

Special Needs Assistants – The Special Characteristic and Strength of the School System of Finland

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The contribution of special needs assistants (SNA) is becoming increasingly important in inclusive and special classrooms. However, the profession itself has remained unexplored. The purpose of this article is to describe special needs assistants' perceptions on their education, professional competence, the content and significance of their work within the school system of Finland, and the further development of their role and content of their work. 171 special needs assistants from the province of Lapland participated in the research. This research was a mixed methods research where the data was collected in 2010 through a semi-structured questionnaire that consisted both quantitative and qualitative elements and was, therefore, analyzed both by using qualitative and quantitative analyzing methods. The results highlighted the diversity, challenges and development needs of special needs assistants' work. Special needs assistants are strength and can work as a support for teachers, students, and parents.

Key words: special needs assistants in educational institutions; the school system of Finland; Finnish Lapland; mixed methods research

In Finland, the population is clustered in southern Finland and the population of Lapland is about 184,000 (with the population density of 1.98 inhabitants per km²). Due to long distances between population centers in Lapland, basic education has its challenges as well. In this article, the special focus is on special needs assistants' work in the province of Lapland, Finland. Not only is there an ongoing debate about SNAs' job description and how it should be developed but also the northern dimension gives its special spice to this discussion.

In 2000, the most common school type of Finland was a school with less than fifty pupils. Every third comprehensive school belonged to this group (Kumpulainen, 2002). Usually, teaching is carried out in these schools as multigrade education which means that many grades are taught at the same time (e.g. the pre-school grade with the second grade, grades 3 to 6 together, or grades 3 and 4 together and grades 5 and 6 together). English terms for this kind of system are multigrade class, combination class, mixed-age class, split-grade class, double-grade class, and vertically-grouped class (Mason & Burns, 1997; Peltonen, 2002; Veenman, 1995). Multigrade school still is an important organizational model in many suburban and countryside areas across Finland. Municipalities (local authorities) are the providers of education. Providers of education and schools set up their own curricula on the basis of the national core curriculum. In curricula, local needs can be taken into consideration (Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi, 2006).

Providing all students with equal educational opportunities and removing obstacles to learning, especially among the least successful students, have been the leading principles in Finnish educational policy since the 20th century. All pupils are entitled to special education when necessary. Before school age and especially during the lower grades, at-risk children and students are screened for possible learning problems to allow for early intervention. Any student with learning or adjustment problems is entitled to remedial teaching. When feasible, this is realized by inclusion but can also be arranged through a special education class in regular schools or in a school for students with special needs. An individual teaching and learning plan is made for each student with special needs (Kupiainen, Hautamäki, & Karjalainen, 2009).

According to the Basic School Act of 1983 (see Hiltunen, Hyytiäinen, Lindroos, & Matero, 2008), schools are entitled to have special needs assistants to help severely handicapped children. In addition, handicapped children or children with other special needs have the right to have those measures of support that their school attendance necessitates for free, including interpretation and assistant services, teaching, special aids, rehabilitation services, guidance, and other measures of support (Lahtinen & Lankinen, 2010).

Effective inclusion of students with diverse learning requirements into regular classrooms still requires careful organization and the creation of a learning environment that is accepting, caring and safe (see e.g. Lakkala & Määttä, 2011). The contribution of teaching assistants, learning support assistants, special needs assistant, or classroom assistants is becoming increasingly important in inclusive and specialist classrooms not only in Finland (Takala, 2007) but the need is topical worldwide (e.g. Logan, 2006; Jerwood, 1999; Farrell, Balshaw, & Polat, 1999; Dew-Hughes, Brayton, & Blandford, 1998).

