

# Developing co-teaching culture in a Finnish School

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Der Unterricht in heterogenen Gruppen stellt an Lehrer hohe professionelle Anforderungen, die oft erst langsam in einer Schulgemeinschaft aufgebaut werden. Die Schule im finnischen Kilpinen (7. bis 9. Jahrgangsstufe) hat bewusst Strategien zur Zusammenarbeit zwischen Fachlehrern und Sonderpädagogen entwickelt, um möglichst früh die Bedürfnisse sowohl der Schüler als auch der Lehrer zu erkennen. Das Experiment in Kilpinen, das vor fünf Jahren begann, hat durch den wachsenden Erfahrungsaustausch das Schulklima flexibler und offener gemacht und dazu geführt, dass es sich die Lehrer immer mehr zum Ziel setzten, Schüler mit besonderen Bedürfnissen so weit wie möglich innerhalb ihrer Klassen zu unterstützen. Diese Entwicklung wurde beschleunigt durch die finnische Gesetzgebung, die den Lehrern einerseits ein sehr gestaffeltes Modell von Fördermassnahmen vorschreibt und ihnen andererseits einen grossen Spielraum der Eigenverantwortung für den Erfolg der betroffenen Schüler belässt.

Kilpinen School is in Jyväskylä, in Central Finland, a city of 130 000 inhabitants 270 km north of Helsinki. Our students, about 490 from 13 to 16 years old, finish here their last years of education which comprises 9 years. Our school works in quite an inclusive way: we do not have any special education classes so that every student stays with his peers. Groups vary in size from 19 to 26 students who are taken care of by 40 teachers and 5 school assistants. Four of them work as special education teachers co-teaching with subject teachers in the normal class and giving students special help in part-time education according to the student's extra curriculum in certain subjects.

Our school model is also inclusive geographically: all students who live in the area are enrolled in our school; only students with serious difficulties (very low cognitive ability or severe motor impairment) are sent to other institutions. For those who substantially struggle with their studies, we have nevertheless developed some co-operation with local social and youth workers receiving valuable support on a weekly basis for students who face challenges in school attendance. Sometimes it is easier for them to work with "an outsider" and to get started with a job needed at the

youth center. This takes some of the load off their responsibility and they will be more able to get a grip of the school work which is mentally important. Our aim is to create a school culture in which we solve problems as soon as they emerge, without a permanent establishment of special education classes, but by actively developing our model of co-teaching.

## What is co-teaching?

By co-teaching, I understand in this article the co-operation between a subject teacher and a special education teacher who share a group in teaching the same topic and taking both the responsibility for the curriculum and the assessment of the student's work. Teaching can be implemented in the same classroom or possibly in separate places. The fundamental idea of co-teaching is inclusive *education*, since we consider it more as a pedagogical method: our implementation of co-teaching in a group does not necessarily require that the students have a diagnosis of their situation; it is enough when teachers understand that a student needs some support.

There are several ways to approach co-teaching. One teacher can be the leading one and the other has a supportive role in the classroom. Teachers can divide the class into two groups (or in another appropriate way) and teach the same matter in separate settings. Sometimes they can teach a different topic to their groups depending on the students' needs. Teachers can also share the instruction, planning and activities in the same classroom by differentiating the tasks. It is most helpful if the teachers adopt a compatible style in teaching as well as in their approach to learning. Nowadays we can observe several approaches to co-teaching which have developed (see bibliography at the end).

### **How did we get started?**

The actual impulse to the development of co-teaching emerged when one of our mathematics teachers approached me with the proposal to build a group which would include students of the general curriculum and those with Individual Program Planning (IPP). I accepted the offer feeling that I could be more useful to students in the classroom and give my support to a larger number of students while learning at the same time from the methods of the math teacher. Our co-operation lasted three years and meant for both of us a good dose of weekly continuous education.

After one joint course, we wanted to share our practice with the other teachers by telling them at the coffee table about our successes and failures. Soon other special education teachers collaborated in developing co-teaching as a new work form for our school. They offered their help to the most challenging groups after subject teachers had opened their classroom doors. Gradually, some of our foreign language teachers became interested and the development went in full speed. This allowed special education teachers to co-operate with teachers of different subjects so that we could introduce pairs working together in mathematics, English and Swedish. Other subjects were added, and after five years of development, nearly everyone in our school does some co-teaching on a voluntary basis.

