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## Pedagogical Collaboration for Multilingual Support in Swedish Compulsory Schools: Mother Tongue Teachers' Perspectives

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The present study analyses mother tongue teachers' perspectives on pedagogical collaboration for multilingual support with two specific groups of professionals: mainstream teachers and special educational needs teachers (SEN). Furthermore, it discusses what factors influence the described pedagogical collaboration. A purposeful sampling with a maximum variation was chosen to obtain the highest possible representativeness. Thereafter, 13 individual, thematical, open-structured interviews were conducted. To analyse the themes arising from the abductive analysis of the interviews, Bronstein's (2003) theoretical model for interdisciplinary collaboration was used. The results show that mother tongue teachers mostly collaborate with mainstream teachers and SEN teachers to solve structural and administrative issues and to share competence and knowledge. Further, the analysis of the influencing factors on the pedagogical collaboration shows that although mother tongue teachers have a firm and consistent perception of their professional role, structural characteristics hinder naturally occurring collaboration. Limited informal contact and the lack of mainstream teachers' and SEN teachers' experiences of successful pedagogical collaboration for multilingual support affect their willingness to collaborate with mother tongue teachers. Therefore, the findings suggest that valuable multilingual resources would be made better use of when structural and administrative matters are formalized.

Keywords: Mainstream teachers, mother tongue teachers, multilingual support, pedagogical collaboration, SEN teachers

## Introduction and Literature Review

In Swedish compulsory school, the students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds are supposed to be promoted. Two measures in particular support multilingual students' simultaneous language and knowledge development, namely mother tongue instruction<sup>1</sup> and multilingual study guidance (SOU 2019:18). According to the Swedish Language Act (SFS 2009:600),

“Persons whose mother tongue is not one of the languages specified in the first paragraph [national minority languages or Swedish sign language] are to be given the opportunity to develop and use their mother tongue<sup>2</sup>.”

National policy documents emphasize the importance of these measures and their salient role in knowledge transfer. However, many Swedish schools are struggling with the implementation of multilingual support. Challenges facing functional mother tongue instruction have been identified by the Ministry of Education and Research (SOU 2019:18) and include a shortage of available mother tongue teachers, qualitative deficiencies, or inaccurate perception of the importance of the subject.

Mother tongue teachers are an important linguistic and cultural link between the school and home cultures (Vuorenmaa & Zetterholm, 2020). However, they usually only meet their students once a week, whereas mainstream teachers<sup>3</sup> have daily contact with their students. Another group of professionals that sometimes work with multilingual students are special educational needs teachers (hereafter SEN teachers), who are experts on learning disabilities. To support multilingual literacy development holistically, the combined knowledge, experience, and backgrounds of mother tongue teachers, mainstream teachers, and SEN teachers are needed (SOU 2016:46). With their cultural and linguistic insight, mother tongue teachers form an important part of early identification of support needs and diagnosis. For instance, when multilingual students' language development

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<sup>1</sup> Also called *mother tongue tuition* (see Reath Warren, 2013). The concept of *mother tongue instruction* used in this study is derived from the Swedish word *modersmålsundervising*.

<sup>2</sup> In this study, the term *mother tongue* is used referring to the first language or first languages that students learned as a child. Also called first language or L1.

<sup>3</sup> The term *mainstream teachers* refers to all teaching staff working at mainstream schools, such as class teachers and subject teachers employed and based at the individual schools, unlike the interviewed mother tongue teachers who are employed by the Center of Multilingualism.

deviates from typical biological and academic development, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether the difficulties are due to inadequate mastery of their second language<sup>4</sup> (hereafter L2), to psychosocial barriers, or to learning disabilities. To determine the sources for these difficulties, a broad cultural, linguistic, and special educational competence is required (SOU, 2016). For this reason, it is important that mother tongue teachers work closely with mainstream teachers and SEN teachers (The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools [SPSM], 2019). Nevertheless, previous research indicates that even well-educated and experienced mainstream teachers and SEN teachers refrain from pedagogical collaboration with mother tongue teachers due to practical and organizational obstacles (Hedman & Magnusson, 2022; Roux Sparreskog, 2018).

Therefore, this study focuses on the mother tongue teachers and on how they describe and characterize pedagogical collaboration with pedagogical professionals or the lack thereof. The study contributes to redefining and adding to existing theories on the collaboration between mother tongue teachers, mainstream teachers, and SEN teachers through utilizing a theoretical model on the influences on well-functioning interdisciplinary collaboration from the field of social work, where interdisciplinary collaboration is used daily.

To understand the Swedish compulsory school context, where the study is set, a brief overview of multilingual support, focusing particularly on mother tongue instruction, will be described in section 1.1. Thereafter, in section 1.2, previous research on pedagogical collaboration for multilingual support is presented.

### ***1.1 Multilingual Support for Students in Swedish Compulsory Schools***

In addition to the five officially recognized indigenous minority languages, almost 200 other minority languages are spoken in Sweden (Lindberg, 2007). During the school year 2021/2022, 26% of all students in Swedish compulsory school had an immigrant background (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). This societal multilingualism challenges the education system. To support those heterogeneous groups of students in simultaneous language and academic

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<sup>4</sup> In this study, the term *second language* or *L2* is used referring to the language or languages students learned after their L1 has been established, in this study Swedish.

development, several measures have been established, such as Swedish as a Second Language, scaffolding language and language-promoting in Swedish mainstream classrooms and all subjects, multilingual study guidance in the students' first language (hereafter L1), or mother tongue instruction. This study, forming part of a larger research project on multilingual support, focuses on one of those measures, namely mother tongue instruction.

