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“So much invisible work” – the role of special education teachers in Finnish lower secondary schools

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ABSTRACT
This study investigated special education teachers’ (SETs) work in Finnish lower secondary schools. We wanted to determine what is included in the work and what kind of knowhow is needed to manage it in the contexts of inclusion and the three-tiered support system. Our data consisted of 63 SETs’ answers to an e-questionnaire. Using content analysis, we found that work with students remains central, but collaboration with adults has become a big part of the work. The range of different challenges SETs help students with has become wide and duties concerning pedagogical documentation have been added to the work. Regarding work with students, subject content knowledge and knowledge of mental health related issues are accentuated at the secondary stage. Besides professional knowledge base, SETs need self-management skills and a critical but compassionate mindset. Time constraints, coupled with the absence of structures facilitating teacher collaboration, present notable challenges for SET work.

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KEYWORDS
special education teacher; lower secondary school; three-tiered support system; Finland; work description

Introduction
We studied the role of special education teachers (SETs), who work in lower secondary schools in Finland. SETs serve the whole school and support various classes, which means they do not have a class of their own. With SETs’ support, students with challenges in learning can continue studying in mainstream classes with their peers. This means that SETs’ work can promote inclusion (see also Ainscow, 2022). In the Finnish education system, SET services are available in primary (students aged 7–12) and secondary (students aged 13–18) schools, and SET education gives qualifications to work on both stages. The three-tiered support system, which has been in use in primary and lower secondary (students aged 13–15) schools since 2011, gives structure to the support. Contemporary research on SETs’ work concentrates mostly on primary schools, failing to address the challenges subject teacher system creates to SETs’ work practices in secondary schools (see also Kokko, 2021; Paloniemi et al., 2021; Panula, 2013). Also, the content of the work seems to differ between the stages, at least regarding teaching, as SETs in primary schools concentrate on helping students with basic skills, such as reading and writing (Rytivaara et al., 2012), whereas lower secondary SETs seem to concentrate on supporting students in languages and mathematics (Panula, 2013; Takala et al., 2009).

Finnish SETs received international attention in the beginning of the millennium, when they were seen as one factor behind Finnish PISA success (Kivirauma & Ruoho, 2007; Sabel et al., 2005)
However, since the three-tiered support system, the PISA results have declined (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019). SETs’ role remains central in the three-tiered support system (Sundqvist et al., 2019) but appears to have expanded from what it was before, which seems to be a global trend concerning SET work (Gilmour et al., 2023; Shepherd et al., 2016). There is a need to clarify the job description. Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore SETs’ work in lower secondary schools. Our research questions are (1) What is SETs’ work in lower secondary schools and (2) What kind of knowhow do SETs need in their work in the 2020s? The first research question addresses SETs’ work content and responsibilities, and the second their knowledge and skills. We look at these questions through the concept of Response to Intervention (RtI), but first we give an overview of the evolution of the Nordic approach to inclusion and the Finnish SET system.

**Special education in the Nordic countries**

Nordic countries have committed to inclusive values as stated in the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994) and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [CRPD] (United Nations, 2006). The research interest towards inclusion and CRPD has progressively increased, especially after 2010 (Graham et al., 2023) and more so after launching the General comment 4 (GC4) which describes the core features of inclusive education (UN, 2016). In the Nordic countries as well as around the world, differing definitions and interpretations have made discussion about inclusion difficult (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2023). The definitions range from just the placement of SEN-students to all students’ possibilities to reach their full academic and social potential (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). Buli-Holmberg et al. (2023) note that even though education systems in the Nordic countries have been regarded as inclusive and egalitarian, research on implementing inclusion in practice is scarce.