In 1998, there were about 4,000 special needs assistants in Finland and, seven years later, the number was already over 8,000. Indeed, having a special needs assistant in the classroom is the most common measure of support in ordinary classrooms although lack of financial resources may hinder the use of this measure of support. (Saloviita, 2007). Yet, special needs assistants represent a fairly new profession and their job description and related differences between schools still require development work. This problem does not only occur in Finland but for example Dew-Hughes, Brayton and Blandford (1998) have reported that in U.K.: “In some cases, the adults most closely concerned in this initiative describe a confusion over roles, responsibilities and approaches. Not only are the assistants confused over job descriptions and specification, but their confusion is shared by teachers and even the students themselves. Assistants report a variety of job descriptions, employers, qualifications, duties, pupil allocations and even titles (Dew-Hughes, Brayton, & Blandford, 1998, p. 179).” The need for research in special needs assistants’ work is obvious. The purpose of this article is to bring out special needs assistants’ perceptions on their education and professional competence, job description, and the future of their work.

The Qualification and Competence of Special Needs Assistants in Educational Institutions in Finland

Prospective societal and cultural changes and internationalization demand readiness to flexible and multi-professional work, entrepreneurship, continuous self-development, knowing the time of the day, and critical thinking from employees who work in educational institutions. Willingness to constant professional development has become the core of professional competence (see e.g. Carver & Scheier, 2005; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2011; Paloste, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2011). The concept of professional competence has many dimensions. Ellström (1994) distinguishes the following types of competence from

each other: actual competence, competence required at work, exploited competence, formal competence, and competence determined from outside.

Formal and actual competence may differ (While, 1994). Indeed, when evaluating professional competence and readiness, the focus should be on the evaluation of actual competence in concrete situations and not just on educational criteria. Similarly, exploited competence may be the same than actual competence but not necessarily as there can be imbalance between exploited competence and the qualification requirements of the work. In SNAs case, the basic qualification (the formal competence) provides the starting point but the professional development mainly takes place only in actual SNAs work after vocational education (actual competence and competence required at work) (see also Dew-Hughes, Brayton, & Blandford, 1998). This development process seems somewhat similar to Katz' model. Katz (1977) has described teachers' professional action as a four-phased development process and it can be considered relevant in special needs assistants' development, too. The overall development progresses toward maturity that can be only achieved through survival, consolidation, and renewal (Katz, 1977; see also Jalongo & Isenberg, 2004). Indeed, the content of special needs assistants' work may change greatly along work years as they get new assistees with various needs. Continuous updating and development is, therefore, a salient part of SNAs' work as well.

The basic definition of special needs assistants' qualification date back in 1994. In Finland, the Qualification for Special Needs Assistants in Educational Institutions can be achieved through one-year vocational education (40 study weeks, 1 week = 40 hours of work) or one or two years' apprenticeship (Takala, 2007).

The core aims in the study programs of all institutions offering special needs assistants education are: (1) to gain knowledge about the work environment of the assistant, including relevant laws and service systems in the society; (2) to support human growth (e.g. recognizing factors that affect human growth and the course of life, recognizing developmental disorders, knowing minority cultures of Finland); (3) to support functional ability (e.g. hygiene, first aid skills, communication skills, knowing the most common illnesses and their symptoms, taking care of various aids and devices); (4) to guide learning (e.g. knowing the basics of reading and writing difficulties, disturbance of attention, sensory disabilities, and various rehabilitation principles). The education is essentially linked to working life; students have a total of 12 weeks of practice in the field. The final examination is a skills test. This profession is regulated by the National Board of Education (The Social and Health Institute in Helsinki, 2006; Board of Education, 2006; Merimaa & Virtanen, 2007).

The vocational degree includes 72 proficiency requirements that cover themes such as collaboration with the teacher, parents, and other partners (e.g. rehabilitation workers). The purpose of such a multi-professional collaboration is to work to enhance the child's learning and growth and solve related problems. The starting point of this collaboration is the customer and his or her support networks that participate in the collaboration (Isoherranen, 2005; Honkanen & Suomala, 2009).

Special needs assistants in educational institutions have a vocational degree that qualifies to support and assist a student or students with special needs in their school-related tasks. In addition, special needs assistants may help the whole class or the teacher in general (Merimaa & Virtanen, 2007). Various working environments represent different kinds of conditions and requirements to SNAs' competence. According to the job description from 2003, special needs assistants can work in the following educational environments: morning and afternoon care, basic education, vocational education, high school, recreation, and, if necessary, at students' home (Hiltunen, Hyytiäinen, Lindroos, & Matero, 2008).