The subject *mother tongue instruction* was established in Sweden in 1977. During the school year 2021/2022, 17.1% of all Swedish students requested tuition in the subject (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). The subject's general aim is to offer multilingual students the opportunity to develop knowledge about and in their L1 and to preserve their cultural identity (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019). Apart from providing support for multilingual students' linguistic development in and developing and preserving their L1s, mother tongue instruction also contributes to promoting and supporting the students' L2 development (Ganuza & Hedman, 2018); in addition, it enables students' multilingual identity development, which is especially important for students at risk of cultural and linguistic marginalization (Wedin, 2020). Additionally, L1-development and multilingualism are important because of their positive effects on students' cognitive capacity as well as general knowledge development (e.g., Barac & Bialystok, 2011). Students using a language other than Swedish daily or students with one of the five official minority language backgrounds are entitled to mother tongue instruction and will be assessed according to the subject's syllabus (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019). However, the subject *per se* is non-mandatory and has no fixed slot in the national curriculum for Swedish compulsory school, which partly explains why it is often taught after or before official school hours.

The overall organization of multilingual education still meets structural obstacles (Lundberg, 2020). Furthermore, Avery (2015) implies that the practical organization of mother tongue instruction affects how mother tongue teachers and students are perceived by others. The findings of her study, in a Swedish school setting, indicate that constant structural stress and marginalization of the subject takes place due to after-school scheduling and minimal interaction with mainstream teachers. Moreover, the practical organization of mother tongue instruction often differs from school to school, even within the same city, depending on the mainstream teacher's personal attitudes (Wedin & Wessman, 2017). While mainstream teachers are employed by individual schools, Avery (2017, p. 245) explains that mother tongue teachers are commonly employed by

centralized units within municipal school organizations and thus have to “teach as itinerant teachers, moving from school to school for each lesson.” Avery’s study highlights that mother tongue teachers struggle with inadequate structural support and time-consuming scheduling issues. Moreover, their conditions for teaching are perceived as stressful. In Dewilde’s (2013, p. 9) study, mother tongue teachers are referred to as “ambulating teachers” since they are often on the move both physically, between schools and classrooms, and culturally, between different languages and school cultures. In Dewilde’s study, the mother tongue teachers suffer from deficiencies concerning continuity in their work and from a lack of continuous conversation and discussion with mainstream teachers.

### ***1.2 Pedagogical Collaboration for Multilingual Support***

To build inclusive multilingual classroom spaces, all the students’ linguistic repertoires should be included (Krulatz & Iversen, 2020). This not only favors multilingual students but is also an instrument for high-quality education for all students (Izquierdo, 2018). In order to do so, pedagogical collaboration between mainstream teachers, SEN teachers, and mother tongue teachers is necessary. Mainstream teachers meet their students daily, SEN teachers are the experts on learning disabilities, and mother tongue teachers are familiar with the students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Vuorenpää & Zetterholm, 2020).

Previous research on pedagogical collaboration stresses its benefits for students’ academic performance (e.g., Creese et al., 1997; Leana & Pil, 2006), especially between language and subject teachers (Li, 2020). Teachers who collectively take responsibility for their students’ wellbeing and learning, increase the possibility for academic success, especially for vulnerable learners (e.g., Bolam et al., 2005; Goddard et al., 2007). Lasagabaster (2018) states that pedagogically collaborating teachers should complement one another to improve the students’ learning results. However, even mainstream teachers who are used to teaching in culturally and linguistically heterogenic schools often refrain from collaboration with mother tongue teachers due to administrative and structural obstacles (Roux Sparreskog, 2018). This issue is not restricted to Swedish classrooms only. Haukås’ (2016) study on L2-learning in Norwegian classrooms shows that the mainstream teachers agree that collaboration across languages could enhance students’ language learning; however, no such collaboration takes place. Another study in a Canadian context confirms mainstream teachers’

interest in collaboration across mother tongue and second language curricula (Gunning et al., 2016). However, for the teachers to collaborate, they need time, materials, and administrative support.

## 2. Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to analyze and to discuss mother tongue teachers' perspectives on pedagogical collaboration with two specific groups of professionals: mainstream teachers and SEN teachers.

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do mother tongue teachers describe how they collaborate with mainstream teachers and SEN teachers?
2. In light of the mother tongue teachers' descriptions of their collaborations, what factors affect their pedagogical collaboration with mainstream teachers and SEN teachers and how?

## 3. Research Method

### *3.1 Participants and procedures*

During one of the monthly staff meetings at the Center of Multilingualism in one medium-sized Swedish municipality, an electronic, *closed-formed*, and *user-friendly* questionnaire (Perry, 2011, p. 132) was distributed to 86 mother tongue teachers present at the meeting. The questionnaire served for sampling purposes only. The questions were formulated to be answered easily on the participants' mobile phones and thus required short answers with basic information only. Further, the questions were formulated to ensure that the participants had experienced collaboration with mainstream teachers, and the possibility to choose mother tongue teachers with different backgrounds for the interviews. In total, 84 of the attendees answered the questionnaire. Of the 80 mother tongue teachers who had experienced pedagogical collaboration with mainstream teachers, 30 were willing to be interviewed.

A thematical interview guide with possible questions was designed. Thereafter, the interview guide was tested in a pilot interview that was conducted with one mother tongue teacher of the largest language group. To capture the culturally and linguistically widespread background typical of these mother tongue teachers and to obtain a “maximum variation”, at least one of the 30 volunteering participants from each language group was contacted (Perry, 2011, p. 59). By gathering in-depth information from “a cross section of cases representing a wide spectrum” (p. 59) through “purposeful sampling” and by choosing one mother tongue teacher from each linguistic group, the highest possible representativeness was obtained. Finally, 13 of those who agreed to participate in the study were interviewed. To protect the mother tongue teachers’ integrity their names are replaced by MTT X (mother tongue teacher), and the names of the schools mentioned in the interviews are replaced by *school X*.