The Nordic countries have adopted different approaches to realizing inclusive values and special education, though all promote the idea of educating all learners in general education classes. Norway and Denmark do not have separate special education teacher programs and instead rely on all teachers’ ability to teach all students (European Agency for special needs and inclusive education [EASNIE], 2020a, 2020b). In Denmark, teachers receive advice for their teaching from consultants in meetings outside the classroom, a practice meant to make the teaching more inclusive (Hansen et al., 2020). Both countries involve educational-psychological counselling services in the evaluation process of students in need of advanced support (EASNIE, 2020a, 2020b). Iceland, Finland and Sweden educate special education teachers in university programmes (EASNIE, 2023). Finland and Sweden have two different special education professions. In Sweden, the work is divided between special education teachers, who work directly with students, and special needs co-ordinators, who collaborate with different stakeholders and lead developmental work. These roles have been found to overlap in practice (Göransson et al., 2015). In Finland, special class teachers teach their own class of students in need of more permanent support, whereas special education teachers, whose work we study in this research, support students from different classes “part-time”, meaning the students receive special support in some lessons during their school week.

**The Finnish case**

SETs started out in the 1970s as aides to class and subject teachers struggling with heterogenous classes (Tuunainen & Nevala, 1989). In the 1990s, the work was affected by the emergence of inclusive values (Ahtiainen et al., 2021). As the work concentrated on students and was based on a pull-out model, SETs’ collaboration with subject teachers was occasional and unplanned (Ström, 1996). In the beginning of this millennium, it seemed that SETs’ work had not changed much and resembled integration more than inclusion in education (Huhtanen, 2000; Moberg, 2001). The
work mainly consisted of supporting students, but a need for collaboration was noticed (Huhtanen, 2000; Ström, 1996).

In 2010, the legislation concerning special education provision changed, as the three-tiered support system (Basic Education Act [BEA], 642/2010; Ministry of Education and Culture 2010) was introduced. The system resembles the RtI model from the United States (Björn et al., 2016). In the Finnish system, support is given on general, intensified or special tier depending on the pedagogically perceived needs of the student. The intensified tier was a new addition, meant to shift the focus of the support towards preventive measures and early support and thus decrease the number of students in need of special education (Lintuvuori et al., 2017; Thuneberg et al., 2013). The system introduced pedagogical documentation on each support level as a new feature to the Finnish school system and made subject teachers more responsible for supporting all students. Practical applications of the support system have been found to vary between schools (Paloniemi et al., 2021; Ukkola & Väätäinen, 2021), but according to legislation (BEA 642/2010) every student who has a need for support in learning, is entitled to support.

In lack of research on lower secondary school SETs’ work specifically, we looked at job advertisements and found that schools would like to hire SETs, who are experienced and flexible, good collaborators and consultants, development-oriented and knowledgeable about pedagogical documents. However, when looking at lower secondary schools’ homepages and their descriptions of SETs’ role, the impression is that SETs only work with students. The Finnish Trade Union of Education (2022) defines SET work through the three-tiered support adding collaboration strongly to the description and mentioning screening and testing as part of the work as well.

**Response to intervention**

The concept of Response to Intervention (RtI), also called as Multi-tiered System of Supports, promotes inclusive values by focusing on quality teaching for all students in general education classrooms. It has been a feature of the education system in the USA since 2004, where the basic idea (see e.g., Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017) is to offer high-quality instruction for all students in the first tier and use screens to identify those in need of support. The students identified as needing more support receive targeted interventions in small groups in the second tier. If the intervention does not strengthen the students’ academic performance, they receive more individualized data-based interventions in the third tier. Data-driven decision-making and close monitoring of student progress are at the heart of this system (Silva et al., 2020), characterized as a test-teach-test process by Fuchs and Fuchs (2017).

In Finland, the three-tiered support system primarily focuses on structuring the support (Björn et al., 2016). The system does not require diagnosing and is loosely regulated. While evidence-based interventions are essential in RtI, they are not at the core of the Finnish system, which puts more emphasis on Master level teacher education and teacher collaboration (Finnish National Board of Education [FNBE], 2016; Morse, 2020), believing that combining general and special education teachers’ expertise, students’ needs can be better met (Kokko et al., 2022). From a practical point of view, the system in the USA has been described as complex (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012) and the Finnish system as unclear (Eklund et al., 2021).

