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Steps to Inclusion? The Role of Tiered Intervention in Finland and in the United States

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Verlag Barbara Budrich

2021-01-26

Jahnukainen , M & Itkonen , T 2021 , Steps to Inclusion? The Role of Tiered Intervention in Finland and in the United States . in A Köpfer , J J W Powell & R Zahnd (eds) , Handbuch Inklusion international / International Handbook of Inclusive Education : Globale, nationale und lokale Perspektiven auf Inklusive Bildung / Global, National and Local Perspectives . Verlag Barbara Budrich , Opladen , pp. 345-356 . <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1f70kvj.22>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/327690>

<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1f70kvj.22>

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Please cite the original version.

Chapter Title: Steps to Inclusion? The Role of Tiered Intervention in Finland and in the United States

Chapter Author(s): Markku Jahnukainen and Tiina Itkonen

Book Title: Handbuch Inklusion international / International Handbook of Inclusive Education

Book Subtitle: Globale, nationale und lokale Perspektiven auf Inklusive Bildung / Global, National and Local Perspectives

Book Editor(s): Andreas Köpfer, Justin J.W. Powell, Raphael Zahnd

Published by: Verlag Barbara Budrich. (2021)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1f70kvj.22>

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19 Steps to Inclusion? The Role of Tiered Intervention in Finland and in the United States

Markku Jahnukainen, Tiina Itkonen

Abstract

This article contrasts the Finnish policy context of a tiered support model with that of the United States, and discusses subsequent approaches in identifying and supporting students with learning disabilities in inclusive general education settings. The Finnish public school is well-known for being highly equitable. One key ingredient of equity is the broad variety of additional supports delivered inclusively in general education under the mandatory *Learning and Schooling Support* system. The U.S. Department of Education does not subscribe to a particular framework of RtI but acknowledges that the core characteristics include research-based instruction in general education settings. In both school systems the role of tiered systems in teacher education needs to be implemented more systematically.

1. Introduction

There has been an enormous interest in comparative education research since early 2000. The international school attainment tests have offered a platform for comparing the results between countries and jurisdictions. Many governments and educational actors all over the world have turned their eyes to the top performing countries to find explanations for their success (e.g. Lien Foundation 2018). Since 2000 Finland has been one of those countries under siege of both academics and practitioners in education. Educational researchers (e.g. Chong 2016; Tomlinson 2012) as well as journalists (e.g. The Editorial Board, 2013; see Takayama et al. 2013) have pointed out some ingredients of the “Finnish miracle” like high level teacher education, trust and teacher admiration. In some cases also the ways of meeting the needs of diverse learners have been suggested as possible sources of Finnish success (Itkonen/Jahnukainen 2007; 2010; Lien Foundation 2018; Sahlberg 2015).

In this chapter, we utilize our previous research work comparing inclusive and special education policies in Finland and in the United States (Itkonen/Jahnukainen 2007; 2010; Jahnukainen/Itkonen 2016). For making the contrasting of two different school systems possible and meaningful, our perspective focuses mainly on system-level developments. Therefore, our angle on inclusive education is also restricted to define the education policy and system level actions to promote the access to support for every student in general education settings.

We first present the tiered intervention/support model in Finland in its broader educational policy context. We further provide a state-by-state review of policies as they relate to identifying students with learning disabilities in the U.S. We then compare the tiered support

models in Finland and the United States; the mandatory *Learning and Schooling Support* in Finland and the most common U.S. model consisting of three tiers (e.g. Fuchs et al. 2008). This chapter concludes with some thoughts on implications of tiered models of support to education policy, including teacher education.

2. From Special Education to *Learning and Schooling Support* in Finland

The Finnish comprehensive education system is historically based on the idea of “education for all” since the first Compulsory Education Act 1921 (Jahnukainen 2011). However, it took decades to fundamentally change the system considering the long tradition of parallel school systems and exclusion of students with severe special educational needs. Finally, since 1997 children of every school age – including students with severe disabilities – are being educated in the same comprehensive school system (Graham/Jahnukainen 2011). Even though special schools still exist, the number of students placed in them have decreased steadily since the late 1990s (Figure 1). Also, the funding reform in 2010 affected the use of full-time special classes (small group) located in regular schools (see Pulkkinen 2019). The increase of the use of partial placement in general education (Figure 1) since 2010 was partly affected by the implementation of more specific statistical units in data gathering but also partly by the service model reform to a tiered system starting 2011. It could be said that on the system level the Finnish comprehensive school has had a clear shift towards a more inclusive direction by decreasing the number of students placed in segregated settings, however, in partly unsystematic ways (see Honkasilta et al. 2019).