Special needs assistants' tasks cover guidance and help during lessons, breaks, and other situations, such as school dining and commutes. In addition, they help preparing learning materials and lessons and organize support services together with teachers and other members of the multi-professional work group. Moreover, special needs assistants take care of their assistees' special learning materials

and aids. Special needs assistants' job varies according to the situation, need, and the assistant's qualification and personality (Merimaa & Virtanen, 2007). The act of vocational degrees (306/1994 and 308/1994) define the guidelines of special needs assistants' work. The newer regulations define more clearly what the qualification requirements are and what is expected of the graduate (see Merimaa & Virtanen, 2007).

Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to study special needs assistants' own opinions on their education and the significance and content of their work in today's school. In addition, the aim was to dissect their ideas on how to develop their work as they can further the development of the whole school system through their work tasks and role. Moreover, special needs assistants' work can represent a model of how to enhance learning and contentment at schools also internationally.

The following questions were set at this research:

- What kind of perceptions do special needs assistants have on their education and their professional competence?
- What kind of perceptions do special needs assistants have on the content and significance of their work in the school system of Finland?
- How would special needs assistants like to develop their professional competence?

Method

In this research, a mixed methods approach was employed which is based on the thought that various methods complement each other: for example, quantitative results can be better explained with qualitative data and the conclusions derived from qualitative data can be supported through quantitative figures (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003; Gorard & Taylor, 2004). According to Cresswell (2003), there are three possible ways of implementing mixed methods design: sequential, concurrent, and transformative. In this research, the methodological approach of mixed methods research resembled concurrent procedure: the data was collected through a semi-structured questionnaire which included both quantitative and qualitative sections. In addition, the data analysis formed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

In addition to the background questions that covered the participants' education and work experience, the questionnaire consisted of four themes: the SNA's occupational proficiency, the SNA's work description and tasks, the SNA's position, and the future of the SNA's profession. All these sections had both open ended questions (qualitative data) and structured questions with 5-point Likert scale as answers. For example, the SNA's perceptions on their work descriptions and tasks were inquired with questions such as "What are the SNA's most important tasks and goals? Why?" (an example of a qualitative question) and "Evaluate how often you do the following tasks (1 = never, 5 = often): I am responsible for teaching / I prepare materials for the pupil / I wash dishes and make coffee / I contact the parents". The purpose was to get a comprehensive idea of the SNA's work through their own descriptions complemented with some pre-structured questions.

The questionnaire was sent to all schools in the province of Lapland. The fundamental thought was that each special needs assistant's perceptions were considered important although the preliminary supposition was that their job descriptions would vary by school and even within a school.

The target schools were elementary schools in the area of Lapland so high schools or vocational schools were left outside the research. 21 chief education officers were addressed to get permission to the research. There are 128 elementary schools in Lapland: 11 schools informed that they do not have any special needs assistants or their assistant/assistants did not want to participate in the research. 23 schools did not answer the research invitation.

Questionnaires were mailed to schools in May 2010 and 171 special needs assistants responded. 88.3 % of the participants were women and 11.7 % were men and they were aged between 20 and 63 years. Almost two thirds of the special needs assistants in this research had the Qualification for Special Needs Assistants in Educational Institutions. The participants' work experience varied between a few months to over 20 years. Over 80 % of the participants told that they had worked as special needs assistant also before. 46.2 % had a temporary contract and the same percentage, 46.2 % of the participants, had a permanent job. Most of the participants, 59.8 % worked in the general class in basic education. Half of them worked as personal assistants and the other half as classroom assistants.