**Methods**

**Data collection instrument**

The data was collected via an electronic questionnaire in 2020. The researchers acquired a research permit from seven large Finnish cities and sent an invitation to respond to the questionnaire by email to all 280 SETs in these cities, who (based on the information provided online) were lower
secondary school SETs. To gain more responses, information on the research was also published in two different SET Facebook groups and on the Finnish Special Education Association’s official Facebook page. As a result, we received responses from all over the country.

The questionnaire was designed using existing research on SETs’ work in basic education and the gap of specific research on lower secondary school SETs’ work. It included nine background questions covering age, education and working experience, and eight open study questions. Five of the open questions were used in the present study (see Appendix 1). The main question of the questionnaire asked respondents to describe what it was like to work as a SET and to freely write about one’s work. The aim with this approach was to get as realistic a picture of the work as possible and to give the SETs the possibility to address issues in their work we might have missed with more guided questions. The main question was answered by all respondents. The other questions focused in more detail on the reasons students received special education, the positive and negative aspects of the work, and the settings in which SETs worked with students. Responding to these additional questions was optional, resulting in varying response rates for each question.

**Participants**

In total, 63 lower secondary school SETs, primarily female (84%), with an average age of 45 (min. 26, max. 60) and an average of 12 years of SET experience (min. 1, max. 34) responded to the questionnaire. Most (70%) had worked in other educational roles as well, most often as subject teachers or special class teachers. The respondents worked in different sized schools, some as the school’s only SET and others with up to five colleagues.

**Ethical considerations**

During this research, the ethical guidelines as stated by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [TENK] (2019) were followed. Responding the questionnaire was voluntary. Some respondents felt the information they had given for example regarding their school’s practices was “too sensitive”, and they hoped that their location would not be mentioned. This is why we have decided not to give more information on the SETs whose quotes we have used.

**Data analysis**

Data-driven content analysis following Schreier (2012, p. 87) was used to analyse the open questions. Qualitative content analysis was used to describe the phenomena of the field and quantitative content analysis where appropriate to give the reader an idea of the rarity or commonness of the categories with frequencies. The analysis was based on our research questions and guided by the data and the literature review. In the first stage of the qualitative content analysis, both researchers read the data several times to obtain an overall picture of it. The aspects resonating with research questions were discussed. In the second stage, the first researcher went through the data systematically, compiling sections resonating with the research questions and then combining similar items under potential subcategories. These subcategories were then discussed. Some of them could be combined and some were renamed to better describe their content. In the third stage, the subcategories were compressed into main categories. This was done individually by both researchers. The main categories were then discussed, and the final categories and their descriptions were agreed on. In addition, after the first draft of this article, the researchers went through the whole data once more to ensure the article properly depicted it (see Stahl & King, 2020). In the results section, we use quotes to further ensure trustworthiness and make the analysis more visible.
Results

Results to research question 1 are compressed into two main categories: the Framework for Special education Teachers’ work and the Assignments. These and subcategories included can be found in Table 1.

Framework for special education teachers’ work

Five subcategories that describe the framework for SETs’ work were found. These were (1) working hours, (2) support needs, (3) setting, (4) working conditions and (5) attitudes towards the work. These are presented next.

Working hours: The SETs in the data had 22–30 h of teaching duties per week. Some, but not all, could use a predetermined amount of their teaching hours to other assignments, such as consultation or writing compulsory documents. Some SETs prioritized students in the second (intensified support) and third (special support) tiers of the support model, and said it was subject teachers’ responsibility to support students in the general support tier. However, there was no consensus on this matter.