Figure 1: Number of Tier 3 (special support) students in Finland by placement options 1998-2017

Source: Jahnukainen 2011; OSF 2018.

The earlier service system with full-time and part-time special education was modified to a three-tiered system defined under the title of *Learning and Schooling Support* effective from 2011 (The Amendment of the Basic Education Act 642/2010) (see Pulkkinen/Jahnukainen 2016). The reform started from the committee work of *Strategy of Special Education* and finalised during 2011, when the Amendment of Basic Education Law was enacted. In-between, following the *Strategy of Special Education*, there was an intensive period of in-service teacher training in every region of Finland organized jointly by the special teacher education units of different universities and by the *Finnish National Board of Education* (see Thuneberg et al. 2014).

The Finnish tiers are functionally equivalent to US Tiers 1, 2 and 3 (see Table 2), but in Finland there is only one fixed national model mandatory for all school boards. *Tier 1* (general support) consists of every action made by the regular classroom teacher in terms of differentiation as well as in terms of school-wide efforts to meet the diversity of students. This is basically transferring more responsibility to classroom teachers as well as the school community. *Tier 2* (intensified support) consists of remedial support by the class teacher, co-teaching with the special educator and temporal individual or small group learning with the part-time special educator. In practice, this is highly equivalent with the former definition of “part-time special education”. *Tier 3* (special support) consists of the whole continuum of special education services from fulltime general education to a special school placement and is mostly equivalent with the previous “full-time special education” (see Jahnukainen/Itkonen 2016).

3. United States: Learning Disability Diagnosis and RtI

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), initially passed in 1975, is a federal law that guides special education policymaking in the United States. The main provisions of the statute include “free appropriate public education” for every eligible child regardless of the type or severity of disability, education in the least restrictive environment, due process rights for parents, and a non-discriminatory, multi-disciplinary evaluation to determine if a child qualifies to receive services. Thus, the provision of special education is diagnosis-based. Today there are thirteen categories under which a child’s diagnosis must fall in order to receive services. This section discusses the evaluation of students for suspected learning disabilities (LD), and the use of RtI in that process.

It is necessary to explain the U.S. education policy context before proceeding to review the variety with which states have designed their RtI and LD diagnostic processes. The U.S. are grounded on the concept of federalism, or the vertical independence between the federal government and the states. Thus, the federal government cannot mandate states to adopt educational policies (although state policies must align with the Constitution), but the federal government can provide incentives or carrots such as funding for the adoption of federal legislation. For example, special education law, initially passed in 1975 by Congress, was last adopted by New Mexico in 1989, over ten years after the law’s passage. Similarly, there is variation in how states have approached the use of RtI and discrepancy models in diagnosing LD.

RtI is an effort to “un-do” the medical model set forth in the law. Traditional “LD” eligibility required discrepancy between academic potential and actual achievement. The un-

intended consequence was that once eligible, the student would receive special education, often in a “resource room” where the student went for part of the day (Fuchs/Fuchs 2005). In the U.S. regulations of the part-time special education placements are called “the continuum of services” and “least restrictive environment”. RtI’s underlining assumption is the opposite – the place for instruction is the general education classroom. Whereas the burden of learning was placed on the child in the traditional LD evaluation (discrepancy), the burden under RtI rests on the “educational system” to provide interventions to keep the child in the general classroom without a special education label (Itkonen/Jahnukainen 2010; Jahnukainen/Itkonen 2016).

RtI is a concept that emerged empirically (e.g. Fuchs/Fuchs 2005), but is not used as a term in special or general educational legislation in the U.S. However, the 2004 reauthorized IDEA permits a local education agency to use up to 15% of federal funds to develop and implement early intervention services to students “who are not currently identified as needing special education or related services, but who need additional academic and behavioural support to succeed in a general education environment” (20 U.S.C. §1413[f][p1]).

The U.S. Department of Education does not subscribe to a particular framework of RtI but acknowledges that the core characteristics include research-based instruction in the general education setting, continuous monitoring of student progress, early screening for academic and behavioural problems, and multiple tiers of intervention that provide progressively more intensive support.

An indication that the U.S. as a whole is moving away from a discrepancy model (which compares a student’s potential with actual performance) in diagnosing a specific learning disability was articulated in IDEA 2004, where it stated that states could use science-based interventions as part of the evaluation procedure to determine if the student responded to interventions or needed special education services. The guidelines given to the states stated that the criterion for a learning disability (a) *must not require* the use of discrepancy between intellectual ability and performance; (b) *must permit* the use of response to science-based interventions; and (c) *may allow* the use of alternative research-based procedures to determine if a child has LD (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1414 (b)(6)(A)).