When we started in 2007, the teachers had some discussions about the possible forms of co-teaching. However, we did not give any precise guidelines, allowing teachers to discover and elaborate their own ways. At the beginning special education teachers agreed to work as “well-trained teaching

assistants” if needed. We got the doors opened and were able to show that there were no intentions to criticize or evaluate anyone’s professional skills. Lesson after lesson, special education teachers looked for space to make use of their expertise – and they found it quite easily when they were searching for different ways of supporting a student’s personal working methods. Through this experience, we gathered a variety of instructions useful for all students. To keep track of the development and to interest other colleagues, we invited all the teachers to our regular meetings and sent them a summary of discussion, since we thought it essential to spread the good experiences of our collaboration. It also seemed important to allow everyone to join the group with a smaller or larger input.

### **What are we doing today?**

In Kilpinen School, the school year consists of four periods which mostly involves some change in the composition of groups or in the learning situation. We therefore ask the teachers in advance to look through their future groups and to inform special education teachers about their needs of another adult present in the classes. A reminder is sent a week before the period changes to maintain awareness of arrangements. Special education teachers first accept those lessons that fit into their schedule. The remaining lessons are divided among the five school assistants. Our subject teachers have learned to evaluate the different situations and know when to work with a special education teacher or a school assistant. But we are flexible with these attributions and can sometimes offer the help of a special education teacher where it was initially not asked. On the other hand, we might lack of lessons for special education teachers and will then guide school assistants specifically in order to attend

more demanding groups. As already mentioned, our co-teaching contribution is focused on English, Swedish, language and literature (Finnish) and mathematics lessons, but every request will be responded in some way – if asked for, we will organize support at least for one lesson a week.

### **What kind of challenges are we struggling with?**

There is always a lot of demands for shared planning, and you must find an acceptable way of distribution. You can easily cut down the co-teaching project by submitting the requirement to a common planning time for two teachers involved. But is it a good reason to give up totally? I feel that the lack of planning time can partly be compensated by relying on the professionalism of each other: the subject teacher is responsible for the management of the topics to teach, whereas the special education teacher brings in different ways of supporting the students’ skills. If you allow each other to interrupt the lesson, when one of you finds it necessary for pedagogical reasons, you’ll be able to build up your co-teaching culture. After some while, you can go to your class having prepared the subject in general and the content and goal of the planned activities.

There is a tremendous need for mutual trust and confidence between colleagues. When starting the lesson, the teachers need flexibility combined with the ability to use the possibilities that will come up during the class. This is not an underestimate of planning, but an encouragement to start co-teaching even with the restriction of limited time. Certainly, there is always a need for shared planning. But we realized that too much advance

planning can weaken our reactions and responses during the lessons, since it is more important to target teaching towards the way your students are able to learn. One must have the courage to change the lesson from the pre-planned direction. As said before, it is essential to agree on an operational practice that each teacher can interrupt the instruction of the other by specifying and concretising questions and comments. You so create room for different views which is beneficial for everyone.

It is particularly important to share short moments of feedback in order to gather observations about the lesson from the two professionals and to build guidelines to be used in the following sessions. There is more information available when the observations of two experts are put together. Student performance is also taken into account for further planning which offers then various frames for teaching in co-operation.

We are now able to adapt instructions sooner and more precisely to the needs of students. We can better focus on differentiated studying skills and learning strategies instead of concentrating on the subject matters to teach.

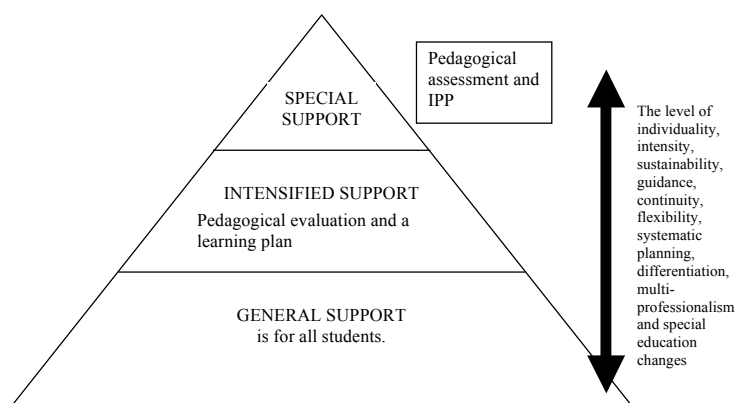
### How could we manage with the changes in the new Finnish Basic Education Act?

