

Workload Factors in Special Needs Education

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ABSTRACT

Teachers meet many challenges in their work. Their work is burdensome, with many associated load factors. The article is about the workload factors in special needs teachers' work. It attempts to find factors of well-being at work that are significant from the point of view of safety, workload and management. The special needs teachers of one Finnish municipality participated in the study. The data for this paper were collected through a well-being survey. Results indicate that the work of special needs teachers is experienced to be mentally and ethically burdensome. Workload factors related to psychosocial risks, possibilities to influence work, and factors related to work community arose to be the most important factors in special needs teachers' work.

Keywords: Safety, well-being at work, workload factors, special needs education, teacher

INTRODUCTION

Teaching can be a rewarding profession involving meaningful, influential, and important work. However, teaching can also be challenging due to the complex nature of the job. Special needs teachers' wellbeing at work is challenged by various changes occurring in the context of school and education. The implementation methods of special needs education have changed with inclusion (one school for everyone). The changes in the environment have also challenged teachers in many ways. The children's needs are more varied than before, and there are more children who need special needs education. During the past ten years, the number of children in need of special support has increased considerably in Finland; in 2019, about 20% of comprehensive school students received special support, whereas in 2009 the share of students in need of special support was about 8% (OSF, 2019). The teachers' amount of work has increased during the last few years (Golnick and Ilves, 2020). In addition to the increasing number of students, the number of tasks included in special needs teachers' job descriptions has expanded (OSF, 2019).

Workload factors are related to work or to the working environment and cause the employees either affirmative or negative load. The harmful load affects the ability to command work and its load factors. Workload factors are usually divided into physical, mental, and social load factors. (WHO, 2021). Psychosocial workload factors are related to the content of the work or the working conditions. They are usually divided into factors related to the way in which work is organized, the content of the work, and social interactions within the work community. (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2020)

The load factors are so manifold that it is difficult to study them all in one study. Several workload factors of teachers have been discussed in previous research. In teaching, workload factors are related to many things, such as the amount of work, the work community, or cooperation with others (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2020; Ballet and Kelchtermans, 2009). Teachers are burdened by long working hours, rising numbers of pupils, and an increase in professional and administrative duties (Reddy et al. 2018). Stress in teaching is widely recognized in the literature Reddy et al. 2018; Morgan and Craith. 2015; Pisanti et al. 2003; Male and May, 1997; Boyle et al. 1995). Previous research indicates that violence directed against teachers is fairly common (Berlanda et al. 2019). In Finnish education provider organizations, the occupational burden generally arises from role overload, indoor air problems in the school buildings, and psychosocial work environments (Finnish Regional State Administrative Agency, 2015).

Workplace wellbeing is a multidimensional concept. It contains the quality and safety of the physical environment and how employees feel about their work, working environment, the climate at work, and the work organization (ILO, 2021). The objective of work safety is to improve the working environment and conditions to

ensure and maintain the physical and mental health and safety of employees. The measures of workplace well-being complement occupational safety and health measures to make sure employees are safe, healthy, satisfied and engaged at work.

According to the Finnish Occupational Safety Act (2002) the employer has a responsibility to make sure that workers are not overloaded. It is important to identify workload factors because they are the foundation of work safety. There is previous research related to teachers' workload factors, but workload factors related to special needs teachers' work have received less attention. This study aims to chart the workload factors of Finnish special needs teachers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is related to a development project, where the management, well-being at work, and productivity of the target organizations are developed with dialogical management.

The special needs teachers of one Finnish municipality participated in the study. The data for this study was collected with an online survey that was carried out in five teams. The development project started with a well-being survey sent by email to all special needs teachers and principals in the municipality in April 2019. Due to the low response rate in spring, the survey remained open until September 2019. Finally, an excellent response rate was achieved; 97% (n=35) of special needs teachers participated in the survey. Eighty percent (80%) of respondents were women.

The well-being survey was rather extensive, covering various dimensions related to working life and well-being at work at individual, team/group and work community levels. The survey was based on earlier research (Syvänen et al. 2015) and was slightly modified for use in this context. The modified survey was not publicly available. Themes of the survey included:

- General features of workplace
- Values and tasks in the work community
- Management
- General features of work
- Possibilities to influence work
- Operation of teams
- Workload factors, including psychosocial risks of work and conflict management
- Feedback and compensation
- Learning, development and renewal
- Job satisfaction

In the online survey, respondents were asked to evaluate presented statements on a Likert scale from 1 to 5.

RESULTS

According to the results of the survey, various strengths and challenges related to well-being at work were identified. General features of the workplace are at a fairly good level. Members of the workplace share a common view about basic tasks, and operations in the workplace are regularly discussed. Distribution of work and responsibilities are clear. Of general features, only two aspects received lower estimates; only 43% of respondents considered distribution of responsibilities fair, and only 37% saw that rules of the workplace are followed well. Factors related to values and targets of organization received high estimates in the survey. The vast majority of special needs teachers (86%) believe that the values of the organization are in line with their personal values. The majority of special needs teachers know the basic tasks of their organization as well as targets set for their own work (85%). They participate in the planning of targets of their own work (70%), and targets are regarded as realistic relative to their own resources (68%). Operational management was evaluated by assessing various aspects related to supervisors' support and availability. According to the results, supervisors (principals) support and respect special needs teachers, are available, and treat all staff members equally.