Support needs: The most common reasons students needed SET support can be seen in Table 2. Students’ support needs ranged from difficulties in keeping up with the pace of the mainstream class to comorbid challenges in learning, concentrating and mental health. According to the respondents, problems with mental health were prominent in lower secondary schools as seen here: Support in “pure” learning difficulties is rarer and the need for psychological, social, motivational and other all-encompassing support is prominent. In lower secondary school, other obstacles for learning, such as fear of social situations, depression, lack of motivation and different home and free time-related stress factors hamper students’ wellbeing and coping at school (SET 12).

Setting: The most common setting for SETs’ work with students was small groups, closely followed by co-taught settings. Only 11% (six teachers) said they sometimes met the students individually. Besides the opinions of SETs, the choice of the setting was also influenced by the opinions of subject teachers and students. Small groups benefited the students who had problems concentrating in the bigger class or whose problems were comorbid or severe. Small groups also offered SETs the possibility to get to know the students, and students who did not participate in the bigger class often did so in small groups. Co-teaching was seen as a positive choice when many students needed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>n = 55*</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning difficulties</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Difficulties in concentrating and managing one’s work</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Difficulties with mental health</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Behavioural difficulties</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Difficulties in understanding the language of instruction</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Absences</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The most common support needs were asked as a separate open question. This question was answered by 55 special education teachers.
general support. It also suited subjects in which students mainly did exercises, although this could also depend on the teacher or their teaching style. One SET commented: Co-teaching has a lot to do with the subject teacher’s persona. The teaching situation can be totally different depending on which colleague you work with (SET 17).

**Working conditions:** Some SETs commented on their working conditions. There were SETs who had to co-teach because they had no own working space and SETs who permanently taught a small group of students from different subjects and grade levels. In addition to some SETs’ lack of influence on the setting, other challenges were that some did not have a colleague, and some had no own work phone. Also, schools that operated in several buildings made the work hectic and collaboration with subject teachers difficult.

**Attitudes towards the work:** SETs held contradictory attitudes toward their work. They experienced the work as rewarding, interesting and multifaceted and felt they could influence their work for example by making their own schedules. However, they also described it as fragmented, unpredictable, and burdened by an unreasonable workload. Nearly all respondents wished to narrow their work description. The competing assignments resulted in feelings of inadequacy in supporting the students, who were unanimously considered the core of the work. One SET explains: I have 23 hours of teaching duties per week. One hour a week has been reserved for other duties, but it’s in no way enough, because I have so much “invisible work”. I’m often absent from lessons – subject teachers wonder where … These are the times when I take care of acute student cases, anxious (unable to attend lessons) students, support documents and communication with parents, school counsellor, school psychologist etc … (SET 60).

**Work assignments**

SETs’ work assignments could be divided into three subcategories. These were working (1) with students, (2) with adults and (3) alone. All 63 SETs described their work assignments.

**Working with students:** All SETs in the data worked with students. They described themselves as “listeners of the students”, meaning that they asked how the students were and tried to encourage and motivate them. This category consisted of two main tasks, namely teaching and supporting.

**Teaching:** According to SETs, support needs were most prominent in mathematics, English and Swedish. Physics, chemistry and Finnish as a mother tongue received some mentions. SET support in humanities subjects such as history was rare, even though SETs told that difficulties in reading and writing cause challenges for students in these subjects. If the teaching took place in a small group, the content of the lesson was said to be repetitive and modified from what was done in the mainstream class. The teaching concentrated on the core content of the subject. SETs received instructions on what to teach from subject teachers. A short conversation or instructions given on a piece of paper minutes before the beginning of the lesson were common. This “acting as a sort of a subject teacher” was seen as a drawback. In co-taught settings, the SETs said they adjust to the teaching style of the subject teacher, observe the students and group dynamics, and help where they can. SETs seldom had the opportunity to plan the teaching together with subject teachers, as every teacher had their own schedule.