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2014), between 10 to 15 interviews should be conducted to capture the depth of the participants’ experiences. Hence, the amount of data obtained was sufficient for in-depth analysis yet maintaining linguistic variation. Together, the participants teach 15 different languages, and only one works exclusively as a mother tongue teacher. The others work as multilingual study guidance tutors in addition to their role as mother tongue teacher. They have between 2-17 years of work experience and varying educational levels. Some have several university degrees in teaching and learning, while others hold no university degree at all. To balance power inequality between the interviewer and the participants, the mother tongue teachers chose the date, the time, the location, and the language of the interview (Kvale & Brinkmans, 2014). The tutors were asked beforehand in which language they wanted to be interviewed and if they desired the presence of an interpreter. None chose to be interviewed in their L1 with an interpreter. One interview was conducted in English, one in both English and Swedish, and the rest in Swedish.

### ***3.2 Interviews***

To collect, what Agar and Hobbs (1982) and Hammersley (2006) call *first-hand information* about the mother tongue teachers’ experience the qualitative data for this study were collected by conducting 13 individual, open-structured interviews. Furthermore, the qualitative approach enabled the exploration of lived experiences of the participants (Obondo et al., 2016). Open-structured interviews were chosen to let the participants develop their story about their work life at their own

pace (Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995; Perry, 2011). As an interviewer, I tried to guide and direct them through this process (cf. Agar & Hobbs, 1982). The open structured interviews enabled a holistic insight into the participants' work life situation. The 13 interviews took place during the spring of 2020. They were audio recorded, and lasted between 29 minutes and 62 minutes. Most were conducted face-to-face and some, due to Covid-19 restrictions, via video call. As this present study forms part of a larger research project investigating how multilingual students' learning is supported in a Swedish school context, the interview guide was constructed to collect wide and holistic data about the mother tongue teachers' experiences and attitudes (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). It covered several areas of a mother tongue teacher's working life, as identified in previous studies (e.g., Avery, 2015; Ganuza & Hedman, 2018; Wedin & Wessman, 2017), and comprised the following areas: background, education, working conditions, collaboration, literacy development, the students' wellbeing, multilingualism, students in need of special education, and professional attitudes. This was done in order to *gain insight* into a mother tongue teacher's *working life* (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The areas were created for the following reasons:

*Background, education, work conditions and professional attitudes:* Those areas were identified as important for the outcome of multilingual support according to previous research (e.g., Avery, 2015; Lundberg, 2020; Wedin & Wessman, 2017)

*Multilingualism, students' wellbeing, literacy development and students in need of special education:* These areas were identified based on previous research (e.g., Barac & Bialystok, 2011; Cioè-Peña, 2017; Ganuza & Hedman, 2018). These areas are also important to the wider project this article forms part of.

*Collaboration:* This area formed the center of the interviews since it was created to answer the research questions of the present study.

At the end of every interview, the participants had the opportunity to give additional information regarding mother tongue instruction and study guidance that was important to them. Directly after every interview, the recordings were labeled with the date and the participant's alias, saved in a secure, password-protected archive, and deleted from the recording device. All quotations in the result sections are transcriptions from the interviews. The quotations from the Swedish interviews were translated into English by the author. Parentheses [ ] are used to indicate clarifications by the author.



### *3.3 Data management and analysis*

This qualitative study aims to gain a broader understanding of the topic. This was done by conducting a thematic data analysis in three steps inspired by Kvale and Brinkman (2014):

**1. Organization of the data:** To achieve a sense of the data set as a whole, the interviews were carefully listened to several times in their entirety. Thereafter, a meticulous summary of the different types of collaborations was made of each interview. For every interview, a table was formed, containing the types of collaboration the mother tongue teachers described, when and with whom they collaborate, and their general discourse on teaching and learning. Next, an edited transcription of all the passages concerning collaboration was written by the author and in the language of each interview.

**2. Reduction, coding, and creation of themes:** Through reduction of the passages concerning collaboration codes and themes were formed. The coding was done manually and in the language of the interview. Table 1 displays an illustration of a coding scheme:

Table 1: Example of a coding scheme.

Transcription	Code	Interpretation	Theme
“I teach 65 mother tongue students from 35 different schools. Most of my collaboration with mainstream teachers concerns administrative matters, such as scheduling.” (MTT1)	Collaboration with mainstream teachers for administration and scheduling	Organizing and adapting the weekly schedule to enable different students from different schools to participate in mother tongue instruction	Collaboration for structure and administration

**3. Interpretation of the themes through theoretical framework and discussion:** Thereafter Bronstein's (2003) review of interdisciplinary collaboration was used as a framework to interpret and discuss the themes.

### ***3.4 Theoretical framework: Bronstein's Model of Influences on Interdisciplinary Collaboration***

In this study, Bronstein's (2003) review of interdisciplinary collaboration was utilized to analyze and discuss the findings and to formulate the aim of the study and the research questions. Bronstein's model, which was created to study collaboration within social work and health care, originally described how social workers collaborated with colleagues from other professional backgrounds, and thus the need for a model for interdisciplinary collaboration emerged. The model was created based on a multidisciplinary theory of collaboration, theoretical conceptual research from social work and health care, role theory, and ecological systems theory. According to Bronstein, the model can be used in social work and health care and in school environments to maximize the expertise of different collaborating professions. As can be seen in Figure 1, it consists of four influences on effective interdisciplinary collaboration.