In line with the idea of mixed methods research, the data was analyzed by using both quantitative and qualitative methods: questions that were measurable were analyzed with SPSS software (Nummenmaa, 2004; Rasi, Lepola, Muhli & Kanninen, 2006) in order to find out variables and their various figures, such as mode, mean, lower and upper quartiles, and percentages whereas qualitative analysis was focused on reduction and combination of perceptions. Qualitative research may also involve statistical data or quantified qualitative data in order to find out statistical relations (Alasuutari, 1994). Responses in the open-ended questions were placed in a table and similar thoughts were combined and further interpreted in the light of the previous studies and literature. Quantitative data was used for supporting and reasoning the qualitative analysis.

Results

Perceptions on Special Needs Assistants' Education

According to the participants' opinions, about 70 % of them found their education and professional skills adequate. Their education was considered providing a good basis but they have to update their skills and knowledge and they would learn the actual profession only by working. Partly, the participants had found their education too theory-oriented and would have appreciated more work-related practical skills and knowledge. Others thought that too much emphasis had been placed on disability or therapies while others would have wanted to have more information about these themes. In addition, the special needs assistants would have wanted to have a chance to study and develop the contents of the subjects taught.

"I found the education quite theory-oriented. It should include more practical examples and education about various syndromes. The education was made so short that there wasn't time to internalize the things properly. We should have had visits to special places and hospital schools. But the time was limited."

"It could include more revision of the basics of school subjects (maths, mother tongue, languages). Many special needs assistants work in small groups where they should know the school subjects (and this is not the case). The education of special needs assistants is (maybe) too much focused on disability, therapies."

A little less than half of the special needs assistants evaluated their education as good or sufficient while the other half considered their education should be improved a bit. They wanted to develop

for example their ICT-skills, manual skills, subject knowledge, or knowledge about a certain learning difficulty or disability. Although only half of the assistants found their education sufficient or good, over 70 % of them considered their professional skills good. In addition to the education, their own professional skills had developed in practical work. Many of them considered constant in-service training as a part of their work and they reported needing additional training every now and then.

"At the moment it is sufficient. If and when I get new assistees, I want to update my knowledge and skills according to their diagnoses. If I get, for example, someone with a hearing problem, then I have to rehearse sign language and other information about hearing defects."

Perceptions on the Content and Significance of Special Needs Assistants' Work

The special needs assistants in this research found helping students, encouraging everyone, and preparing learning materials especially to their assistees as the most important tasks in their job. They worked for the pupil's best.

"Your purpose is to cut yourself out of the picture. The pupil/pupils become independent and self-supporting. In other words, the more the pupil copes without the assistant, the better. Helping the assistee is the most important because he or she is the one I work for."

The participants found challenging problems related to the assistees, work environment, and employment. The pupil being restless, violent, and unwilling to learn and problems in the interaction with teachers or parents were reported the biggest challenge.

"Violent situations and calming them down, --- calling after help, and of course, by trying to calm down (usually verbal message is useless in those situations) and my physical shape is not good enough that I could go and separate these troublemakers (nor do I have even to permission [to intervene])."

"Collaboration with parents tends to flounder; they are quite withdrawn and downright helpless. It is really oppressive when they don't give any support to your attempts to enhance the pupil's coping in life."

"How to adjust to the work community! It is mentally hard. In my work place, assistants represent the lowest caste, and it is shown to you very often."

According to the data, special needs assistants' best skills were related to paying attention to various learners, interaction with various partners, and how to develop their work. 35.3 % of them reported needing supplementary education in rehabilitation, for example speech and occupational therapy. Over a fifth of them wanted to participate in all kinds of supplementary education because they found it necessary to get more information and develop their skills.

"All sorts of training!! I don't have to become a therapist or such but as a special needs assistant I want to know what kind of therapy my client could need or get—and what"

could be useful and helpful for him or her. We could have courses or one-day trainings as supplementary education (e.g. 4 times a year)."

Special needs assistants have to use communication methods that are designed to support or replace speech when necessary. About 40 % of the participants reported using pictures of pictos to support communication, 8.6 % used supporting sign language, and 5.2 % used Braille. When necessary, special needs assistants have to learn to use these communication methods which is challenging to their professional skills.

