2022; UNESCO, 2017). Children with special education needs (SEN) mainly are placed into regular ECEC settings, in which one or several groups may be housed in the same building. A group can comprise a maximum of 12 children, ages one to three years each, or 21 children, ages three to five years each, in pre-primary education, with a ratio of one teacher to 12 children. In Finland, as in other OECD countries, women comprise the majority of ECEC personnel. In the Finnish context, 97% of ECEC teachers are women (Finnish Government, 2021).

Since August 2022, a unified support system has been in place for children's learning paths, starting with ECEC (EDUFI, 2022). The unified three-tiered support system has been mandatory in pre-primary and basic education since 2014 (EDUFI, 2014), comprising general, intensified and special support. According to core curricula (EDUFI, 2014; 2022), three-tiered support can be explained as follows. General support is the first response to children's needs, with a short duration and no assessments or formal decisions required. The second tier, intensified support, requires a pedagogical assessment that forms the basis for each child's individual learning plan. Solutions related to adjusting learning environments and providing part-time special needs education are common. For children who need even more support, the third tier (special support) is the strongest ECEC support level. Children in need of special support generally participate in regular ECEC groups. Special support aims to provide children with holistic, systematic and multi-professional support based on individual learning goals (EDUFI 2014, 2022). In pre-primary education, about 10% of children receive intensified or special support (Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017; Author 2; Statistics Finland, 2020). General support is the first response in which no assessments or formal decisions are needed, so statistics about the number of children receiving general support are lacking.

In regular ECEC settings, personnel (i.e., teachers, caretakers and assistants), together with ECSETs, are supposed to support children on all tiers. Personnel working in the groups

have a principal responsibility to provide general support. When children need more support (second or third tiers), ECSETs play a more prominent role in planning and executing support strategies and solutions (EDUFI, 2014, 2022). ECSETs' varying working conditions affect how they conduct their work (Author 1; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). When ECSETs have a large area of responsibility (high number of children and settings), they tend to focus more on indirect support for children through consultation (Author 1; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). With less responsibility, ECSETs can work directly with children. Nevertheless, common key responsibilities for ECSETs who work with children who have SEN are to identify, assess and provide support for a broad range of needs, and to adapt the learning environment for these children (EDUFI, 2014, 2022; Lindsay & Strand, 2016). Furthermore, a basis for supporting personnel is consultations provided by ECSETs. The consultations aim to provide personnel with the knowledge and tools they need to support children in their regular group (Dockrell et al., 2017; Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Rantala et al., 2018).

Supporting Children With SLCN in ECEC Settings

Support for children with SLCN in everyday ECEC activities is important. Teachers' individual features, interpersonal skills and pedagogical competence, together with instructional skills and engagement, influence learning opportunities for children (Cunningham et al., 2020; Hanssen, 2018; Martinez et al., 2021; Palla & Vallberg Roth, 2020; Syrjämäki et al., 2017). In addition to quality in speech used, quantity of linguistic input is important for supporting language development (Degotardi & Han, 2020), particularly when combined with teachers' language awareness and their linguistic responsivity towards children's communication attempts (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Justice et al., 2018). Arnesen et al. (2019) and Dockrell et al. (2017) asserted that identifying resources to help children with SLCN is a particular area of concern. Reading aloud and storytelling are common ways

to support children's language development on a daily basis (Brodin & Renblad, 2019; Author 2). Other common ways of providing support include planning for interactions, discussions, songs, rhymes, organised play etc. (Hanssen, 2018; Holmes et al., 2019; Author 1).

Diverse and flexible arrangements in the regular ECEC group and daily activities are to be organised to support children with SEN (EDUFI, 2014, 2022). Learning environments should be designed and used to support children with SLCN. Concerning social learning environments, extant research indicates that group composition is important, exerting positive or negative effects on children's language development (Justice et al., 2019). Martinez et al. (2021) mentioned children's strengths and developmental needs as important to consider when combining peers or groups. Furthermore, Justice et al. (2019) asserted that children's language development benefits when they are in groups with mixed age ranges, as long as the age range is not too wide. Aside from the optimal age range, participation in pair and group interactions also has been found to exert a positive effect on the number of verbal and nonverbal communication cues that children perform when communicating with their teachers (Cárdenas et al., 2020).

Children's strengths and developmental needs are strongly relevant in selecting activities in which they will be interested and engaged. By planning activities based on children's interests and engagement, teachers may be able to promote language development more effectively (Brodin & Renblad, 2019; Cárdenas et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2021; Norling & Lillvist, 2016; Pramling et al., 2019). In addition to addressing children's interests, the activities' aim, intensity and duration impact children's vocabulary expansion (Boerma et al., 2021; Hagen et al., 2017). If teachers are aware of and support children continuously and purposely, the effect after 30 weeks is notable (Hagen et al., 2017). As a complement to supporting auditory language, key word signs and pictures can augment spoken instructions to

support children in their learning processes further (Cologon & Mevawalla, 2018; Garrity et al., 2015; Nordberg, 2021).

Aim and Method

The present study aimed to examine support for children with SLCN provided in regular ECEC settings. The specific research question was as follows: How do ECSETs describe conditions for providing support to children with SLCN who receive regular ECEC?

Participants and Data Collection

This study was conducted in regions of Finland where Swedish is the medium of instruction. Finland is, under its constitution, a bilingual nation in which Finnish and Swedish are national languages. Education policies and national core curricula for both languages are largely identical; the only difference is the language of instruction. Each municipality decides the language used with ECEC activities based on the languages spoken in the municipality.

Itinerant ECSETs were chosen as participants because they are responsible for supporting all children with special education needs in a municipality. The selection of participants was based on a strategic process. We searched for participants with work experience as itinerant ECSETs, plus at least one colleague in the municipality. In searching for possible respondents, itinerant ECSETs' work histories were examined (Author 1) using information from municipalities' webpages, focusing solely on municipalities where Swedish is the medium of instruction in ECEC. The first author contacted potential respondents personally by e-mail and invited them to participate in the study. The goal was to find 12–15 respondents who wanted to participate. Altogether, 15 possible respondents were contacted, and 14 from five different municipalities agreed to participate. Of the respondents, seven represented urban areas, four came from rural areas and the final three represented a

municipality comprising both rural and urban areas. The respondents formed four groups, with three participants in three groups and five in one group, based on residence. All the respondents were women with varying work experience as ECSETs ($M = 12.86$ years). The respondents were responsible for the varying number of ECEC groups ($M = 26$ groups) and spent different amounts of time supporting children with SLCN ($M = 55\%$ of working hours).