General features of special needs teachers' work are at a high level. Work is considered responsible (98% of respondents agreed), and special needs teachers are highly committed to their work (91%). Work is considered versatile and worthwhile, and the vast majority of respondents (83%) enjoy their work. The majority of respondents (66%) believe that their abilities and knowledge meet the requirements of the work.

Special needs teachers are satisfied with the overall flow of information and communication in the organization; the organization utilizes versatile communication channels, communication is open, and the amount of communication is sufficient. Teachers are also satisfied with their ability to participate in decision making. Some respondents saw that there could be a bit more time for shared conversations, but overall satisfaction with factors related to communication was high.

Teams' activities are considered very good. Factors related to responsibility are at a high level: Special needs teachers take responsibility for their own tasks, and responsibilities are shared well in teams. Team members help and support each other when needed, and trust between team members is high. Team members are committed to shared targets, and co-operation is fluent. Equal distribution of work was considered slightly challenging, but the overall level of teamwork was very good.

The factors listed above describe strengths related to special needs teachers' work. However, the survey revealed some challenges as well. Based on the survey, factors that challenge special needs teachers' well-being at work are mostly related to psychosocial risks, possibilities to influence work, and factors related to the work community. According to the survey, physical burden was considered low (14%), but psychological and ethical burden were considered high; 96% considered psychological burden and 74% considered ethical burden as high.

Table 1 summarizes the most important workload factors in special needs teachers' work. Numbers (percentages) illustrate the magnitude of different workload factors.

Table 1: Workload factors in special needs teachers' work.

<i>Psychosocial risks</i>	Not enough time in use to do work properly	52%
	Not enough breaks during the workday	62%
	Safety at work is challenged by violence or threat of violence	26%
	Physical violence (from clients or their family members) causes stress	11%
	Verbal abuse (from clients or their family members) causes stress	20%
	Harassment or inappropriate conduct by coworkers causes stress	11%
	Harassment or inappropriate conduct by supervisor causes stress	9%
<i>Possibilities to influence work</i>	Distribution of tasks and amount of work	37%
	Work hours	29%
	Amount of work	49%
	Decisions related to the work community	29%
<i>Factors related to work community</i>	Workplace harassment	14%
	Discrimination	23%
	Gossiping/talking behind backs	51%

Of psychosocial risks, lack of time seems to be the biggest workload factor. More than half of special needs teachers consider that they do not have enough time to do their work properly, nor do they have enough breaks during the workday. In practice, this means haste in everyday work. Also, according to the survey, special needs teachers have relatively weak possibilities to influence the distribution of tasks, working hours, and amount of work, which adds to the overall workload related to lack of time.

The survey reveals that violence, or the threat of violence, challenges the safety in the special needs teachers' work, and verbal abuse from clients or their family members especially causes stress. Harassment in its different forms, conducted by coworkers or by supervisors, or workplace harassment in general, was identified as a workload factor. Statements related to harassment were low compared to other factors, but in the bigger picture this is notable, since in Finland the tolerance level regarding any kind of harassment is zero. Gossiping was considered quite a remarkable workload factor related to the work community. This, along with perceptions of discrimination and low possibilities to influence decisions related to the work community, are challenges related to the management of the organization and have an effect on the working atmosphere and workplace wellbeing.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to identify workload factors in special needs teachers' work. Most of the workload factors that emerged in this study were like those mentioned in

previous research. For example, like this study, workload factors have been mentioned previously regarding the amount of work, long working hours (Easthope and Easthope, 2010), and violence directed against teachers (Berlanda et al. 2019). However, some different and less discussed factors were found.

For example, some studies have highlighted the factors related to the work community to be workload factors (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2020; Easthope and Easthope, 2010). In this study, these factors were seen to be bracing factors. The factors related to the work community (communication, ability to participate, responsibility, co-operation, teamwork) were seen to be at a good level. However, the results indicate the presence of some workplace harassment and discrimination. The amount is not large, but they are factors with zero tolerance in the workplace. In this research, gossiping was considered a rather big workload factor related to the work community, and this is one development area in the organization.

Overall, the results of the study indicate that the work of special needs teachers is experienced to be mentally and ethically burdensome. Work was considered responsible, and the special needs teachers are highly committed to their work. The work is demanding, the number of students is high, and the students' needs are more varied. The special needs teachers indeed experience the feeling of inadequacy in their work, which for its part adds to their perceived workload. Daily work also needs to be done in a hurry; it is not possible to do the work as well as desired. These factors partially explain why special needs teachers feel their work is mentally and ethically burdensome. However, the ethical burden is not explained by value conflict. According to the results, the values of organizations are seen to be in line with their personal values.

Workplace wellbeing is a multidimensional concept. The development of work wellbeing requires paying attention to several factors of work, work community, and working environment. This study indicates that there are many strengthening and burdensome workload factors in special needs teachers' work. It is important to support the special needs teachers' work wellbeing because healthy teachers have a positive influence on the pupils and their families, but also on other teachers and special needs assistants. It also has links with good and effective teaching. This study identified various factors causing workload and stress for special needs teachers in Finland. Further research is needed about this topic in other countries and about development actions that could ease identified workload factors in special needs teachers' work.

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