**Supporting:** Only 16% (10 SETs) mentioned that they try to teach learning strategies and come up with solutions that help the students cope with their difficulties. Reading and writing strategies, math support and aggression replacement training were examples of different strategies. Many SETs wrote that there was too little time for these activities, as it was important to keep up with the pace of teaching in the mainstream class. If a student had been absent or needed to practice before exams, some SETs provided extra teaching outside the student’s schedule. Also, if the students needed support in demonstrating their knowledge, they could take exams in the SETs’ working space. In some cases, SETs were solely responsible for the education of certain students, such as those with attendance issues. These were students who did
not come to school, could not keep up with the pace of completing lower secondary school in three years or had an individual education plan meaning a special tier status in some subject(s). Taking care of these students’ affairs was time-consuming. SETs’ work approach, especially in solving bullying situations and in the matters of absentee students, resembled that of the school counsellor. The preventive approach is emphasized in the national curriculum (FNBE, 2016) but was not often mentioned in our data.

**Working with adults:** Work with adults included collaboration and consultation. We treat these tasks separately, since most of the SETs made a clear distinction between them. Working with adults was described as both problematic and effortless, depending on the person one was working with.

**Collaboration:** Collaborative duties were the most common assignments, aside from teaching duties, as mentioned by 86% (54 SETs) of the respondents. The SETs most often collaborated with subject teachers in matters of sharing information about students or an upcoming lesson. Multi-professional collaboration extended to school staff like school psychologists and external entities such as special schools, healthcare and child protective services. Communication and meetings with guardians were frequent. Even though collaboration was considered important, it was difficult to find a balance. Either there was too much collaboration, especially concerning different kinds of meetings, or too little collaboration, which was the case with planning co-teaching.

**Consultation:** In total, 59% (37 SETs) included consultation duties in their work. Consultation differed from collaboration in that the SETs were experts and advised others, primarily subject teachers. Most consultations centred on writing pedagogical documents. However, SETs expressed concerns about the growing number of consultation duties and their limited time for them. SETs stated that subject teachers would need consultation in differentiating and in class management, but they were unsure how to advise them. Initiating consultation in other matters than pedagogical documents seemed quite demanding for SETs, as seen here: Consultation is nearly non-existent. A SET is no one’s boss, and I am forced to look at classes, where even general support is not available. I don’t know many subject teachers who want advice in their teaching. I won’t initiate this – I have tried and failed in the past (SET 25).

**Working alone:** The duties listed here were writing pedagogical documents, screening and testing students, and also organizing and planning. All SETs in the data mentioned assignments from this category.

**Writing pedagogical documents:** Writing pedagogical documents according to the requirements of the three-tiered support system was the most common task mentioned in the category of working alone. This work was time-consuming, and some SETs felt that it took time away from working with the students.

**Screening and testing:** The practices regarding screening and testing varied widely, from screening all students in the first year of secondary school in mathematics and reading/writing (reported by three respondents) to testing singular students if subject teachers reported difficulties. Most SETs were able to decide on screening by themselves. Some SETs saw no use in testing the students because they had no time to help with their specific difficulties, as said here: We have little time for screening and testing. I find it really odd if there haven’t been any signs of learning difficulties in primary school. I’m basically against testing, especially if the knowledge of a difficulty is ignored in practice. I’m more needed in teaching students than screening them (SET 20).

**Organizing and planning:** Planning and organizing support measures and informing subject teachers about students’ support needs are also regarded as individual work. Messaging was often involved in these activities and had become an everyday part of many SETs’ duties as they organized meetings and stayed in touch with guardians. Some used WhatsApp to communicate with students who had trouble coming to school. SETs also monitored student progress through online documentation. Most SETs made schedules for themselves and school assistants, whose work some SETs also planned, organized and instructed. Those who worked in schools with more than one SET planned how they could best divide their work. In total, ten SETs listed school development work as their duties, meaning educating other school staff on inclusive special education practises.
Knowledge and skills needed in special education teachers’ work

The three main categories and their subcategories that respond to research question 2 can be seen in Table 3. They are discussed next.