For this study, data were collected through four focus group interviews. Focus group interviews are beneficial when respondents' discussions provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomena studied (Allen, 2017). Due to COVID-19, all focus group interviews were conducted online and took place in spring 2021 (March to June). The respondents received the discussion themes by e-mail two weeks before the interviews so that they could reflect on them beforehand. The interview encompassed five themes that the respondents were encouraged to discuss: (a) areas of responsibility; (b) organisation of support; (c) consultation as support for personnel working with children; (d) support for children with SLCN; and (e) multilingualism and SLCN. Themes for the focus group interviews were selected with the current research question in mind, as well as a forthcoming study about multilingualism. Earlier research influenced the themes primarily (Authors 1 & 2), highlighting both direct and indirect support as important strategies for ECSETs' possibilities in supporting children with SLCN (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Authors 1 & 2; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). The interviews lasted from one hour and 15 minutes to one hour and 32 minutes each ($M = 1$ h, 26 min).

After the interviews were conducted, a survey was sent to the respondents who participated in the interviews. Only 11 respondents answered the survey; thus, background information about three respondents is missing from Table 1. Questions in the survey sought data on work experience, areas of responsibility, number of children with SLCN and how much time they spend on supporting children with SLCN weekly. In addition, respondents estimated how much of their working hours they spend on supporting children with SLCN.

Data Analysis

Data on support provided for children with SLCN were analysed using a thematic analysis driven by the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006) identified six phases for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns. These different phases guided the first author in the present study. The first author is responsible for the analysis. Initially, the researcher became familiar with the data by listening to the interviews and simultaneously transcribing them. Through this process, a sense of the whole body of data was obtained. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommended that the researcher become familiar with the data during the first phase. During the second phase, initial codes should be generated. In the present study, open coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) was used, i.e., the researcher did not have pre-set codes, as they were developed and modified during the coding process instead. All initial extracted data were identified with the specific research question in mind. Altogether, 276 different data extracts related to the research questions were identified, written in a table and coded. The third phase should entail searching for common features in the coded and collated data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). During this phase, the researcher sorts the codes into potential subthemes by colour, marking every extract that coincided and had a similar meaning. All codes were sorted and given potential subtheme names. Within identified themes, coded data extracts were read and reread to determine whether the codes could be collated into potential subthemes. Furthermore, the subthemes were collated and merged into 10 themes. When the themes were refined, some collapsed into each other, resulting in four remaining themes. See Table 2 for an example of how extracted data were refined into themes. This corresponds with the fourth phase, during which themes are reviewed, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), who also identified a fifth phase, when themes are named and

defined. In the present study, themes' names were defined based on their specific scope and content. By identifying each theme's core, potential overlap risks were reduced, and the final themes' names were refined. The final phase entails production of the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and the results are presented with descriptions, combined with excerpts from the transcripts.

Research Ethics and Trustworthiness

All research involving people – in this case, ECSETs working with children – must be conducted in accordance with a set of ethical guidelines. The research ethics principles in Finland (TENK, 2019) have been followed during each part of this study. Information about the informants' rights was given to each focus group before each interview was conducted. Respondents provided their consent to be interviewed and recorded after receiving information about the study's aim and their rights. Respondents were informed about their right to end the interview at any time. Furthermore, each respondent received information on how the results were to be processed, analysed and reported. Finally, the participants' confidentiality and personal data security were guaranteed. Respondents were given fictitious names that were used in the results section. Confidentiality was secured further by excluding aspects that would allow for identifying participants or settings in the respective contexts. Safe data storage was maintained by keeping the data on the university's server behind passwords.

Trustworthiness in a qualitative study rests on credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). All these features must be present continuously during the analysis. In the present study, peer debriefing and controlling preliminary findings and interpretations against raw data were used to increase credibility. To meet the transferability demand, sufficiently detailed and thick descriptions

were provided. Dependability was ensured by making the steps of the research process traceable and clearly documented. Confirmability was established by demonstrating how interpretations and conclusions were drawn from the data. Confirmability was established when credibility, transferability and dependability were achieved. The question about reflexivity was important to address in the present study, and since becoming author, 1 have been working as an ECSET simultaneously with some of the respondents and know some of them superficially. Being aware of the risk of bias, and addressing biases adequately, data quality was not affected, nor were subsequent research results (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Finally, citations from respondents were included in the results, which strengthened trustworthiness.

Results

The data analysis resulted in four overarching themes that illustrate how ECSETs describe providing support for children with SLCN: (1) cooperation and professionalism as prerequisites for providing support; (2) processes and procedures for providing support; (3) consultation for personnel, enabling support for children in the group; and (4) adjusting support based on the child's individual needs.

ECSETs' Descriptions of Support Given to Children With SLCN

Cooperation and professionalism as prerequisites for providing support

The first theme relates to the prerequisites that ECSETs deem necessary for supporting children with SLCN. The ECSETs mentioned cooperation and ECEC teachers' professionalism as prerequisites. They expressed that much of their work depends on functional cooperation with ECEC teachers, guardians and other professionals. ECSETs seem

to rely on ECE teachers and their relationships with the children's guardians when it comes to enacting possible support measures:

> We have been quite particular about the fact that personnel first have to have a discussion with the guardians to indicate that there is something they are worried about and mention that they have access to ECSETs. If it is OK for the guardians, the ECSET can come and meet the child and form an opinion of her own; by informing the guardians, we can establish good relations with them (Julia).

The ECSETs emphasised the importance of good relations with the guardians and viewing them as partners and an important source of information. 'Guardians have a right to know everything that is discussed, written or decided concerning their child', said one ECSET. Other cooperation partners that ECSETs valued were speech therapists. The ECSETs indicated that they were able to consult with speech therapists and, in turn, provide guidance to ECEC personnel who work directly with the children.

The ECSETs revealed that they become involved in a support case when they get information from the ECEC teachers, and when the child's guardian has given consent to contact the ECSET. According to the ECSETs, professionalism is an important aspect when it comes to supporting children. As one respondent said, 'Being professional means noticing all children in need of support'. The ECSETs recognised that those who notice all children are usually keen on supporting them. Another aspect of professionalism that the ECSETs frequently mentioned was the individual plan that ECE teachers write for every child receiving ECEC. The ECSETs pointed out that writing the plan is the teacher's responsibility, but that they can consult ECSETs when necessary, e.g., when it comes to documenting support arrangements, responsibilities and content.