However, the Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education has since issued a memo (Musgrove 2011) to the states to remind them that tiered models cannot be used to delay or deny special education evaluations under IDEA. Specifically, parents can continue to request a special education evaluation at any time, and local schools cannot deny or delay providing it using RtI strategies as a reason. Similarly, all due process protections for students and parents under IDEA (e.g. consent for evaluation, eligibility, and individualized education program decisions) supersede local school district or state RtI policies.

All fifty states have adopted an RtI method for identifying LD in accordance with the federal regulations described earlier (Coomer 2015; Schultz/Stephens 2019). Out of these, eleven states (22%) allow *only RtI* as a method to diagnose LD. Twenty-four states (48%) allow school-based evaluation teams to *use RtI or the severe discrepancy model*. Twelve states (24%) allow *RtI or a pattern of strengths and weaknesses model* for identifying LD. Three states (Alabama, Arkansas, and California) allow school-based evaluation teams to use *any of the three LD identification models* (discrepancy, RtI, or strengths and weaknesses assessment). Table 1 summarizes these data.

Table 1: Diagnostic models by state

LD Diagnosis Model as Adopted by the State	Number of States	% of States
Only Rtl	11	22
School-level choice: Rtl or Discrepancy	24	48
School-level choice: Rtl or Ts strength/weakness pattern	12	24
School-level choice: Any of the three (discrepancy, Rtl, or strengths and weaknesses assessment)	3 (Alabama, Arkansas, and California)	

Source: Adapted from Jahnukainen/Itkonen 2016.

4. Comparing the Tiered Models

Students with learning disabilities have been the main groups receiving special educational services in both countries. In the U.S., this student group comprises 34% of all students in special education (National Center for Education Statistics 2019). In Finland, statistics based on grounds of special education decisions have not been gathered since the law reform of 2011. However, it can be assumed that the main reasons have remained the same (OSF 2010).

The definitions are slightly different. In the U.S., the IDEA defines a learning disability as “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations.” In Finland, learning disabilities were split (2001-2010) into different categories based on their origin, e.g. learning difficulties caused by impaired linguistic development (dysphasia) or learning difficulties related to autism or the Asperger’s syndrome or specific learning difficulties based on the subject area e.g. learning difficulty in mathematics, learning difficulty in foreign languages or reading or writing disorder (OSF 2019). However, this kind of data is currently not gathered anymore.

In the Finnish system, all students might have received support without a diagnosis by decisions made on pedagogical groundings in student welfare groups at school level even before the 2011 reform. We have characterised the Finnish system as a “difficulty model” and the U.S as “disability model” (see Itkonen/Jahnukainen 2010). However, if the Rtl model is used in the U.S., it allows similarly low threshold services without “wait to fail” as in Finland, at the Tier 2 level. Tier 2 is also the typical level of additional support in terms of learning difficulties in the area of reading, writing and mathematics in both countries. As we have shown earlier (Itkonen/Jahnukainen 2007), the services in the Finnish system concentrate on early intervention and there is a striking difference compared to the share of students served for LD in secondary education.

The special feature of the Finnish special support system is still the extensive use of Tier 2-level part-time special education (Table 2; see also Jahnukainen/Itkonen 2016). The key player in this low threshold system of meeting the diverse population is a special teacher, whose workload is not dedicated to a small group of students only. Instead, s/he is dealing with the whole school population, doing assessment, co-teaching, teaching small groups and consulting the classroom teachers (e.g. Rytivaara et al. 2012). Basically, there is at least one

of this kind of teacher available in every school. During the school year 2016-2017, about 120,000 (or 21.8 per cent) comprehensive school students (age group 6 to 16) were taking advantage of this service (OSF 2018). This service simultaneously delivers preventive as well as rehabilitative functions. In practice, this means that as soon as the classroom teacher or the parents notice that some additional support is needed, the possible intervention can be started. This form of special education is basically open for any student who struggles with learning for whatever reason. In particular, there is considerable pressure to rehabilitate early reading, writing and arithmetic problems using part-time special education.

Table 2: Overview of tiered intervention models in the United States and in Finland

	US model	FIN model
Program	<i>Response to Intervention</i>	<i>Learning and schooling support</i>
Implementation status	Several models	One national model
Legal status	Must be permitted in states' identification methods of LD since 2004	Mandatory since 2011
Tier 1	Universal interventions	General support
Tier 2	Targeted interventions	Intensified support
Tier 3	Intensive interventions	Special support

Source: Adapted from Jahnukainen/Itkonen 2016.