**Professional knowledge base**: This category consists of three subcategories, which are general pedagogical knowledge, special educational knowledge and collaborative skills.

**General pedagogical knowledge** contained knowledge about subject matter and teaching methods and strategies in different subjects. It also included knowledge of basic classroom management, such as clear structures, rules and instructions. The SETs said a novice SET needs to study the subject content on their own first to be able to teach it to students.

**Special educational knowledge** included knowledge of (1) differentiation, (2) different factors affecting learning and (3) pedagogical documents, screens and tests. Differentiation was one of the most often mentioned skills the SETs said they needed in their work. They adapted assignments to meet the students’ needs on a daily basis. By different factors affecting learning, the SETs meant challenges refereed in Table 2. Considering pedagogical documents, SETs had to know them “inside-out”, because if they did not write the documents, they were the ones who instructed others in writing them.

**Collaborative skills** like interaction and communication were crucial in SETs’ work. Besides subject teachers, fluent collaboration with parents and school leaders was seen as vital in the work. Important SET qualities in collaboration were assertiveness, consistency, and compassion. These were needed especially in consultative situations, when SETs felt a need to influence other stakeholders’ attitudes and motivate them for new ways of working.

In the main category of professional knowledge base, subject content knowledge, knowledge of mental health and collaborative skills were the areas perceived as most important in lower secondary context. However, many SETs expressed that these skills had not been taught in initial teacher training.

**Self-management**: The category of self-management contains the subcategories of professional development and stress-management.

**Professional development**: SETs’ area of expertise was so wide that they had to constantly update it by further educating themselves. They had accepted that professional development was part of their work, but with the already packed work description, they struggled to find time to develop their own expertise. One SET writes: *At the moment, I take part in almost all available courses that have something to do with my work description. This means I study weekly. I’m not obligated to do this, but the courses make my work easier, especially as I am in the beginning of my career* (SET 48).

**Stress-management** skills were essential in coping as a SET and maintaining one’s wellbeing. These included time-management skills and the ability to establish boundaries between work and free time. Lack of time to take care of all one’s duties properly was mentioned by nearly all SETs in the data. Consequently time-management was viewed as a core skill, meaning one had to be able to limit the work and prioritize tasks. Other ways to balance one’s working hours were, for example, consulting subject teachers during breaks or taking care of parent-teacher meetings by phone. Student issues followed SETs home, either in the form of paperwork or in thoughts. The data was rich with mentions of exhaustion, such as the following: “I’m at the limit of coping”, “I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main categories</th>
<th>Professional knowledge base</th>
<th>Self-management</th>
<th>SET mindset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subcategories</td>
<td>1. General pedagogical knowledge</td>
<td>1. Professional development</td>
<td>1. Student-centred approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Special educational knowledge</td>
<td>2. Stress-management</td>
<td>2. Critical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Collaborative skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Compassion</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. Flexibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Elements of special education teachers’ knowledge.

RQ2: What kind of knowhow do SETs need in their work in the 2020s?
also work on weekends” and “I thought I had it in me to work until retirement but now I’m not sure”. One SET summed up: The work is so hectic, my lunchbreak (if I have time to have one) lasts for 10 minutes. It is not possible to manage this work within the working hours even by lowering the standards. All SETs I know work on their free time as well (SET 43).

**SET mindset:** The main category of SET mindset includes four subcategories, which are student-centred approach, critical thinking, compassion and flexibility.

**Student-centred approach** included taking care of students’ rights as well as being interested in them. Some SETs said they need to check that the agreed support measures are in use in the mainstream class and that the teaching is being differentiated. They did not like this part of their work as they felt they had to “demand and justify” things to subject teachers. Also in different meetings, the SETs often felt it was their duty to make sure the student was heard. On the other hand, being there for the students: meeting them unhurriedly, building a confidential relationship, listening and being interested in them, was according to most SETs the best part of their work. One SET explains: It is important that the youngsters know that they are important and that you believe in them. By caring, being nice and having a positive attitude, you can make them come to school and become motivated in working with you. Only after that can learning be successful (SET 63).