Processes and Procedures for Providing Support

   The second theme captures the ECSETs' way of assessing, documenting and prioritising work with children. Assessments, together with the children's individual plans, function as a foundation for providing support. The ECSETs asserted that it is a shared responsibility, together with teachers, to assess children's need for support. The ECSETs said that they use some developed and validated assessments to gauge children's language development levels. ECSETs and teachers in an ECEC group can use most assessment materials, but that some are only to be used by ECSETs. Assessments, observations and documentation serve as the foundation for writing individual children's plans. The ECSETs claimed that individual children's plans cannot be static and should be updated continuously wherever a need exists. Both ECSETs and other personnel can update and make notations to the plan when a child has reached one of the goals listed there. Documentation seems to be easier to update when the plans are in digital form. In this case, updates are immediate and visible to all.

   The ECSETs agreed that children who require special support are highly prioritised when it comes to providing support. Support in this sense can be individual work with the child several times a week or every second week, or ECSETs' consultation with personnel working with the child in the group. The ECSETs noted that clearly expressed and unwritten prioritisation rules are in place when it comes to supporting children with SLCN. The ECSETs said that children ages one to three years participating in ECE are last in line when it comes to receiving actual support due to time constraints and the total number of children in need. Priority also is given to children whose support is already in progress because the ECSETs have found that progression is crucial for children to receive correctly directed support.

The ECSETs reported that they plan their work based on working conditions and personnel and children's needs. Occasionally, the ECEC leader asks the ECSETs to do specific tasks that do not factor in their special education expertise. 'Sometimes you do not prioritise preferred work yourself; someone else makes the priority for you', Sara said. The ECSETs revealed that they sometimes sensed an internal conflict as to what they were obligated to do and what they feel would be best for the children because the obligation takes time away from working with the children.

Consultation for personnel enabling support for children in the group

The third theme captures another essential part of supporting children with SLCN. Consultation and working together towards the same aim is important, the ECSETs said. Regardless of their particular work situations, all the ECSETs emphasised that all personnel receive consultation, but how often and to what extent vary. The ECSETs counsel personnel on how to work with children with SLCN. This consultation is based on the ECSETs' own experience, speech therapists' recommendations or other expert advice. Furthermore, the ECSETs often urge personnel to join them in the field when they work with children to get an up-close perspective and receive direct consultation about possible ways of working in these situations. Many ECSETs stated that this seldom happens due to a lack of time or the possibility to 'go out' from the group during the day. As one respondent stated, 'We have really eager teachers that like to discuss pedagogy… There are also many teachers who do not want you to come to the group'. The ECSETs perceived that personnel view them as either a resource or as extra work, depending on each individual's own knowledge and interest in supporting children with SLCN. However, they said that most of the personnel appear to appreciate the support they receive from ECSETs and view them as a resource. Generally, the personnel listen, discuss and try to implement different types of support for the children.

The ECSETs also noted that some settings do not need any support from ECSETs, but that it still is wanted because personnel enjoy discussing and developing their ways of working. Simultaneously, in settings in which ECSETs are looked upon as extra work, personnel do not wish to receive visits from ECSETs, often because the personnel feel that if ECSETs visit, it means more work for the personnel. In these settings, personnel do not see, or choose not to see, children in need of support. The ECSETs concluded that these settings are usually in need of support and consultation.

Adjusting Support Based on Each Child's Individual Needs

The fourth theme captures the importance of adjusting daily support to children with SLCN. The ECSETs identified effective relations with children with SLCN as key to proper support and progression. Personnel must build mutual trust and respect to create optimal learning possibilities for children. The ECSETs pointed out that relations are important when it comes to adjusting activities to children's competence levels. Activities planned for supporting children should be organised in different ways, considering children's individual characteristics. If a child needs SLCN support and simultaneously has trouble with concentration, individual work might be a good solution for supporting language. The ECSETs mentioned shyness or children's need for time to reflect, in combination with SLCN, as reasons why they chose to work individually with children. 'I think that if I give her more time individually, it is possible for her to think and make progress at her own pace', Sandra said. Simultaneously, if children have SLCN, combined with social difficulties, the ECSETs often choose to work in smaller groups when providing support.

All the respondents argued that language should be supported continuously in ECEC settings, not just during specific training sessions. Daily communication is most important, according to the respondents. Teachers should focus specifically on communication with

children with SLCN, offering new words and concepts, and high-quality language, which is beneficial for all children. As a complement to spoken language, key word signs and pictures are some of the first things that respondents said they instruct personnel to use in a supportive way.

Generally, personnel are instructed on what is important to pay attention to in specific activities. The ECSETs counsel personnel on how they can think about certain tasks, like storytelling (e.g., how they talk about the story during and after the storytelling time), so that the activity effectively supports children with SLCN. Different ways of arranging the storytelling situation should be based on children's needs and what is in focus – whether it be words, understanding language, tenses, negations, narratives etc.

Working in small groups frequently is done when supporting children with SLCN. These groups can be arranged with an emphasis on teacher support and/or peer support. The ECSETs argued that peer support sometimes is beneficial because they found that children talk to each other in a different way than when they talk to adults, and that it is important to support children on all levels. It is possible to adjust small group activities to the exact level for the specific child, so that the possibility of the child succeeding at the specific task increases. Furthermore, small groups are more likely to allow for children's preferred ways of learning – whether visually, aurally or kinaesthetically – to be realised.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to examine how ECSETs describe the support given to children with SLCN who receive regular ECEC. Four themes became apparent in the study: cooperation and professionalism as prerequisites for providing support; processes and procedures for providing support; consultation for personnel enabling support for children in the group; and adjusting support based on each child's individual needs. By comparing the themes arising

from data and interpreting them in combination with earlier research, two overarching themes that addressed the research question were discussed: elements indicating successful work and potential pitfalls from providing support.

The results revealed cooperation as one of the most essential elements for succeeding in providing support. The ECSETs reported that they are very dependent on functional cooperation with personnel, guardians, and external specialists. Earlier research supports this argument, i.e., that with respectful cooperation, all professionals contribute their own expertise and work together with the child's best interests in mind (Dockrell et al., 2017; Kim & McIntyre, 2019; Rantala et al., 2018). ECSETs indicate the importance of cooperation with personnel for making progress in the support provided for children. Personnel become gatekeepers for providing support: If they fail to identify children who have special SLCN, the children do not necessarily receive the support they need and are entitled to receive. This vulnerability in the support system emerges as a potential pitfall when ECSETs depend on inadequate knowledge, interest and motivation of personnel to support children with SEN. This lack of knowledge, interest and motivation among personnel is something that earlier research also pointed out (Hanssen, 2018; Heiskanen et al., 2018).