The first tier in both models focuses on offering quality instruction for everybody and meeting the so-called “normal diversities” (see Table 3). The U.S. model focuses more heavily on evidence-based practices and scientifically validated curriculum. This difference might be explained by the different basic educational standards in these countries. In Finland, the variation between schools in terms of quality of instruction and the curriculum expectations is very narrow (Sahlberg 2015). Also, teacher education is rather similar and based on the same standards in all Finnish universities.

Table 3: Features of the Tier 1 intervention in the United States and in Finland

Tier 1	US	FIN
Target group	All students	All students
Interventions	Evidence-based practices to all students Scientifically validated core curricula	Quality instruction Differentiation, additional support
Key professional	General education teachers	General education teachers/Special education teacher

Source: Jahnukainen/Itkonen 2016.

In both models, Tier 2 focuses on “at-risk students,” for whom the general classroom or Tier 1 primary instruction is not sufficient. These students need “occasional and perhaps relatively short-term additional instruction or curriculum adaptations to meet their needs” (Vaughn/Denton 2008: 52) (see Table 4). Students with SLD (reading, writing, mathematics) receive services mainly at this Tier 2 level in the Finnish system (Thuneberg/Vainikainen 2015). Only students with severe language delay or combined with other disabilities will be guided to Tier 3. The Tier 2 target group is estimated to be more than 20 per cent of all students. If taking into account all students served yearly by the part-time special education,

this seems to be a quite correct estimation based on the past Finnish experiences (e.g. OFS 2018). At Tier 2 level the specialist also plays an important role in the implementation of the more targeted interventions in more traditional small groups (resource rooms) or in co-teaching. The special educator on this level needs to be a kind of jack-of all trades who is able to work with different kinds of students with a variety of special needs.

Table 4. Features of the Tier 2 intervention in the United States and in Finland

Tier 2	US	FIN
Target group (Estimated) size	At-risk student, not successful in Tier 1 Also, students who have been evaluated and qualify for special education under IDEA, but whose individualized education program has minimal support needs regarding goals, services, accommodations. 25-40% of the age group	At-risk students with mild learning and behavioral special needs 20-30% of the age group
Interventions	Individualised and/or small group support, in general classrooms or pull-out service	Targeted short term individualised and/or small group instruction, co-teaching or pull-out service
Key professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specialist (e.g. reading specialist) and other designated personnel as decided locally Special education teacher will be a case manager (working with classroom teachers) if the student is part of special education 	Special teacher in co-operation with classroom teacher

Source: Jahnukainen/Itkonen 2016.

Finally, Tier 3 in both countries consists of students who require more individualised, more intensive support. Table 5 depicts the two countries' systems.

Table 5: Features of the Tier 3 intervention in the United States and in Finland

Tier 3	US	FIN
Target group (Estimated) size	Students who require extensive amount of time and intensity to reach desired levels of proficiency; Students who qualify under IDEA for special education 4-6% of the age group	Students with significant continuing need(s) for special support 6-7% of the age group
Interventions	Special education, as well as other long-term services for students who are not eligible for special education under IDEA	Inclusive or special education based on IEP. General curricula can be individualised
Key professional	Highly qualified teacher	Special teacher
Additional professional	EA, classroom teacher Problem solving teams	EA, classroom teacher Student welfare groups

Source: Adapted from Jahnukainen/Itkonen 2016.

5. Policy Implications for Teacher Education

The Finnish “Education for All”-approach has developed during the decades and currently every student is served in the same comprehensive school system. Finnish public school is well known for its high equity and narrow standard deviation in terms of student performance. One key ingredient of equity is the broad variety of additional supports delivered under the *Learning and Schooling Support* system. Special teachers play an important role in this system as consultants, co-teachers and educators specialized in learning and behaviour support and student welfare. Every school in Finland has at least one special teacher working with the whole student population.

In Finland, special educators with this kind of profile have been trained since 1977 (Hautamäki et al. 1996), instead of traditional special teachers focusing on more specific disability groups. They are mostly responsible for organizing the Tier 2 level but participate also in organizing and consulting the actions in other levels. In teacher education, these special teachers do have their own route; however, the collaboration with other teacher students starts during undergraduate studies sharing the same basic studies in educational science. The in-service training is an important part of the professional development of these teachers. Also, the successful implementation of large-scale reforms calls for extensive in-service training offered to every teacher.