In addition, the special needs assistants could name also positive things in their work. Many of them found interaction easy and working with children fun. In addition, many assistants told that co-workers and the working environment brought joy to their work.

"It is easy to get along with children; giving instructions and guiding with assignments is sometimes very challenging. It is fun to play, do arts and crafts, and supervise PE-clubs."

The diversity in special needs assistants' work, co-workers, good working atmosphere, and, most of all, children were found motivating factors of work. Children's progress and positive feedback enhanced the joy of success and motivation. Although, their work was not always easy, many assistants found it important that they knew that the children needed them and appreciated their help. Low salary and lousy and uncertain working conditions and employment lowered their motivation.

"The versatility of this job; every day is different and you always have to be able to pull something out of the hat. The good work community, especially the teacher. The school as a whole changes. Following the pupils year after year; seeing how they grow and change."

"To have the experience of being important. I am motivated by noticing the children's progress and successful moments with them and when a child shows his or her feelings, or when I notice that the child is happy/content when I help him or her."

SNAs' Perceptions on the Development Needs and Future of Their Profession

Special needs assistants had to face a variety of problems in their work. In addition to the previously-mentioned violent behavior and employment-related issues, the special needs assistants found time management difficult: according to their perception, they did not have enough time for organizing morning and afternoon care or preparing learning materials.

"Afternoon activity is one of the assistants' challenges when they overlap with the pupil's lessons. Sometimes, an assistant has been obliged to leave his or her actual work to supervise afternoon care."

Some development suggestions were related to collaboration with the classroom teacher, subject teacher, or special teacher, depending on the respondent's work environment. Some of the assistants worked with physiotherapist daily while many of them worked with physio-, occupational, and speech therapists weekly and a few also with social workers and health care personnel.

Collaboration between the school and home is defined in law and is a mandatory theme in degree requirements. Over 70 % of the participants thought that parents appreciated their work. At times,

collaboration with parents was considered challenging because parents did not always agree with the school about the pupil's progress or need for help. Sometimes, collaboration took place only through the teacher but a few assistants mentioned that the feedback given by parents also caused them experiences of success.

The special needs assistants in this research thought that their position in the work community and in society varied greatly. Their profession is still not appreciated due to the common conception of their work, professional competence, and the nature of their employment contract and salary. Mostly, the participants perceived their own position better than special needs assistants' position in general. Still, others had the experience of being undervalued. Only 20 % of the participants thought that municipality authorities appreciate their work and only 12.5 % of them thought that this was the case at the national level.

"You don't work in this profession for money. The salary is really lousy nor is assistants' work and especially their education appreciated! It's like 'Anyone can become an assistant'."

"The teacher's assistant. Our work is not considered important, e.g. supervising afternoon activities is more important than assisting the pupil."

The participants named a few means of improving their position: accepting them as equal members of the work community which means equal treatment, participation in shared events and meetings, securing the flow of information also when the assistants cannot participate, and rights to have breaks and attend in-service training. At the general level, they would like to improve the conditions of their employment by turning temporary contracts into permanent and checking the salary to correspond with the requirements of the job. They also considered that changing their title from assistant into instructor would increase the appreciation of their profession.

According to the data, special needs assistants' perceptions on their future varied: some saw their future bright while others dark being prepared to change their occupation. Due to temporary employment, many of them were uncertain about the future. On the one hand, they believed there will be work in the future and the appreciation of their work would also increase, but low appreciation at the moment was seen as rolling back employment. Moreover, financial situation in the municipalities of Lapland was considered worrying when it comes to future employment opportunities.

"More and more special needs assistants are needed in the future because pupils have so many various special needs. The special needs assistant will be considered more as the teacher's pair in all classrooms."

"[The future is] weak. Too little appreciation. People don't understand how important the special needs assistant is to the child."

Many of the participants hoped that the violence special needs assistants have to face would be intervened in and that assistants would be provided with means to face the violence. The biggest problem is that assistants are not entitled to hold or given the power to act properly in threatening situations.