An apparent pattern may be at work in support processes and procedures, which ECSETs described in similar ways, indicating that municipalities follow the same structures. ECSETs emphasised the importance of documentation, with a particular emphasis on each child's individual plan. According to core curricula (EDUFI, 2014; 2022), the child's plan is part of the pedagogical documentation and should stem from an inclusive practice in which methods on how to support learning systematically are documented. Earlier research points to the importance of early intervention (e.g., Dockrell et al., 2017; Hanssen, 2018; Heiskanen et al., 2018), which contradicts the present study's results. ECSETs noted that they are obligated to follow informal priority lists regarding who to provide with support. Children with

extensive support needs and/or are in pre-primary education are prioritised, while younger children with milder support needs are at risk of being left behind. Furthermore, ECSETs themselves sometimes feel like they are trapped between their own priorities and their employers' decisions because they might be obligated to prioritise against their own professional expertise and even engage in other types of assignments that are not related directly to providing support. Earlier research has problematised this lack of acknowledge on ECSETs' expertise and concluded that it might hamper ECSETs' ability to provide adequate support for children (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Holst & Pihlaja, 2011; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017).

ECSETs create a balance between effective conditions for consultation and difficulties succeeding with consultation. Effective conditions for consultation are present when several factors coincide, e.g., manageable workload, functional collaboration and time. Workload is two-sided because the workload for both ECSETs and personnel should be manageable. Even though ECSETs invite personnel to participate in consultation, they do not always have the time or opportunity to leave the group of children. Furthermore, personnel's individual assumptions on children and learning play an important role in providing support. Earlier research raised the potential for inclusion, and participation depends on teachers' pedagogical competencies, interpersonal skills and values (Hanssen, 2018; Palla & Vallberg Roth, 2020; Syrjämäki et al., 2017). This also is seen in the present study because ECSETs argue that personnel have conflicting assumptions on ECSETs, viewing them either as helpful or as a burden. According to researchers, consultations are needed to provide personnel with knowledge and tools to support children with SLCN (Dockrell et al., 2017; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Rantala et al., 2018). When ECSETs are looked upon as a burden, personnel do not want visits from ECSETs because that means more work. ECSETs concluded that these settings would need consultation the most because they do not have an interest in supporting

children with SLCN. This lack of interest obstructs consultation as the basis for consultation providing personnel with knowledge and tools for supporting children in their regular group (Dockrell et al., 2017; Heiskanen & Viitala, 2017; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Rantala et al., 2018).

Finally, the results on adjusting support based on the child's individual needs in their regular settings create a common pattern. ECSETs and personnel need to be sensitive and responsive towards children. This aligns with prior research in which personnel's interest, knowledge and desire to build relations with children with SLCN is highlighted (Brodin & Renblad, 2019; Cárdenas et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2021; Norling & Lillvist, 2017; Pramling et al., 2019). Through their genuine relation to children, personnel know and understand children's strengths and challenges to make individual adjustments. This genuine relation and interest challenge personnel to both find new angles of support to provide and rely on methods they believe are effective (Brodin & Renblad, 2019; Cárdenas et al., 2020; Justice et al., 2019; Kuutti et al., 2021; Roulstone et al., 2012).

The greatest pitfall is personnel because everything depends on personnel's knowledge, interest, understanding, and experience concerning children and their needs, setting premises for providing support (Nordberg & Jacobsson, 2019). If personnel, for whatever reason, do not recognise children with SLCN, then support is failing.

In conclusion, the present study's findings indicate that children with SLCN in ECEC are in an unequal position when it comes to support. Much seems to depend on the personnel's individual interest and motivation. This induces a need to educate all personnel on the importance of early support and intervention (Dockrell et al., 2017; Hanssen, 2018; Heiskanen et al., 2018), and to create effective consultation conditions (Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). Moreover, strengthening multiprofessional cooperation in ECEC and clarifying

ECSETs' roles and responsibilities would be beneficial in ensuring that children are receiving the best possible support.

Limitations

The present study contains some limitations. First, the sample, comprising 14 Finnish ECSETs, was small. Second, the focus group participants described their own views on providing support for children with SLCN, i.e., first-order and second-order perspectives, as they described their own, as well as the personnel's, support activities. Third, due to the small sample and the study's qualitative nature, it is not possible to draw any generalizable conclusions. Still, the results indicate which issues should be addressed to guarantee equality when it comes to children's learning and development in ECEC.

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Table 1

Information about the ECSETs' work experience, number of groups they are responsible for
and time spent supporting children with SLCN.

Respondent	Work experience in years	Work as an ECSET in years	Number of groups that ECSET is responsible for	Percentage of work used to support children with SLCN
Anna	31	17	17	65%
Linda	23	11	56	80%
Mary	20	13	12	65%
Rose	3	2	20	60–70%
Sara	29	27	61	80%
Emma	29	3	17	60–70%
Amy	5.5	1.5	4	25%
Lisa	40	25	52	10%
Sandra	11	1	14	50%
Olivia	29	20	22	50%
Julia	28	21	13	50%

Note: Three respondents missing.

Table 2

Example of a corpus of codes and the process of how they were collated and merged into
themes.

Data extract	Coded for	Subtheme	Theme
'I have my own priority list that I follow'	Unofficial list	Prioritisation	Processes and procedures for providing support
'Settings with children ages 1–3 are not visited'	Lack of time	Prioritisation	
'First comes children on special support and intensified support'	Support	Three-tiered support	

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4

CAUGHT BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND AMBITIONS: FINNISH EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS EXPERIENCES OF CONSULTATION AS INTERPROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION

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Abstract

The focus in this chapter is Finnish early childhood special education teachers' (ECSET) experiences of consultation as an indirect support to children. The aim is to examine how ECSETs experience their consultative role with focus on the practical opportunities to deliver consultation and the use of different consultation strategies. A case study approach was used. The empirical data consist of three group interviews with ten ECSETs. The in-depth analysis revealed three different cases characterized as a) frustrated knowledge sharer, b) adapted and collaborative quick-fixers, and c) satisfied reflection supporters. The final cross-case analysis revealed that most of the ECSETs experienced the conditions and their jurisdiction for conducting consultation to be poor. Concerning the use of consultation strategies, they balance between quick fix advices and the use of reflection as consultation strategy. They call for greater opportunities to implement the consultation as structured, process-oriented dialogues. The need to strengthen the special needs teachers' jurisdiction to deliver high quality consultation to develop inclusive support for children is discussed.

Introduction

Inclusive education and day care has been a guiding principle in Nordic countries for the last three decades (UNESCO, 1994), and this principle is also visible in Finnish early education and care (ECEC) (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE], 2018). Even though it lacks a common definition, participation and equality are central aspects of inclusion that have impacted the organisation of support for children with special education needs (SEN) (Pihlaja, 2022). This puts great demands on ECEC professionals (Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019). There are expectations that ECEC staff, including teachers, child careers and teaching assistants, can meet the needs of a wide variety of children, including children with SEN (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022; UNESCO, 1994). However, research has indicated that ECEC staff often have a lack of knowledge regarding children with SEN (Hannås & Hanssen, 2016; Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022; Pihlaja, 2022), and even lack of knowledge regarding inclusive practice (Lundqvist et al., 2016). Collaboration between professionals with different competences is one way to ensure children with SEN receive appropriate, but still inclusive, support in regular education settings (FNAE, 2018). In Finland, consultative support to staff in day care centres delivered by early childhood special education teachers (ECSETs) is a common collaborative approach (Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019). In this chapter, the consultative role of Finnish ECSETs is in focus.