**Critical thinking and compassion:** Being able to think critically and being compassionate were important in all aspects of the work. Critical thinking was especially important in evaluating the support a student had been given and in finding new, more effective ways to support them. Compassion was a recurring element in the data. In all interaction, the SET had to take others’ situations into account, try to understand them and be respectful. One SET gives a good example of compassion after first having criticized subject teachers’ willingness in adapting assignments for different students: On the other hand, I feel for subject teachers. People should try what it is like to teach, when every hour a new class of 24 more or less motivated teenagers comes in (SET 21).

**Flexibility:** Finally, according to the respondents, a professional SET needed to be flexible because the work was unpredictable by nature. Situations, plans and students could change on the fly if a more acute situation came up. They said that a SET must be able to adapt to changing situations and act promptly when needed. Many also said that SETs should try to make their schedules flexible, so that it would be easier to take care of unpredictable demands. The SETs commented like this: The work is very spontaneous. Situations and plans can change surprisingly but I have already gotten used to this (SET 55).

One can’t always foresee things and in the next moment one must answer to multiple needs at the same time. One can’t plan much ahead (SET 52).

**Summary**

The aim of this research was to find out what Finnish lower secondary school SETs’ work is in practice and to specify the professional knowhow SETs need. Based on our results, SET work and skills required to manage it in the contexts of inclusion and three-tiered support are summarized in Figure 1.

Work with students was central and took place in small groups or co-taught settings. Individual teaching, which is mentioned in the national curriculum (FNBE, 2016) as one of the settings available, was rare due to the high demand for support. Aside work with students, SETs collaborated with adults and worked alone doing different tasks. In comparison to the RtI model used in the US, very little testing or evidence-based methods were used. The SETs had mixed feelings about their work, which they saw as both rewarding and challenging. The working conditions were not equal for all SETs.

The knowhow SETs needed consisted of a professional knowledge base, self-management skills and a category which we termed as SET mindset. SETs in our data expressed that much of the knowhow needed in their work had to be acquired independently, implying that initial teacher training does not sufficiently prepare them for their current work (see also Smeplass & Leiulfsrud, 2021;
Takala et al., 2021). Lack of education was experienced in subject content knowledge, students’ mental health issues and collaboration with adults. Most challenges were reported in collaboration and consultation. This was commented to be due to secondary school structures, which did not facilitate collaboration: all teachers had their own schedule and a time-slot for collaboration was often hard to find. SETs experienced consultative discussions with subject teachers difficult to initiate. Advice in pedagogical documentation was an exception to this rule. Difficulties in consultation and its minor role have been noted in other research as well (Mihajlovic, 2020; Pettersson & Ström, 2019).

**Discussion**

Based on our results, we claim that the work of SETs has changed significantly after incorporating three-tiered support in the Finnish system. Compared to studies done before this new support system (Ström, 1996; Takala et al., 2009), SETs’ work in Finland has expanded in three directions. First, SETs now address a broader range of student challenges, aligning with an inclusive approach.

![Figure 1. Elements of special education teachers’ (N=63) work in Finnish lower secondary education.](image-url)
might be considered an “inclusive shift” in practice, as according to statistics (Statistics Finland [SF], 2020), the number of students in special schools is steadily decreasing. However, it has been reported that there is confusion regarding who is responsible for supporting students in different tiers of the support system (Nykänen, 2021; Takala et al., 2023). According to Sirkko and colleagues (2023) SET’s would like to dedicate more time for the supportive aspect of the work at the expense of teaching the subject content, which was the case in our data as well. In small group settings, SETs felt they were required to follow the instructions given by subject teachers, which left little time to teach different learning strategies or concentrate on the students’ actual challenges.