In August 2011, the Finnish Basic Education Act was changed which implies that schools must now provide support on three different levels: general, intensified and special support. Help on the first two levels has to be available for students prior to special support. The revised Education Act states that the student has the right for support even on a short-term basis. Students with longer-term challenges in their studies or difficulties in their learning process are entitled to part-time special education.

When a teacher notices that a student is somewhat struggling with his schooling, he sets up a pedagogical evaluation which is the basis for a specific learning plan, written in co-operation with the student and his family. This plan defines the kind of support needed and its organization. If intensified support is suggested, a multi-professional student welfare group formed by school principals, special education teachers,

student counselors as well as a school psychologist, a nurse and a social worker follows up in regular meetings every second week. If these measures prove to be not yet sufficient, the teacher writes another assessment requiring the necessity of special support which then comprises an Individual Program Planning (IPP) with specific personal goals for studying. (Fig. 1.)

**Figure 1. Three-level support for students in basic education in Finland.**



We must offer various forms of support as soon as we notice the need for it. The support will be carried out as long as possible in neighbourhood schools or even in the student's original classroom. Each higher level of support has to be based on full information about the earlier support granted. The IPP is reviewed and, if necessary, adapted at least once a year: we check how the special support is offered to students and whether there is a need for changes. A more detailed review has to be established before the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

We develop continuously the ways to help our students as early as possible so that their barriers to learning can be limited to a minimum. We are aware that we should specially improve the forms of intensified support, since in spite of our early help it is very difficult to differentiate enough the students' learning processes. But we are proud that the new Education Act did not impose major changes to the school culture we had adopted and allowed us to carry on developing our co-teaching processes.

### How has our school culture changed?

Students with special needs are more likely to be successful in their own group if there are two teachers in the classroom. They will be able to learn from their peers, engage in social activities and gradually become aware of their own goals. But it also offers chances for a better classroom atmosphere, when the impatience among teenage students arises: help is quickly available and students can concentrate on

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their work more easily. And this again offers more and better opportunities to reduce behavioural disruption. If a student does not have time for unnecessary small talk with his friends, it is easier to make him work again.

While one teacher treats a new topic, another will improve the working climate by positioning himself in a meaningful way in the classroom. The peaceful climate of the classroom helps students to concentrate better and teachers to cope with their work. Some of our classes become challenging, but the load is not carried by only one teacher. Two teachers can arrange more varied lessons than one and have time to provide individual guidance to students. I have often walked around in the classroom whispering answers to students' individual questions while my colleague has continued teaching the whole group. It has been great to be part of cultural changes in the classes where previously loudly presented questions are turning into quietly presented requests of clarification.

Co-teaching also offers opportunities for flexible grouping of the students: sometimes we separate those who need more support or the gifted ones, dividing the class into two groups who might stay in the same room or be separated. I have also experienced a way to cope with the absence of students by providing on their return a summary of previous lessons, while the normal class goes on. This is a good method during the ordinary flu seasons, but it does not help against unauthorized absence or homework not done.

The strengthening of teachers' professional skills is not the least advantage of co-teaching. There is a continuous improvement available for the special education teacher in managing the curriculum. The subject teacher becomes professionally stronger knowing a variety of teaching methods and differentiation of the topic taught, whereas the special education teacher has more experience in personalized learning. Joint discussions significantly improve their experience.

Now that we have developed our co-teaching culture for five years, we see more and more team teaching in classrooms. The subject

teacher often teaches the new content and it's followed by a summary by the special education teacher and thus presented in a more memorable form. Co-teaching gives us an opportunity to provide two different approaches to teaching the same information. But teachers also have to agree on a common language to use in the classroom when they want to guide the students' ability to control their own thinking and learning progress. We hope that students will do this more easily if two teachers repeat the same guiding questions.