Consultation between ECSETs and other professionals in ECEC (teachers, child careers and teaching assistants) can be defined as a problem-solving process that aims to help the professionals to develop attitudes and skills that make it possible for them to deliver adequate support to a child or a group of children (Newman & Rosenfield, 2019). The development of the ECSETs' role from a teacher role towards a consultative role is a common trend in Nordic countries (Gäreskog & Lindqvist, 2020; Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019; Riis Jensen et al., 2022). There is some research regarding the role of ECSETs but research regarding the consultative role is still limited. This role has been recognised in some research focusing on special education teachers working in schools (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009; Bladini, 2004; Riis Jensen, 2017; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). Research has indicated that the lack of descriptions and definitions of the consultative role in addition to poor conditions in which consultation is to be delivered, such as a lack of time, leads to ambiguities in how consultation should take place in practice (Rantala et al., 2018; Sundqvist et al., 2014). Special education teachers in schools are still often expected to teach children with SEN, and consultation is often

consigned to short moments of knowledge transferring and advising (Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). For the development of inclusive practice, researchers have highlighted the need for more collaborative and reflective consultation in which different professionals can share their knowledge and focus on adaptations and changes needed in the environment rather than on problematising the child (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009; Bladini, 2004; Sundqvist, 2012; Sundqvist et al., 2014; Riis Jensen, 2017; Riis Jensen et al., 2022). In addition, the positive aspects of conducting consultation with groups of teachers have been pointed out in research (Riis Jensen, 2017; Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009). Even though research regarding special education teachers consultative role in schools can shed light on the ECSETs' consultative role, there is an urgent need for bridging the research gap in the field of ECEC consultation. The consultative role among special education teachers and ECSETs differs since special education teachers often work in one school and thus often have an internal consultative role (Sundqvist, 2012), while ECSETs can be described as external experts, since they support children and staff in several kindergartens (Pihlaja & Viitala, 2018). This probably affects both the current conditions for consultation and how consultation is delivered.

Aim and research questions

The aim of the study presented in this chapter is to examine how ECSETs experience their consultative role. Two research questions have guided the study:

1) How do ECSETs experience the prevailing conditions surrounding the consultative work task?

2) How do ECSETs experience the implementation of consultation and the use of consultation strategies?

The Finnish context

Finnish ECEC is committed to the values of inclusion (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018) and this is visible in practice by the fact that most children with SEN receive individualised instructions and interventions within regular groups (Heiskanen & Viitala, 2019; Viljamaa & Takala, 2017). Children's right to support is furthermore assured in the core curricula and legislation for ECEC (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018; FNAE 2014; 2022). From August 1st there is a unified support system for all children participating in ECEC (FNAE, 2022).

Since 2011, a three-tiered support system has been mandatory in pre-school education and basic education in Finland. In 2022, the three-tiered support system also became

mandatory in ECEC (FNAE 2014; 2022). The three tiered support model consists of the following support levels: general support, intensified support, and special support. General support is the first response to children's need of support. Support on this level is usually short termed (FNAE 2014; 2022) with a focus on pedagogical support: routines and interaction, clear structure of the day and communication in a way that is accessible for all. Personnel working in the group are responsible for support provision on this level. If a child needs support on a regular basis or various support provision simultaneously and general support is no longer enough, intensified support is offered. If a child receives intensified support the ECSET have a more prominent role in planning and executing support strategies and solutions in collaboration with ECEC personnel (FNAE 2014; 2022). Special support is the strongest support level and if children receive this it is assumed that these children cannot adequately achieve goals set for their growth, development and learning. Children that receive special support have their own individual educational plan with individual goals to achieve. In the plan, it is clearly stated who is responsible for providing the support and arrangements for the child's learning.

Nationally, about 10% of children in ECEC receive SEN support on tier two or three within the three-tiered support system (Statistics Finland, 2020; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017). Most children with SEN need support for language difficulties (Laasonen et al., 2018; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017) and other common needs for support are difficulties in concentration, attention, and socioemotional functioning. To ensure that children in need of support receive appropriate learning ECSETs can offer direct or indirect support to the child. ECSETs are expected to serve as consultants for the personnel who support children on a daily basis (FNAE, 2022).

Theoretical framework

Abbot's (1998) theory of jurisdiction of work tasks has been used to reach an understanding of the current conditions for ECSETs fulfilling the consultative task, while two different approaches to consultation (Sundqvist, 2012; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015) have been used to understand the implementation of the consultation and the use of consultation strategies.

Jurisdiction of work tasks

According to Abbot (1998) a profession is a group that has autonomy in performing specific work tasks. A profession operates within a system including different professions

that are dependent on each other for their "jurisdiction" (control) of certain work areas and working tasks. Changes in one profession affects other professions and gives rise to tensions between them. Jurisdiction and changes in jurisdiction of certain working areas can be reached at three different levels. At *the legal level*, policy documents and regulations affect the professions' work tasks. For ECSETs, the national core curriculum for ECEC and local work descriptions are centrally regulated (FNAE, 2018). At *the public level*, political discussions as well as the occupational groups' ability to assert its importance and knowledge have an impact. Finally, professions can also claim jurisdiction in *the workplace*, where they communicate what working tasks they should or wish to have.

An expert-driven and a participant-driven perspective of consultation

Consultation can be delivered in different ways, and different consultation models have been described in research (Crothers et al., 2020). These models can be understood in the light of an expert-driven and participant-driven approach to consultation (Sundqvist, 2012; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). Within both these approaches, consultation is defined as a problem-solving process characterised by a triad relationship including the consultant, the participants, and one or several of the participant's clients (children) (Crothers et al., 2020). The choice of approach affects the focus, the relationship between the consultant and the participant(s), and the use of consultation strategies. The consultant uses expert knowledge and gives suggestions to the participant regarding suitable interventions. This means the relationship between the consultant and the consultee risks being asymmetric due to the dominance of the consultant (Sundqvist, 2012; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). In contrast, a *participant-driven approach,* primarily based on humanistic psychology and constructivism, is built on a strong belief in a participant's own capacity to develop an understanding of problems and find new ways of acting (Lambert, 2004). When employing a participant-driven approach*,* the consultant tries to help the participant change attitudes and working methods through the use of communication skills, such as affirming listening and questions, to stimulate the participant's thinking. As the consultant does not provide expert advice, the relationship between the consultant and the participant is generally considered as more symmetric (Newman & Ingraham, 2019).