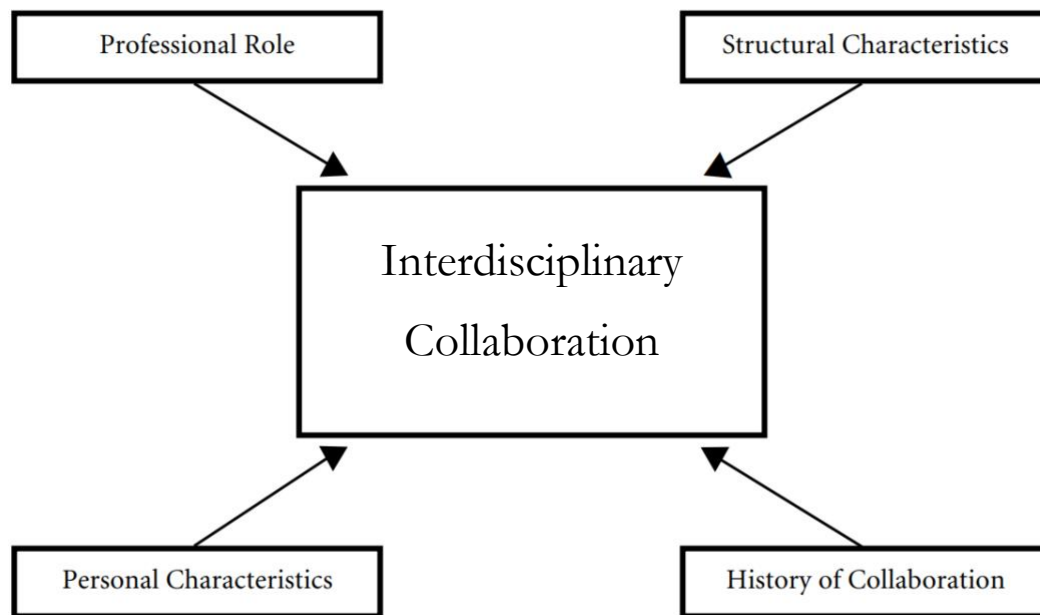


Figure 1: Influences on interdisciplinary collaboration (amanded from Bronstein, 2003, p. 303).

This study focuses on the four influences on interdisciplinary collaboration: *the professional role*, *structural characteristics*, *personal characteristics*, and *the history of collaboration*, all of which, according to Bronstein (2003), influence the quality of interdisciplinary collaboration. For successful interdisciplinary collaboration, Bronstein (2003) stresses the importance of a strong sense of the *professional role*, such as maintaining values and ethics, an ecological holistic view of practices, and respect for professional colleagues. Furthermore, professional autonomy is described as an ideal of professionalism. Moreover, it is suggested that the expectation of the profession, the professional attitudes, and the ability to collaborate are crucial to successful cooperation. Regarding *structural characteristics*, Bronstein (2003) describes a working culture that supports collaboration, such as administrative support, professional autonomy, adequate time, and common space for collaboration. The collaborative parties can spend formal and informal time together, and develop an effective communication while maintaining a solid professional identity. In addition, the following factors can influence collaboration: a financial base and allocation of resources, a sense of a common and clearly defined mission, and a bearable workload. Bronstein's model emphasizes the importance of *personal characteristics* for successful collaboration. Collaborators should view one another as people outside their professional role, and this includes having trust, respect, understanding, positive informal communication, comfort with collaborators' personal behaviour,

and a positive attitude towards collaboration. Capable collaborators who keep each other informed of important information are also important for effective collaborative work. Finally, Bronstein (2003) highlights how positive experiences of collaboration, in other words the *history of collaboration*, determine the outcome of functioning collaboration. Collaborators who have experienced positive interdisciplinary collaboration are more likely to initiate and maintain collaboration with other professions in the future. If the collaborating parties have benefited from earlier interdisciplinary collaborations, they are willing to spend more time and energy on future collaborations. According to Bronstein (2003), the establishment of these four influences maximizes the chances of well-functioning interdisciplinary collaboration. In this study the model is used to examine the above named four influences on the described pedagogical collaboration between mother tongue teachers.

### ***3.5 Ethical considerations***

In a qualitative study, complete anonymity is not possible (Svedmark, 2012). However, in this study careful consideration of the confidentiality and individuality requirements has been undertaken. To ensure ethical standards, all the mother tongue teachers were informed, prior to filling out the sampling questionnaire and prior to the interviews, of the voluntariness of participation and the de-identification of their own names, schools, and students mentioned during the interviews (Swedish Research Council, 2017). They were also informed about the subject of the research, the methods, the overall research plan and the purpose of the research. No ethical trial has been submitted since no sensitive personal data was collected. Because the analysis of the data did not indicate a necessity to reveal either the individual's ethnicity, sex, or age, those facts are not described in detail. However, to show the representation of a wider spectrum, the different languages, backgrounds, and educational levels are mentioned. As mentioned above, the recordings were labeled only aliases, saved in a secure, password-protected archive, and deleted from the recording device. All the participants' real names were deleted or de-identified in writing. The

key with the aliases, the transcriptions and the recordings were stored at different archives at the University.

## 4. Results

The results are presented in two sections, one for each research question. The first section presents how mother tongue teachers describe that they collaborate with mainstream teachers and SEN teachers, and thereafter the second section presents the factors affecting the described pedagogical collaboration between mother tongue teachers, mainstream teachers and SEN teachers.

### 4.1 Different types of collaboration

Various aspects of pedagogical collaboration emerged in the analysis of the interviews. According to the interviewed mother tongue teachers, they collaborate mostly with mainstream teachers and SEN teachers for solving administrative matters and for competence sharing. This section is concerned with the mother tongue teachers' descriptions of different kinds of pedagogical collaboration, namely *collaboration for structure and administration* and *collaboration for competence sharing*.

According to the mother tongue teachers they mostly initiate collaboration with mainstream teachers because of structural, organizational, or administrative issues, such as scheduling the lessons or finding a classroom to work in. All the participants meet and collaborate regularly with many different mainstream teachers and SEN teachers from many different schools. One interviewee, for instance, meets “65 mother tongue students from 35 different schools” (MTT 1).

