



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

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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

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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).

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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

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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).

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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

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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

<i>CATEGORY</i>	<i>LARGE EFFECT</i>	<i>SOME EFFECT</i>	<i>ONLY A LITTLE EFFECT</i>	<i>NO EFFECT</i>
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%

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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

<i>NUMBER OF</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>MIN</i>	<i>MAX</i>
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

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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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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