These two approaches should not be considered as dichotomies, rather as a continuum in which the consultation can be expert- or participant-driven depending on the situation (Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). Despite this, researchers have claimed that a pure use of an expert-centred approach in consultation in SEN risks maintaining the teacher's view of the

child as a problem, which rarely leads to long-term changes in practice and in how they respond to certain children's needs. In contrast, a participant-driven perspective is concerned with placing greater focus on the teacher's practice and changes in the environment, and can thus lead to more sustainable changes (Bladini, 2004; Riis Jensen, 2017; Sundqvist, 2012; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015; Svenkerud & Opdal, 2019). Thus, the consultation approaches also appeal to an individual and a relational perspective on SEN (Bladini, 2004; Sundqvist, 2012).

Method

The present study aims to examine how ECSETs in Finland describe prevailing conditions and the practical implementation of the consultative task. For reaching an in-depth understanding of the nature of consultation, a multiple-case study design was chosen since it is an effective methodology to study multifaceted issues in real-world settings (Yin, 2014). This study is designed as a descriptive case study constituted of ECSETs in four municipalities.

Case studies are defined and conducted in various ways depending on the purpose and fields of the study (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). Characteristics of a case study include a lengthy concentration on the case and thorough analysis of issues and themes. Case studies can be seen as a preferred research strategy when *how* or *why* questions are being posed (Yin, 2014). Moreover, the analytical approach varies since there are no definite approaches (Schwandt & Gates, 2018; Yin, 2014). Furthermore, a descriptive case study usually requires participant observation, drawing on methods of document review and in-depth interviews to understand the experiences, perspectives, and worldviews of people in a specific context (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). In the first step of the present case study, focus-group interviews provided a rich collection of views.

Participants and data collection

The target group was ECSETs with several years of work experience as ECSETs. When searching for possible participants, previous knowledge about ECSET work (Author 1) combined with information from the municipalities' webpages were used. The authors contacted potential participants by e-mail and invited them to participate in the study. All contacted respondents agreed to participate, and in total, 10 participants from four different municipalities were represented. The participants formed three interview groups, with three

participants in two groups and four participants in one group. All participants were women; further background information is presented in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 near here]

For this study, data were collected through group interviews. Due to COVID-19, all group interviews were conducted via Zoom. The group interviews took place in late autumn 2021 and the beginning of 2022. The interviews were conducted as semi structured interviews. The themes were *prevailing premises and possibilities for the consultative task*, *the implementation of consultation* and *the impact of consultation*. The focus-group interviews lasted between 55 and 70 minutes.

Data analysis

The analysis was conducted in an abductive fashion with focus on the research questions outlined in the literature review and the theoretical framework but without using a hypothesis or predetermined codes (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Thus, we initially tried to understand each case in an inductive manner without actively using the theory. In the final cross-case analysis, the theory was used to interpret the participants' descriptions and reach an understanding of patterns between the cases (Yin, 2014). The analytical process of each case can be described in four steps: 1. gaining an overview; 2. focusing attention on themes in each case relevant to the research questions; 3. developing case narratives; and 4. developing themes by a cross-case analysis.

Initially, the researchers became familiar with the data by listening to and simultaneously transcribing the interviews, enabling them to obtain an understanding of the individuality of each case and note apparent trends. By reading and rereading the transcripts with the research questions in mind, trends and themes within each case became apparent. Individual comments within each case were summarised to identify its essence. The researchers read each other's summaries, compared results and cowrote them into a single summary. The case analysis was written as a narrative report for each case. In the case descriptions, metaphors and quotations were used to illustrate common trends and themes. Finally, a cross-analysis of the cases was made to find shared patterns and themes. In this phase, the theory was used as an interpretative tool.

Ethics and trustworthiness

In each part of this research, Finnish research ethics principles (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2019) have been followed. Informants received information about the study's aim and how the results would be processed, analysed and presented. They were also informed about their rights regarding participation and the option to withdraw at any time, and they gave their consent to be recorded and participate. Finally, the confidentiality of the participants was secured by excluding aspects that would allow recognition of participants or settings in the respective contexts. For reaching trustworthiness, peer debriefing, triangulation in analysis, and control of preliminary findings and interpretations against raw data were used.

Results

Even though the ECSETs in the present study have similar contextual and working conditions (Table 1), the analysis revealed similarities and differences regarding current conditions for implementing the consultation task that also affected the use of consultation strategies. In this section, an in-depth description of each of the three cases is presented as three narratives: a) frustrated knowledge sharer, b) adapted and collaborative quick-fixers, and c) satisfied reflection supporters. In the discussion section, themes and common patterns across the cases are discussed through the lens of theory and previous research.

Case 1: Frustrated knowledge sharer

The first narrative is characterised by frustration over current conditions and staff expectations that force the ECSETs into the role of knowledge sharers and experts even though the ECSETs themselves wish to use a more process-oriented consultation. This group represents ECSETs in a municipality where the consulting role has diminished in recent years. Instead, the ECSETs are expected to provide direct support to children with SEN. Changes in the national policy documents regarding children's right to support have influenced the expectations of the ECSETs' role:

The law now states that children have the right to special education, and we are expected to realise that … And there definitely is less time for consultation nowadays. The staff don't see the necessity, they don't value it as highly as they did before …

The participants also discussed the inclusion policy and the staff expectation for ECSETs to be more visible in the children's groups: "The more the diversity of the group increased, the more helpless they felt, and the more they began to demand and expect from our presence in the groups." On the other hand, the ECSETs also experienced that their participation in the children's groups improved the quality of the consultation and the trust from the staff:

> Still, it is an important part of consultation to visit the group and get to know the children. At least I feel that if I have seen and heard and observed, I also understand what the staff tells me in a different way. We also automatically get more trust from the staff when we know the children and the group.

The ECSETs visit the groups where there are children with SEN one day every two weeks. In addition to the direct support of the children, they offer consultation to the staff during these visits. There are practical barriers to hold discussions with all staff members at the same time, which influences the quality of the consultation:

> One of the teachers stays with me inside during the children's outdoor time, and sometimes the assistant also … but it is not always possible … You can see the staff are stressed. The consultation is not structured in a way that I think everyone would get more out of.