Special needs assistants thought that improvements in employment and salary would increase the appreciation of the profession and the interest in the field. Moreover, their coping at work should be paid attention to. They suggested, for example, that nation or municipality-level authorities would come and familiarize with assistants' work in practice and that the media would increase the positive cover-

age of their profession. Indeed, over 70 % of the participants were of the opinion that the media brought out their occupation in a positive manner only rarely or never—and therefore, informing people about their work was considered a salient means in increasing the appreciation of their work.

”By increasing rights to holidays, generous increase in salary, diminishing the inequality between various professions (the teacher-the assistant), giving power/right to act in various situations.”

”By informing about the significance of special needs assistants work to increase the appreciation.”

Conclusion

The nature of special needs assistants’ profession changes and develops constantly nor is it possible to define it in future (e.g. Starkey et al., 2009; Bullough & Baughman, 1995). However, it seems clear that keeping up professional competence necessitates continuous seeking for new information and education. Also the teacher’s work has changed more and more toward collegial activity and that means, for example, that teachers and special needs assistants have to work together in the classroom. Learning from others and solving problems together have become more and more common. However, SNAs do not really appear in educational literature, neither do teacher students have to study collaboration methods with SNAs in teacher education. Yet, a classroom teacher and a special needs assistant make an important working pair in the classroom and the basics of co-operation should be discussed in teacher education, too.

The results show how SNAs job descriptions varied by schools and even within the same school. This fact cannot be totally prevented because SNAs work with various children and in a variety of work environments. Moreover, the results pointed out that SNAs work involved many kinds of problems that need to be solved in collaboration with authorities at the national level but also locally at the school level (see Karvonen, Vikat, & Rimpelä, 2004). More attention should be paid on SNAs’ position at their work communities and they should be provided with equal opportunities to participate in all school activities including coffee breaks, parties, and meetings.

It seemed that SNAs’ education and practical work set various challenges at their professional competence. Although their professional competence appeared good and most of the participants were qualified SNAs, it would be important that all SNAs had the qualification needed. Furthermore, they should have the opportunity to improve their professional competence through in-service and supplementary education by giving them the same kinds of right to participate in education as for example teachers have.

For all the challenges and issues in SNAs’ work, the participants in this research seemed to have internalized the core purpose of their work, namely, to help various learners to learn and grow. If this attitude toward work, downright vocation, is the bedrock of SNAs coping in their undervalued and uncertain work, it seems relevant to discuss more thoroughly aspects that could enhance this attitude.

When evaluating the reliability and limitations of this research, it should be noted that the data is ample and comprehensive as it covers the whole area of the Province of Lapland in Finland. 171 special needs assistants make a good sample of the profession. Although 23 schools out of 128 did not want to or did not participate in the research, the special needs assistants hardly represent systematically different schools when it comes to SNAs’ job description. The reason for this loss may lie in the time the data collection took place: namely, it was arranged in May 2010 which is the busied month at schools in Finland as the study year ends at the end of May.

The purpose of this research was to draw as comprehensive a picture of SNAs' perceptions on their work as possible without endangering their obligation to maintain secrecy. Thus, the data was collected in a manner that protects participants' anonymity. All in all, the data was quite versatile and brought out both negative and positive experiences and perceptions on SNAs' work. Therefore, it seems that the participants answered the questions truthfully (Golafshani, 2003). Yet, it is possible that they may have aimed at improving the appreciation of their profession but on the other hand, the examples that were brought out in their answers were quite concrete by nature and thus seemed to correspond to the reality of their work. To highlight the participants' voice, plenty of citations from the data were added within the results section of this article but such quotations that could have endangered the participants' anonymity were omitted (Gregory, 2003).