The descriptions of special education teachers' jobs have permanently changed at Kilpinen School. Part-time special education has still its own place in separate arrangements and settings, though we are lucky to be able to organize necessary resources ourselves according to the students' needs and continue to work at the established level. During the school year 2011–2012, we started a project with one class of the 8<sup>th</sup> graders in English lessons with the goal to enhance students' participation and subjectivity. Both teachers try to increase students' personal involvement in lessons in order to create greater responsibility for their learning by shaping teaching and guidance. We could observe some interesting features. Students' motivation to do the tasks increased, when they were offered wider choices for work. The classroom climate changed as the students were allowed to work in different ways and also help their peer more than before. I am proud of the open-minded attitude that is growing in our school. We are on the threshold of a good transition from teaching to supporting learning.

**Example of an English lesson with tasks of different levels (8<sup>th</sup> grade), based on: Key English 8. Authors: Westlake P., Kangaspunta R., Lehtonen E. & Peuraniemi J. 2008. Helsinki: WSOY**

**Goal: Working with the new Unit 18A (learning new words, listening to and translating the text, doing some exercises in the work book).**

**1. Homework revision:**

As homework, students have filled in the words in English in their word lists which contain the key words of the new unit. The teacher either shows the answers and students check their own lists or the teacher checks the words one by one together with all the students.

**2. The students look at the pictures of the new unit: What are they about?**

**3. Listening to the unit:**

When listening, some of the students will follow the text in their text books (attachment 1). Some of the students will listen their books closed and without the support of the text. The students make the choice by themselves.

4. *Translating the unit into Finnish (these exercises are intended to help understand the differences between the English and the Finnish language):*

Some students will translate the text alone with the help of the dictionary in their English textbook.

Some students will work in pairs and translate the text, the dictionary is used if needed.

Some student will have a ready made translation of the text, and they will compare it with the English version. The Finnish translation has some underlined sections and the students look for the corresponding spots in the English text and write them in English on their paper.

5. *Working with the work book:*

When students complete their translation work, they move on to the workbook exercises. Students in the class have two different kinds of work books: some have a traditional workbook and some a workbook, the exercises of which are reduced and simplified. As they finish the translation, teachers will show them where to start their working with the exercises.

6. *Homework assignments:*

Students will have some homework in the workbook. Different kinds of homework will be given to different students. The other option is to assign the learning of the word list as homework.

Attachment 1

**18 A Heroes**

If you ask teenagers who they admire the most they often come up with the name of a film star, rock star, TV personality or sports star. Some of these people are talented and some are just good-looking. Many are both. And who knows how much work they had to do or how many difficulties they had to overcome. They may, of course, have exciting lifestyles and live a rich and luxurious life. But staying famous must be just as difficult as becoming famous. Nevertheless, we still have to ask ourselves if they really are heroes.

 On September 11, 2001, **Melissa Esposito**, 15, from New York City, experienced something she will never ever forget. This is her story – a story of real heroes.

I remember leaving for school on my bike as usual. It was a beautiful September morning. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the trees were still green. None of us could have imagined what was to lie ahead on that fateful day. Mom works for the local bakery so she had already left for work by car, but Dad was still in the kitchen, fixing himself coffee. I waved goodbye to him and cycled off to school.

The news about the first plane hitting one of the World Trade Center towers spread real fast. Our math teacher stopped the lesson and switched on the television. We could not believe what was happening. By then the second plane had hit the other tower and we all realized that this was no accident.

 Key text



118 one hundred and eighteen

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Tiina Saarenketo

After having worked for 15 years as a physiotherapist for handicapped children and adults, Tiina Saarenketo became a special education teacher and is now also a vice principal in Kilpinen School in Jyväskylä, Finland. She holds a masters degree from the Special education faculty at the University of Jyväskylä and is currently working with her dissertation dealing with a project to modify teaching and learning in the classroom. Tiina is now analyzing the data of the project which involved learners of English in 8<sup>th</sup> grade who were encouraged to participate more actively in the learning process. She hopes that the results will be useful for students and for teachers, in normal heterogeneous classrooms – and will give some strengthening thoughts about inclusive settings.