Regarding consultation strategies, the participants described how the staff overall asked for concrete guidance for supporting individual children. "I think the expectation is that you just give straight answers and tell the personnel, 'Now you should do this or this.'" The ECSETs try to motivate the staff, ask the staff questions, give them advice, and get them to reflect, but often nothing happens between their visits:

> I'm keen to listen and ask questions so they can describe the situation. I also share my opinion of the children and then we try to understand what the problem is about and how we can respond to the child. How to proceed and what kind of support this child needs … Even though the consultation is not very well structured from time to time, I always try to give them a task, something they can try or reflect on. But when I get back, they say they haven't had time …

The participants expressed how rewarding a more process-oriented consultation in which they use communication skills rather than advice would be, but there are few possibilities to implement such a consultation in the current situation:

I have had the opportunity to try that kind of consultation during my education, and both the staff and I were very satisfied. I think we should have more opportunities to develop that kind of consultation. But given the current situation, I think it is difficult.

The ECSETs expressed that staff and the head of ECEC do not understand the value of a more long-term consultation process and called for more support from the leaders:

It would be important for others, such as the head of ECEC, to understand the importance of staff being able to spend time on this type of consultation. … If the staff have the opportunity to experience a longer period of consultation regarding a particular child's case, they will also see the difference between that kind of consultation and the short advising occasions we now give.

Case 2: Adapted and collaborative quick fixers

The second narrative is characterised by how the ECSETs in the group continuously adapt their work tasks and consultation to the needs of the staff and the children by balancing between a coteaching role and a consultative role, as well as between offering concrete tools and asking questions that help the staff develop support at the group level. This group represents ECSETs from two smaller nearby municipalities that have a close collaboration. In contrast to the first narrative, the participants in this group state that they have great opportunities to influence how they work, adapting to the needs and demands of the staff at the day care centres. The consultation happens continuously and naturally after they have worked with the children individually or in their group. These ECSETs also visit the groups of children they are responsible for about a full day every other week (though not during the pandemic). During the visits, they work within the children's group as coteachers or provide direct support to the children. Coteaching is a new way of working that ECSETs link to the consultation:

So that I will gain a greater understanding of how staff experience things. It is quite an easy way to give consultation towards something specific without being too predetermined about what you want or where you are heading. But you show the way.

The presence in the children's groups is presented as something that strengthens the opportunity to understand the context, the staff and the children, and the participants thought coteaching had a positive effect on the quality of the consultation. In this group, it can be

noted that the ECSETs are quite satisfied with the conditions and adapt the amount of consultation as needed:

> I feel that after I have been to a group, I give consultation to the personnel so the amount of consultation varies. The consultation also varies depending on the staff or the staff's experiences and knowledge and so on. Some are more independent and others less so …

ECSETs express that the staff in the day care centres trust them and ask for their consultative support. However, there are some units where ECSETs find consultation difficult because the staff prioritise other work. Even if they participate in departmental meetings, the consultation is, even in this group, mostly takes place through short conversations with individual staff. This group of ECSETs have a vision of how consultation opportunities could be developed to become more structured where all the staff together can reflect on the activities and individual children:

> I have received positive feedback from staff about scheduling consultation in advance … the whole team can participate … they can prepare themselves if there is something specific they want to discuss … I think regularity has a great impact …

ECSETs implement consultation in various ways depending on the actual group: "Often not so structured, we take it as it comes." ECSETs usually mention what they have been doing and offer tips and give material to personnel. Furthermore, consultation varies depending on the staff that receives consultation or what type of knowledge and experience they have: "Some of the staff know what to do and others do not … so each time I am sharing what we have been doing and why, plans for the forthcoming time giving them material and so forth."

The staff wants support from ECSETs, and above all they ask for concrete tools. ECSETs express that staff possess knowledge but need affirmation. By asking questions concerning the child and environment, ECSETs motivate personnel and affirm their belief in their own competences, but it is not always easy to stimulate their own thinking and the pressure to give quick fixes is obvious:

> … they want tools. That is something you often hear. My thought then is that you should collect your own tools and see what you have there. A lot of staff possess the knowledge and have the tools, but it is so messy in their toolbox that they can't find the right tools.

Case 3: Satisfied reflection supporters

The third narrative is characterised by contentment about the current possibilities for implementing the consultative task. Thanks to the support of foremen, the ECSETs in this group expressed that they had the opportunity to not only act as advisors but to conduct the consultation as reflective conversations with the entire staff. They also stated that consultation is clearly included in their work description, and personnel receive consultation in the day care centres continuously in accordance with needs. Consultation is carried out during visits, sometimes by telephone or in digital meeting places:

> … I feel that personnel take their time when I am coming to them. When you are coming there and are there from 9 to 14, the personnel are trying their best so that we can talk in between. I feel that they want to ensure that there is time for discussions.

The ECSETs highlighted the shared responsibility that they and the teachers have: ECSETs are dependent on the staff's insights regarding the children to be able to offer appropriate consultation. The emphasis is on where the consultation is needed most, and they experience consultation as being as important as the direct support they give to the children: "Sometimes you just need to support staff by giving them consent that it is okay even though all children have not done the same thing."

In this group, it also appears that the combination of working with the children and having continuous conversations with staff makes it possible to develop adequate support for the child. These ECSETs also stated that they have received support from day care centre heads to create opportunities for more process-oriented and continuous guidance for the entire team, for example to support personnel in relating to a child perceived as very demanding:

> … When you are working with tough cases, you should not do the work alone. The consultation made the staff feel that they were not left alone, they had a psychologist, ECSETs and head of ECEC backing them up, and really felt that we do this together.

The ECSETs in this group used a wide range of consultation strategies. Even though they mentioned sometimes offering advice to staff, they talked a lot about the importance of giving space for reflection and letting the staff find the solutions themselves through reflective discussions. They mention how they as consultants lead the staff to solutions and how they use different strategies (e.g., notes) to support these reflections:

The staff wrote three notes each about what kind of change they want, and we looked at everybody's thoughts. Then they got three more notes to write what they believe should be done for these changes to occur.

The ECSETs have experienced good results from consultation, which is designed as reflective conversations with the entire staff and talks about magical moments when the staff find solutions. When the staff themselves come up with solutions together, the motivation to make the necessary changes also increases: "The staff themselves found out the same things I had been thinking about, it was just like: Hallelujah, it worked."