Organizing individualized mother tongue instruction is, according to her, a routine task. The challenge is to “overcome the administrative struggle” (MTT 1). Administrative tasks and structural collaboration, such as scheduling classes or booking classrooms, are described as time-consuming. In addition, every term differs from the previous one and a new schedule must be fixed. Several mother tongue teachers talk about the struggle of scheduling the mother tongue instruction. One mother tongue teacher scheduling as a task “constantly in progress” (MTT 9). Every time the schedule changes, the mother tongue teachers need to confirm with the different mainstream

teachers, the students, and their parents. According to her, a schedule can change from one week to another. Finnish, as a minority language, is available to all students with Finnish roots who may join Finnish classes if they or their parents so desire, even if they do not speak Finnish at home. According to MT<sup>T</sup> 9, this leads to Finnish mother tongue instruction being a frequent “non-stop-drop-in-drop-out-subject” (MT<sup>T</sup> 9). Every time a student starts or stops studying Finnish the mother tongue teacher needs to adapt the weekly schedule and therefore the schedule changes often. Thus, the mother tongue teacher needs to consider the student's regular school schedule and therefore to collaborate with the different mainstream teachers to solve structural matters.

Apart from collaboration for structural and administrative matters, the mother tongue teachers describe their collaboration with mainstream teachers and SEN teachers as focusing on knowledge and competence sharing, either when their own competence is lacking or when mainstream teachers and SEN teachers need to get insight on specific L1 knowledge. Because mother tongue teachers meet students and teachers from many different schools, close pedagogical collaboration and joint reflection on the process or frequent method discussions occur only sporadically and in exceptional cases when something “extraordinary” (MT<sup>T</sup> 9) comes along. One mother tongue teacher explains:

“I have 60 different mother tongue students from 60 different schools, so how can I find the time to collaborate with all their teachers?” (MT<sup>T</sup> 9).

Thereby showing how this mother tongue teacher collaborates only when absolutely needed. Collaboration can occur when something positive happens, such as a student making progress, or something negative, such as disruptive behavior or absence. When students' knowledge and language development proceeds adequately and according to their age, the participants do not feel the need to collaborate. The collaboration with SEN teachers is mostly about students in need of special educational support or implementation of a diagnosis. One mother tongue teacher describes this as follows:

“They come and ask me, for example, if they have discovered that the student has difficulty with something, and how does this work in his/her mother tongue? Then we talk about whether the student needs more support or if they need an investigation [into language impairment].” (MT<sup>T</sup> 12)

Some of the participants revealed that because of their lack of SEN knowledge they thus need to collaborate with SEN teachers when they are unable to find adequate materials or methods to support the students in their language and literacy development. In such cases, as illustrated in the interview below, the SEN teacher prepares the materials or assists the mother tongue teacher to find adequate strategies to teach a student needing special educational support.

Interviewer: “Have you collaborated with SEN teachers?”

MTT 2: “Yes, with one SEN teacher. I have met her because sometimes when the children are newly arrived [in Sweden] they have difficulties with Swedish, and above all with reading and understanding. The student I worked with last fall had difficulties with reading and distinguishing between the different alphabets.”

Interviewer: “Because you have another alphabet?”

MTT 2: “No, he's never been to school.”

Interviewer: “How did the SEN teacher help you? Did she give you materials or what did she do?”

MTT 2: “Yes, she gave me materials. At first, we worked with just pictures. And then... which letter the picture starts with. Then, short words.”

When a student's L2 development is slower than expected, or when a SEN teacher needs to incorporate knowledge of the student's first language into an ongoing investigation, the mother tongue teachers are often asked to contribute. This is done to distinguish between disabilities and second language development in progress:

“When they discover that a student is struggling, they ask me to rule out language disabilities.”  
(MTT 12)

And through this collaboration, linguistic disabilities are investigated, excluded, or ascertained:

“When I was once asked if I could confirm dyslexia in the mother tongue, I said no. Based on my view of dyslexia, this was not what the student had. He had social problems. But I'm not a SEN teacher.” (MTT 10)

In such cases, the mother tongue teachers compare the errors in Swedish with linguistic structures from the mother tongue or describe the student's linguistic development in the mother tongue:

“I was once contacted by a mainstream teacher regarding a student with strong Finnish language skills. He had gone to a Finnish kindergarten. He could not speak Swedish. I then explained how it works in Finnish. I understand the child, the Finnish way of thinking. Some grammatical things are not important.” (MTT 9)

Other difficulties can be attributed to differences in text genre conventions:

“A text in Polish is written in a different way than in Swedish. If the student only translates the words from Polish to Swedish, the Swedish text will be difficult to understand” (MTT 3).

By analyzing the student's texts, this mother tongue teacher shows how she can distinguish between mistakes made due to different genre conventions or to language impairments. Moreover, cultural differences sometimes need to be taken into consideration when comparing students' subject knowledge. As described by MTT 12 in the following utterance:

“There is a significant difference between school here and in my home country. [...]. For example, there they read more facts and answer questions. Here it is more about analyzing, reflecting, and reasoning [the subject content]. Many of my students feel that they get stuck on reasoning and reflecting. It is difficult to get good grades.”

However, not all mother tongue teachers have been involved in such L1 investigations. In addition, mainstream teachers and SEN teachers do not always give feedback to mother tongue teachers after an investigation has been completed:

“I know she has a diagnosis, but when I asked which type, they just said she has a learning disability.” (MTT 6)



When mother tongue teachers do not receive information about students' learning impairments, they must rely on their own educational background and work experience. Some mother tongue teachers describe how they adapt their teaching methods to the student's individual needs regardless of the student's diagnosis:

"I always try to find out the reasons behind students' behavior. I have to teach the student in front of me no matter what." (MTT 8)

Other mother tongue teachers feel insecure when it comes to learning impairments:

"Yes, he had dyslexia or what was it? I think he has dyslexia, right? I do not know. I have not asked, but I think perhaps dyslexia or something else... And I did not know much about dyslexia. So, I read a bit about that. And now I know it's not a disease." (MTT 13)

Yet another mother tongue teachers displays insecurity when it comes to learning impairments:

"I had a student once in my mother tongue class and noticed that he was having difficulties. However, I was not sure what it was. Adequate education is required to understand this. You observe that something does not fit, but you do not really know what it is. You just see that something is different." (MTT 7)

As shown, some mother tongue teachers acknowledge they do not know much about different diagnoses and are thus highly dependent on SEN teachers' instructions and support. Because they are unfamiliar with the symptoms and signs of different learning impairments, the likelihood of incorrect or even no adaptation of methods in the mother tongue classroom increases. This, in turn, may lead to inadequate multilingual support or even students dropping out of mother tongue instruction.