Second, work with adults, a trend observed in other countries as well (Berry, 2021; Sundqvist et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2021), has become a significant aspect of SET work. Still, collaboration lacks its full potential, as for example, co-teaching is seldom co-planned due to time-constraints. This unplanned “co-teaching” was a common setting for support in lower secondary schools in our data. Third, the three-tiered support system has increased the time SETs have to spend on paperwork in the form of pedagogical documentation. According to the SETs in our data, this time would be better spent working with students. It seems that the documents are too complex and time-consuming, or the SETs do not see a real connection between the documents and the daily work with students. Pedagogical documentation and enhanced collaboration with adults appear to be direct consequences of the three-tiered support system. An overview of the changes compared to the work description prior to the three-tiered support system is presented in Table 4.

This study has practical implications. We recommend rethinking and clarifying the work description for lower secondary school SETs. This step is crucial for promoting inclusion and ensuring support for all students who need it. Lack of time to take care of all one’s duties properly has been a recurring notion in recent research concerning SET’s work (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Hester et al., 2020; Kokko et al., 2022). Addressing this issue is essential for both the wellbeing of SETs and the rights of students. We also question whether initial teacher education adequately prepares lower secondary SETs for their roles, especially as it seems that the focus in teacher education is more on primary than secondary students (see also Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Offering future SETs the opportunity to specialize in either younger or older students is worth considering. Furthermore, we urge critical examination of secondary school structures and practices. As collaboration and its possibilities are key elements in the Finnish multitiered support system, supportive structures for collaboration in lower secondary schools need to be created. Adapting the new practices of the three-tiered support system to existing structures (Pulkkinen, 2019) poses a barrier to collaboration. Lastly, the current salary system ignores the tasks of collaboration and paperwork included in SETs’ work, as the salary is defined by teaching duties only. This issue should be rethought to make SETs’ “invisible work” visible.

To conclude, we think that specifically tailored support for individual students is a step in the right direction. However, the Finnish multitiered support system needs to be actively developed. There is a need for clearer nation-wide instructions. With the current state of the system, inclusion is at a developing stage (see also Vanhanen et al., 2022). To enhance this progress, schools should find ways to make the three-tiered support system work for the benefit of their students. This

### Table 4. Lower secondary school special education teachers’ work before the three-tiered support and now.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>SET work before 2011*</th>
<th>SET work in the 2020s’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Object</td>
<td>Students with challenges mainly in reading, writing and mathematics</td>
<td>Students with diverse challenges affecting learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Individual approach</td>
<td>Collaboration with teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Before three-tiered support system (see Huhtanen, 2000; Panula, 2013; Ström, 1996; Takala et al., 2009).
requires defining the responsibilities of SETs and subject teachers across different tiers, but also facilitating collaboration. Inclusive education should not only be about the placement of students, but about everyone’s right to learn. This means that inclusion needs good all-round teaching which includes all teachers (Mitchell, 2014).

**Limitations**

This study has limitations. Only 63 SETs responded to the questionnaire, which affects generalizability (Johnson & Christensen, 2016). It can be speculated how well our sample represents the population it concerns, which is often the problem in survey studies (Peng et al., 2006). Nevertheless, the respondents thought it was important to study their work. One SET wrote: *This is an important topic for research. During my career, I haven’t been able to find a single guidebook that would tell what this work really is* (SET 57). Our results align with findings from other studies (Lavian, 2015; Mihajlovic, 2020; Paloniemi et al., 2021), indicating reliability and suggesting that the limited data did not seriously compromise the credibility of our results (Peng et al., 2006). This is a rare study due to its context. More research is needed to confirm our findings. Interviews and observations could provide more in-depth insights into the work and its content.

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**Data availability statement**

Due to confidentiality agreements, the data cannot be made openly available.

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