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how ECSETs describe their consultative role. By comparing patterns in the three narratives and understanding these patterns through the lens of theory and earlier research, two themes addressing the research questions emerged: *poor conditions – weak jurisdiction for conducting the consultative task* and *balancing between quick fixes and the use of reflection as consultation strategy.*

Poor conditions: weak jurisdiction for conducting the consultative task

The first research question focused on the prevailing conditions surrounding the consultative task. The results revealed similarities and differences related to conditional aspects, such as time issues, but also regarding expectations of how ECSETs should work. Earlier research has indicated that poor conditions, such as a lack of descriptions and definitions of the consultative role and a lack of time, make it difficult to implement consultation (Rantala et al., 2018; Sundqvist et al., 2014). An apparent pattern in the results is that interpretation of policy documents regarding support to children with SEN impacts the fulfilment of the consultative task. Even though inclusive education is a guiding principle in the national core curriculum for ECEC, the children's right to appropriate support in combination with the staffs' lack of knowledge in how to deliver this support means that ECSETs have a double role: They should support certain children and the staff. This is also highlighted in current policy documents (FNAE, 2018). In addition, the results revealed a lack of time to implement consultation, especially in the form of group consultation, which the research suggests is important (Riis Jensen, 2017; Ahlfeld Nisser, 2009). Even though ECSETs can manage their time to a certain degree, the staff in kindergartens seldom have time for consultation. In line with earlier research (Rantala et al., 2018; Sundqvist et al., 2014), the participants also experienced expectations from the staff regarding their work tasks

as an aggravating circumstance. In addition, support, or the lack thereof, from the heads of the day care centres was an aspect that framed current conditions surrounding the consultative work task. The ECSETs in two municipalities seem to be chameleons who adapted to staff expectations and prevailing time opportunities, even though they have ambitions to work in a different way and use more time for consultation. One group had calmly accepted the situation and did their best to meet staff and the needs of the children, while the other group expressed frustration regarding the conditions. The ECSETs seem to balance between expectations that they should deliver direct support to certain children and their own ambitions to support the staff to develop competence through consultation. In one group, the ECSETs received support from the head of the day care center to set aside time for more long-term consultation with the entire staff. These ECSETs were also more satisfied with the conditions and the implementation of the consultations.

Seen in the light of Abbott's (1988) professional theory, the results indicate that the ECSETs' jurisdiction to carry out the consultative task is weak due to conditional barriers existing in the legal system, such as a lack of visibility in political educational documents and a lack of definition of the consultative task in work descriptions. There also seem to be tensions between ECSETs and ECEC staff regarding who should deliver concrete support of children with SEN. In addition, our interpretation is that ECSETs may not have made sufficiently clear claims about the consultative role in the public system and the workplace system. The question is to what degree they can reach jurisdiction without support from leaders in promoting the consultative task. In addition, practical issues such as staff resources at the centres, as well as the number of children to whom the ECSETs are expected to deliver support, impact the conditions and the jurisdiction of the consultative task.

Balancing between quick fixes and the use of reflection as consultation strategy

The second research question focused on the implementation of consultation and the use of consultation strategies. A common pattern is that the ECSETs balance between staff expectations of concrete instructions on how to support individual children and their own ambition to get staff to reflect on possible solutions and working methods in the group. This is in line with earlier research regarding how special education teachers in schools implement consultation (Bladini, 2004; Riis Jensen, 2017; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015).

As a result of the above described time constraints, the ECSETs often deliver quick-fix advice when they visit the children's group or after they have delivered support to a child outside the group. They are expected to be experts with the solution for "fixing" certain children. Thus, our interpretation is that they act in accordance with a child- and expert-centred approach to consultation (Sundqvist, 2012; Sundqvist & Ström, 2015). Even though the ECSETs considered expert advice regarding certain children as sometimes necessary, they stated the importance of developing participant-driven consultation in which they could support the entire staff to develop current work methods and inclusive SEN practices.

Researchers have pointed out that collaborative and reflective discussions in consultation are essential for developing inclusive practice. The focus should move from problematising the child to problematising the environment (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009; Bladini, 2004; Sundqvist, 2012; Sundqvist et al., 2014; Riis Jensen, 2017, Riis Jensen et al., 2022). The results of the current study confirm that the individual perspective on SEN seems to dominate the consultation task. This perspective becomes both natural and difficult to move away from when the ECSETs also provide direct support to children and lack the possibility of regularly sitting down with the whole staff for more in-depth consultation. On the other hand, coteaching as a complement to consultation seems to have a positive impact on the trust in the relationship between ECSETs and the staff as well as on the collaborative aspect of consultation. This is a new approach that should be further examined.

Conclusion

The study presented in this chapter examined how ECSETs describe their consultative role. Our conclusion is that the prevailing practical conditions and a weak jurisdiction hinder the delivery of high qualitative consultations. Even though ECSETs are expected to take on a consultative role, the consultation is not clearly stated or implemented in policy documents or in local work descriptions, and is not clearly communicated in the ambits that ECSETs operate in. Due to the difficulties of meeting with staff and staff expectations of receiving concrete instructions regarding how they can support certain children, the consultation mostly entails a quick fix that seldom leads to changes in practice. Thus, the current conditions and the fulfilment of the consultation task are closely connected. There is an obvious need to change current conditions and create time and staff receptivity for a participant-driven consultation where staff, together with ECSETs, can reflect on the environmental obstacles and opportunities for all children to develop knowledge and skills based on their current abilities in an inclusive environment.

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Table 1

Background Information of the Participants

Participants	Focus group	Age	Year of exam	Years of work experience	Number of children*
1	1	55	1989	32	200
2	1	58	1994	23	200–220
3	1	55	1992	1,5	300
4	1	59	2014	10	200
5	2	62	2006	16	200
6	2	26	2020	2,5	200
7	2	47	1999	22	200
8	3	62	1993	14	160
9	3	37	2014	5	130
10**	3	-	-	-	-

 * Number of children = Estimated total number of children in groups ECSETs are responsible for (includes children with or without SEN).

** Participant 10 has chosen not to give any information due to the risk of recognition.

Eva Staffans

Joint Mission or Mission Impossible?

Exploring Conditions for Itinerant Early Childhood Special Education Teachers' Work

Children in need of support for development and learning have the right to receive adequate support during their time in early childhood education and pre-primary education. This thesis examines possibilities and limitations for itinerant early childhood special education teachers (ECSETs) to carry out their work, which is to plan, implement and evaluate support for children with special educational needs. Further ECSETs should support personnel who work with children in the groups. What kind of facilitators in the environment offer good conditions for ECSET to provide support to children and what are possible barriers that make ECSET's work more difficult?

The results show that itinerant ECSETs have various possibilities and conditions for their work. This variety in possibilities directly affect how support for children is organized. ECSETs who work in contexts where there are inhibiting conditions that affect the work negatively often have challenges in providing support and furthermore they often have a weakened jurisdiction. In contrast to these challenging conditions, there are ECSETs who have very good conditions to carry out their work. These ECSETs have a strong support from leaders in early childhood education, functional collaboration with personnel in the groups and strong autonomy and flexibility. The challenge is to get several enabling conditions to coincide, so support provision for children in need of support can become a joint mission.