### ***4.2 Influences on the pedagogical collaboration***

The analysis of the interviews highlights several factors influencing the pedagogical collaboration between mother tongue teachers, mainstream teachers, and SEN teachers. The findings to the second research question apply Bronstein's (2003) theoretical framework – the *professional role*, *structural characteristics*, *personal characteristics*, and the *history of collaboration* – to analyze the participants'

responses. That is, both the quality and the quantity of the collaboration are affected due to the factors described previously. Consequently, this section is concerned with the theoretical analysis of the influences on the pedagogical collaboration between mother tongue teachers, mainstream teachers, and SEN teachers.

#### ***4.3 Professional role: The firmly established professional role as a subject teacher***

Because mother tongue teachers often teach at different schools, they describe themselves as visiting subject teachers dependent on the mainstream teachers' structural support for allocating classrooms:

“When I work as mother tongue teacher at a school, first I get a classroom assigned by a [mainstream] teacher” (MTT 13).

When visiting the school, several mother tongue teachers feel like guests of mainstream teachers, whom they depend on for locational and organizational matters. Therefore, they see their relationship with mainstream teachers as slightly hierarchical and the collaboration as semi-reciprocal.

However, when it comes to pedagogical, methodological, or linguistic questions, mother tongue teachers, mainstream teachers, and SEN teachers are described as equally important pedagogical collaborators. Here, the mother tongue teachers see themselves as “real” teachers, as “experts in their own subject” (MTT 10), and as specialists in students' L1-development and home culture. Such a reciprocal collaboration is exemplified in this mother tongue teacher's depiction of the work between herself and the mainstream teachers regarding students' academic development:

“When I work as a mother tongue teacher, I am in charge. I have control. Then I need to collaborate because my students are their [mainstream teachers'] students too. They meet them every day. I only meet them once a week. The student has been with their teacher all day. I pick up the student after class. Sometimes the teacher asks me about the student's knowledge of Somali. Does she understand? How does she write? There is collaboration. I MUST collaborate. But I control the mother tongue instruction.” (MTT 13)

Above, the participant describes pedagogical collaboration with mainstream teachers in the same way as other subject teachers might describe pedagogical collaboration. They collaborate with other teachers when they have similar interests, work with the same students, or need pedagogical collaboration for complementation of their own professional knowledge.

Overall, the mother tongue teachers characterize themselves as independently working language teachers, teaching a “real” subject (MTT 10). They plan and evaluate lessons for their mother tongue classes, organize parent-teacher talks, and assess students’ achievements according to Swedish steering documents and the subject syllabus. The following illustrates how one mother tongue teacher oversees planning and teaching of the mother tongue instruction:

MTT 3: “And then we work with the theme of the day.”

Interviewer: “Which you prepare?”

MTT 3: “Of course!”

Interviewer: “You don’t get [requests] from mainstream teachers, ‘Now we want you to work with this or that?’”

MTT 3: “No, it doesn’t work like that in mother tongue instruction. We are the ones in charge of planning lessons and creating materials.”

This illustrates that the planning and preparation in mother tongue instruction is seldom, or never, connected to the thematical work planned in other subjects, thus underlining the mother tongue teachers’ independent role as subject teachers. They compare themselves to and see themselves as “real” subject teachers. Like other subject teachers, they collaborate mostly with their closest colleagues, that is, other mother tongue teachers in the same language. As explained by MTT13:

“I follow the annual lesson plan, wich we Somali teachers designe together. ”

As exemplified, the collaboration regarding planning and preparation is both reciprocal and equal.

#### ***4.4 Structural characteristics: Structural characteristics hindering naturally occurring collaboration***

Mother tongue instruction is often taught after the official school day when mainstream teachers have left the school for the day. As a result, mother tongue teachers and mainstream teachers meet each other infrequently. This indicates that the exchange of information on both formal and informal issues is rare between both sets of teachers.

MTT 3: “What if the fire alarm goes off? I have no idea what to do. I know nothing about their routines. I know the routines here [at the Center of Multilingualism], but I have no idea about all the other schools. We teach there after official school hours.”

Interviewer: “Aha, the mainstream teachers have already gone home?”

MTT 3: “Yes, exactly.”

Moreover, mainstream teachers and most of the SEN teachers are directly employed by and stationed at individual schools. The mother tongue teachers, on the other hand, are employed by the municipality and the Center of Multilingualism and have their offices located there. Thus spontaneously occurring meetings with mainstream teachers and SEN teachers are described as rare. That is to say, structural characteristics hinder naturally occurring collaboration between mother tongue teachers, mainstream teachers, and SEN teachers.

In the interviews, the mother tongue teachers related that they all have assigned workstations at the Center of Multilingualism, where they meet frequently and where all the staff meetings take place. Moreover, they know one another personally and share informal time together, such as coffee breaks and/or lunches. However, most of the mother tongue teachers’ breaks are used for commuting between schools.

Interviewer: “What does a normal day look like for you? For example, last Friday.”

MTT 8: “I start with mother tongue instruction.”

Interviewer: “Where do you teach mother tongue instruction?”

MTT 8: “At 8:10 I teach at *school 1*. Then I have multilingual study guidance at *school 2*. Then I have a [mother tongue] group at *school 3*. Then I come back to the Center of Multilingualism and teach the last group here.”

Interviewer: “At what time do you teach it?”

MTT 8: “The last group I teach at 4 pm.”

Interviewer: “You travel a lot back and forth.”

MTT 8: “Yes. Most often I travel by bus. I can drive a car, but it gets even more stressful with parking and stuff. When I take the bus, I can read and think. When I drive, I cannot.”