Discussion

Based on this research, some distinct issues were perceived in SNAs' work. Dew-Hughes, Brayton, and Blandford (1998) crystallize the basic actions that would improve SNAs' position in work places: "Where improvement can be effected relatively easily by individual schools is in the induction phase for assistants. Competent models are in operation for newly qualified teachers and they can be adapted to meet the different ranges of key skills required by individual institutions. The establishment of whole-school training program could pay large dividends in efficiency and status for new support staff, as would planned professional development and clearer definition of roles and responsibilities (Dew-Hughes, Brayton, & Blandford, 1998, p. 183)." Indeed, SNAs should not be seen as a threat to teachers' autonomy (see Jerwood, 1999) but as strength and resource to be used in the classroom (Margerison, 1997).

Collaboration between the teacher and the special needs assistant should be an integral part of the education in both professions. For example, Morgan, Ashbaker, and Forbush (1998) claim that too little attention has been paid to developing the collaborative skills of the actual classroom team (see also Logan, 2006). That means the teacher and other adults who work in the classroom, including special needs assistants. Morgan, Ashbaker, and Forbush (1998) introduce a model of collaboration training and the very first item of the model is "Defining roles and responsibilities". It was evident also in this study that clear definitions of roles and responsibilities would make the collaboration easier. At its best, well-functioning collaboration leads to a synergistic effect (Morgan, Ashbaker, & Forbush, 1998).

As the content of special needs assistants' work appeared rewarding and motivating as such, by fixing the outward framework it would be possible to enhance their work satisfaction and well-being at work. For example, Hackman and Oldham's (1979) job characteristics model describes meaningful work relating to jobs with characteristics such as task variety, identity and significance, feedback, and autonomy. However, just role clarification is not enough. According to Arnold et al. (2007), humanistic work values – in other words, the normative beliefs individuals hold about whether work should be meaningful – have an important influence on the likelihood of finding meaning in current work and psychological well-being. One of the core issues here is the appreciation of work.

The lack of appreciation of SNAs work was evident in this research and this result is in line with international studies as well (see e.g. Dew-Hughes, Brayton, & Blandford, 1998). In addition to the variation in SNAs' job descriptions, more research is needed about their role in pupils' learning process. According to Broadbent and Burgess (2003), little research is available to indicate the efficacy or long-term benefits of special needs assistants in building effective inclusive classrooms. The authors mention that SNAs are sometimes regarded as 'hoverers or hinderers' and, therefore, studies on their

significance and actual classroom activities should be carried out in various educational settings (see also Logan, 2006). It would be important to show the significance of SNAs' work and to sufficiently inform all relevant instances.

In addition, to emphasize the northern dimension, the participants of this research worked in small schools across the wide province of Lapland and thus represent an important part of the operation of these schools. In these kinds of small work communities, the significance of fluent collaboration and the work contribution of each member of the work community become accentuated even more. Not only is special needs assistants' contribution important in schools in rural settings but it is also necessary to notice their significance to these children they work for. With the help of special needs assistants, children with special needs are able to attend school in their home districts because especially in small village school with multigrade education, teachers would not otherwise have the resources to teach inclusive classes. Educational equality is and has been the fundamental focus of the educational system of Finland. According to this principle, everyone are entitled to education regardless of their special needs or place of residence (Antikainen, 2006; Uusitalo, 1999). Lack of resources can threaten this equality and there is already evidence on teachers' fatigue (e.g. Santavirta et al., 2001; Simola, 2002; van Horn, Schaufeli, & Enzmann, 1999) although the teachers' profession is still appreciated and popular in Finland. Still, teachers should not be left alone in classrooms.

SNAs' work is not highly respected when it comes to their pay and career structure (see Farrell, Bashaw, & Polat, 1999) but people who are motivated by their desire to help and care for others are likely to find this profession meaningful. Unquestionably, no teaching method or aid can replace the help and support given by another human being (see also Takala, 2010) and this fact should be recognized not only by municipal and national authorities to make SNAs' overall work conditions adequate but also by local partners, teachers, other school and health care personnel, and parents, to improve the practical work of SNAs. According to Määttä and Uusiautti (2011), good teachers' work grounds on teachers' pedagogical love and desire to teach. According to this study, it seems that special needs assistants share the same kind of pedagogical love, genuine wish to help and guide. Moreover, they help those children who need help the most or even cannot ask for help.

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