As U.S. states have similarly adopted RtI policies, the use of a tiered model obviously places new demands for teachers, and institutions that train them. The remainder of the section examines California as a U.S. case study for a state-wide teacher education innovation. States often function as “policy laboratories” for federal policies, as federal policies often grow from state initiatives (Manna 2007). In special education policy, California was the first state (1992) to require functional behavioural assessments and positive behavioural interventions for students who exhibited challenging behaviours. IDEA included such language in its 1997 reauthorization.

According to a policy memo from 2018, the California State Commission for Teacher Credentialing will be restructuring its elementary and special education teacher licensing. This means that universities, which provide such credentials, must rethink their teacher education programs. All teacher candidates in California will soon receive the same “trunk” of methods and foundations, after which specialization will occur. According to the new requirements, everyone receives a shared training on core curriculum, classroom management, and foundations. The idea is also that co-teaching and collaboration are infused in the training. After a shared core training, specialization on “mild to moderate support needs” will then occur. Other special education teacher licenses will include extensive support needs, deaf and hard of hearing, visual impairments, and early childhood special education. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss whether these teacher education reforms are a response to the tiered models already being implemented in school districts across California, or are a result of another event (e.g. an expected teacher retirement wave in the state).

6. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that both countries have adopted a tiered model for serving and/or diagnosing students who require more academic or behavioural support than what the general curriculum and classroom teaching provide.

In the United States, there is state-by-state variation in how a tiered model of support is implemented. This chapter focused on the use of RtI as a mechanism to diagnose students with LD. Hence, the tiered intervention concept did not override the medical model—children still need a diagnosis in order to receive special education. The ability for school-level teams to consider an intervention-based diagnosis in all 50 states however, is a move away from the “wait to fail” approach, which was a criticism of the discrepancy model (Itkonen/Jahnukainen 2010). It was beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the implementation of RtI at the school level, for example, the fidelity of the intervention models; or their effect in states’ LD prevalences. Also, beyond the scope here were the interactions between diagnoses using tiered models of intervention and the due process rights that IDEA guarantees for families (e.g., due process protections to disagree with a child’s evaluation or individualized education program). Thus, what appears to be the case in the U.S. is that it may, as a nation, implement a parallel system. IDEA has its eligibility evaluation requirements on one hand, and entitlements on the other (families’ right to request an evaluation or challenge the school district in instances of disagreement), both of which trump intervention-based diagnostic and service efforts (Musgrove 2011). IDEA is headed toward a regular reauthorization process sooner than later. It remains to be seen whether (and how) tiered supports will be further reflected in legislative special education language.

In the Finnish context, the implementation of the *learning and schooling support* has succeeded well, at least at the system level, and the latest statistics show a development towards more inclusive settings. However, the recent national evaluation investigating the actualized educational support system (Vainikainen et al. 2018) found regional differences in operational models of the tiered system. This is related to the fact that the Finnish legislation is rather loose, as it gives a lot of flexibility to municipalities to choose the actual ways to organise the support at the school level. Because part-time special education, in particular at the Tier 2 level, plays an important role, the reported lack of resources and professionals is an alarming finding, which needs to be solved by offering more funding for this purpose from both state and municipality sources.

In light of the international discourse on inclusion (see Richardson/Powell 2011) and our findings on the challenges in implementing Tier 2, a tiered system presents both possibilities and challenges. A tiered model works insofar as the people implementing it have the strategies, willingness, and both individual and systemic capacities to provide high-quality instruction and to determine when students’ movement between tiers is required (Lipsky 2010; Wilson 1989). By systemic capacity we refer to, for example, a school-wide approach where there are enough resources (e.g., staff, knowledge) that are utilized creatively to meet the needs of all students.

Finally, time will tell the relative success of tiered systems. The two countries compared here represent very different special education structures and disability constructions. A comparative, historical-institutional perspective can provide a deeper understanding of the efficacy and fidelity of tiered systems. U.S. special education originated in courts to remedy the lack of access to public schooling, and to provide individualized supports for those with

invisible disabilities who had access to schools but were left to their own devices. Thus, the development of special and inclusive education in the U.S. continues to move between civil rights, educational and medical frameworks. Eligibility determination continues to be required in order to receive services. In contrast, Finnish special and inclusive education originated from educator initiatives (Pesonen et al. 2015; Thuneberg et al. 2014). Tiered supports in general education context were provided inclusively as “best practice” even before legislation formalized them (Sahlberg 2015). Therefore, implementing a tiered model of supports in Finland does not require the un-doing of previously institutionalized structures. More research is needed on institutional and organizational structures and their effects on the outcomes of tiered systems. For example: Is the formalization in the Finnish context helping or hindering local support provisions by establishing implementation procedures and requirements? Such research would help school districts across countries and regions in planning and delivering education that reaches all learners.

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