Having to travel from one school to another consumes their time for planning and reflecting, and it requires a lot of energy:

“After a while, I felt very tired because of all the traveling.” (MTT 1)

Some participants see meeting many new people as something positive and use the transit time on the bus for reflection, while others complain explicitly about how exhausted they become because of all the different people they meet during one day. They simply do not have the time or energy to collaborate with all the mainstream teachers and SEN teachers they meet. According to several, even mainstream teachers do not always have the time for intense and frequent collaboration. Collaboration across (with) different professions occurs more naturally when it is possible geographically and timewise. If the pedagogical collaboration is more complicated than it is useful, it seems to be regarded as an unnecessary luxury and is limited to the minimum.

#### ***4.5 Personal characteristics: limited informal contacts affect the willingness to collaborate***

Due to a lack of time and the geographical distance between mainstream teachers, SEN teachers, and mother tongue teachers, the few meetings between them are often described as purely restricted to professional matters. The participants repeatedly complain about having very little or no time for private conversations, which restricts the building of personal relationships.

However, the outcome of the professional collaboration seems to depend on personal characteristics, such as trust and respect.

MTT 5: “For example, I applied for help for a student. He does not thrive, and he cannot read. In fact, he does not learn at all [...]. I have talked to the principal because I thought he should meet a psychologist.”

Interviewer: “Right.”

MTT 5: “And I’ve talked to a SEN teacher. But I think, because it’s a big city, this SEN teacher does not recognize me. She does not know how much experience I have.”

When the mother tongue teachers, mainstream teachers, and SEN teachers do not know one another on a personal level, they are less likely to collaborate on a professional level. One mother tongue teacher stresses the importance of being informed about participating in teachers’ planning days to feel included in the school culture and to create mutual trust and shared experiences.

MTT 10: “As a teacher you develop when you share experiences, and we mother tongue teachers feel more naturally integrated in their daily work life.”

Interviewer: “Then, it’s easier to collaborate?”

MTT 10: “Exactly.”

A participating mother tongue teacher criticized a mainstream teacher for pushing her student into only speaking Swedish and not using his L1. Previously, the student had been living in a country where his L1 and his culture had been oppressed by the government. Therefore, the mother tongue teacher describes her own reaction to the mainstream teacher’s “Swedish-only-instructions” as quite strong. According to the mother tongue teacher, the mainstream teacher knew her well and therefore accepted her comment and adapted the instructions accordingly:

“I do not think they truly understand why. No, they do not understand me completely, but they like me. That’s why they don’t get offended.” (MTT 5)

Although the mainstream teacher did not completely relate to the cultural and linguistic oppression, she trusted the mother tongue teacher's opinion, knowledge, and experience. In this case, personal characteristics formed the basis for successful pedagogical collaboration.

#### ***4.6 History of collaboration: Creating a history of and a structure for pedagogical collaboration***

Mother tongue teachers from larger language groups, who spend a significant part of their day at the same school, tend to convey their presence as something positive for their students:

MMT 11: "I have the chance to help because I'm in the same place. But what if I only have one hour at that school?"

Interviewer: "Is it almost a prerequisite that you work at the same school?"

MTT 11: "Yes, I feel like I can contribute a lot to my students. Help them. For example, if they have tests. I'm there right away. If they have a question, they come to me at once. They say I go to MTT11 directly. If I'm just there for one lesson..., how would it be then. It's not possible."

However, most of the interviewed mother tongue teachers teach at many different schools. Some of these schools organize mother tongue instruction for all their students on the same day and time weekly regardless of the language. In that way, all the mother tongue teachers are in the same place at the same time and have the possibility to meet with mainstream teachers and SEN teachers during the coffee break after class. According to the participants, a natural and relaxing meeting point for mainstream teachers, SEN, teachers and mother tongue teachers is thereby created. When structural and administrative burdens are simplified by fixed slots in the students' schedule, the mother tongue teachers may focus their time on collaborating methodologically and pedagogically, on teaching, planning, and reflecting. Then, administrative issues are facilitated, and the collaborators may spend informal time, such as breaks, together. Mother tongue teachers and mainstream teachers can reflect on joint goals together and get acquainted on a personal level. However, not many schools use this system:

"In some schools it works great but not in all." (MTT 10)

Another advantage with this system is that students are more alert and motivated than after school hours. Moreover, more students tend to participate in mother tongue instruction.

## 5. Discussion

The findings are compared to Bronstein's (2003) influences on interdisciplinary collaboration, namely *the professional role*, *structural characteristics*, *personal characteristics*, and *the history of collaboration*, and to recent studies presented earlier in this paper. For clarity, Bronstein's influences are highlighted in italics.

### ***5.1 Increasing possibilities for inclusive multilingual classroom spaces and multilingual students' academic success***

The findings of the study indicate that mother tongue teachers have a shared understanding of their *professional role* (cf. Svensson & Torpsten, 2013), which is focused on language teaching and includes methodological and pedagogical matters. The results suggest that mother tongue teachers' pedagogical practice is firmly established thanks to the subject's syllabus and other steering documents. Mother tongue teachers have a strong sense of their own profession and a holistic view of practices, which includes professional autonomy. This, according to Bronstein (2003), is seen as an ideal of professionalism. When collaborating on pedagogical matters, mainstream teachers and SEN teachers are described as equal collaboration partners, and mother tongue teachers are perceived as the experts on the students' home culture and L1. Concerning pedagogical and methodological questions, the different collaboration partners are described as dependent on one another's knowledge. In such cases, and in accordance with Bronstein, the findings indicate that the interdependence on one another's expertise is given, and professional autonomy is evident. This legitimizes the mother tongue teachers' professionalism and allows them to act independently. Regarding collaborating on methodological and pedagogical matters, the collective ownership of goals is related as student-centered, and it circles around the student's wellbeing and academic progression, which, according to previous studies (Creese et al., 1997, Leana & Pil, 2006), benefits students' academic performance.



Although mother tongue teachers describe professional autonomy when it comes to their subject, they are dependent on mainstream teachers' instructions when it comes to structural issues. This indicates that interdependence is not given in structural matters (cf. Bronstein, 2003), and they cannot act completely independently. The analysis indicates that valuable collaboration time is used to solve practical challenges, which suggests that pedagogical collaboration to support multilingual students meets structural obstacles. This is in line with previous research that has shown that the pedagogical collaboration to support multilingual students still meets structural obstacles (Lundberg, 2020; Roux Sparreskog, 2018).

The mother tongue teachers in this study are employed by the Center of Multilingualism and thus have to move physically and culturally between many different schools, which corresponds with previous studies (Avery, 2015; Dewilde, 2013). Therefore, the shared time with all the different mainstream teachers and SEN teaches is described as limited. The findings suggest that *structural characteristics* – such as a working culture that encourages collaboration with administrative support and provides adequate time and a common space for collaboration – are still insufficient and that collaborating professionals have more to lose than to gain from collaboration (cf. Bronstein, 2003). Neither time nor space for constructive disagreement and deliberation among colleagues are naturally given, and the collaborating professionals' workload influences the pedagogical collaboration negatively. Aligning with the findings of Gunning et al. (2016), pedagogical collaboration takes place only when the collaborating professionals have the necessary time. The results suggest that pedagogical collaboration is often described as requiring too much of an effort, and is thus restricted to exceptional cases. In line with Avery's (2015) study, the participants describe how working time and energy are consumed by structural and administrative tasks, thereby implying that their cultural and linguistic knowledge is not fully utilized. Instead of investigating language impairments or L2 developmental issues, which could increase the academic success of vulnerable multilingual learners (cf. Bolam et al., 2005; Goddard et al., 2007), the participants disclose how they are unable to spend valuable shared time with mainstream teachers and SEN teachers. This is because the constant scheduling and administrating create stress and consume their energy and time.

The findings indicate that some of the structural issues could be overcome when collaboration is formalized with fixed slots or collaboration contracts. The findings suggest formalized structural

support to create, what Krulatz and Iverson (2020) call, inclusive multilingual classrooms and to increase the possibility of joint planning, evaluation, and reflection among different pedagogical experts to support multilingual students subject-wise as well as language-wise (Li, 2020). Once the administrative burdens are eased, the infrequent collaborative time could be used to discuss methodological matters, such as conducting investigations to distinguish between learning disabilities and L2-development.

Furthermore, the lack of structural support and the geographical distance led to collaborators not getting to know each other personally. As noted by Bronstein (2003), interdisciplinary collaboration depends on *personal characteristics* such as mutual trust, respect, understanding, positive informal communication, comfort with the collaborators' personal behavior, and a positive attitude towards collaboration. Therefore, mother tongue teachers, mainstream teachers, and SEN teachers need to meet on a regular basis. Frequent and naturally occurring collaboration would enable the collaborating parties to inform one another about recent events and the students' development. Therefore, and as noted by Bronstein (2003), when the collaborating parties know and trust one another, the willingness and chances for successful pedagogical collaboration increase. By overcoming the mother tongue teachers' constant structural stress and the marginalization of the subject, as mentioned by Avery (2015), the interaction between mother tongue teachers and mainstream teachers may increase and time for informal communication could be created.

Through geographical proximity, joint meeting points could be created. The schools who adopt fixed slots for mother tongue instruction not only facilitate administrative and structural issues but also create physical possibilities for positive joint experiences, which are described as leading to a *history* and a future *of collaboration* (Bronstein, 2003). Positive effects of experienced collaborations could potentially increase the collaboration parties' willingness to invest time and energy in future pedagogical collaboration. Moreover, the students' simultaneous language and subject development would become more holistic, and the chances for high quality multilingual education are increased (Izquierdo, 2018).

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to analyze and discuss mother tongue teachers' perspectives on pedagogical collaboration with two specific groups of professionals: mainstream teachers and SEN teachers. This has been done through an abductive process by thematically analyzing interview data, followed by examining the influences on such collaboration, based on Bronstein's (2003) theoretical model for interdisciplinary collaboration.

The findings suggest that pedagogical collaboration between mother tongue teachers, mainstream teachers, and SEN teachers is mainly affected by *structural characteristics* supporting pedagogical collaboration. The mother tongue teachers' perception of their own *professional role* is described as firmly established. Moreover, their role and tasks are underlined as understood by most of the mainstream teachers and SEN teachers. However, the lack of structural characteristics prevents mother tongue teachers, mainstream teachers, and SEN teachers from meeting regularly, thereby making pedagogical collaboration both time-consuming and complicated. Better structural and administrative support is suggested to improve pedagogical collaboration, which could focus on pedagogical matters and competence sharing rather than on structural matters. Mother tongue teachers could engage more often and in a more structured way in investigations distinguishing students' L2 developmental issues stemming from language impairments.

It is suggested that formal and informal time spent together could increase the opportunity for the different professionals to get to know one another on a personal level, which, in turn, improves the *personal characteristics* needed for successful collaboration. When structural characteristics are formalized, mainstream teachers, SEN teachers, and mother tongue teachers meet more often, more naturally, and more regularly. This increases their possibilities for pedagogical collaboration, and the chance of building a *history of collaboration*, thus promoting future collaborations. Professionals experiencing the positive effects of pedagogical collaboration can lead to them initiating additional future collaborations. By taking into account the different professions' knowledge and backgrounds in a more structured and standardized way, multilingual educational support could be easier, more holistic, and systematic; and students' multilingual literacy development would be genuinely promoted. Finally, further research could be conducted on how mainstream teachers and SEN teachers describe the components and influences of pedagogical collaboration with mother tongue teachers to obtain a more holistic insight into pedagogical collaboration.

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### **Abbreviations, acronyms, and definitions**

L1: first language,

L2: second language,

MTT: mother tongue teacher

SEN: special educational needs

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