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5 The state of inclusion in the state of inclusion?

Inclusion as principled practice in Finnish basic education

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Introduction

Inclusion in education is a globally shared principle with the aim of guaranteeing, securing, and promoting the equality and equity of people by removing barriers to learning and social participation. The Council of the European Union (2018) asserted that

> [e]nsuring effective equal access to quality inclusive education for all learners, including those of migrant origins, those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, those with special needs and those with disabilities – in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) – is indispensable for achieving more cohesive societies.
>
> (Clause 16: 3)

Finland has secured both financial and physical access to education for all learners regardless of their backgrounds. In a practical sense, *all students* attend a school providing public compulsory education at no cost to the families – a principle that covers education from preschool and first grade to higher education. At the policy level, Finland is committed to international declarations, programmes, and agreements with the aim of guaranteeing everyone's right to free education in their neighbourhood school as called for in the Salamanca declaration (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN General Assembly, 2007), which was ratified in Finland in 2016.

Furthermore, as argued by Simola and colleagues (2017), the quality of Finnish basic education is an internationally well-known success story written in the recent history of Finland. This story arose after the high ranking in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) over two decades ago. Regardless of a substantial decline in the results on various fronts – the most concerning being the increasing performance gap

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related to gender and socioeconomic backgrounds – Finland keeps ranking among the topcountries within The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (see, e.g., Ahonen, 2021a). The quality is often attributed to university-level teacher qualifications in early childhood and basic education, firm beliefs in education and the teaching profession, the pedagogical freedom experienced by teachers, and the absence of external inspections and testing (e.g., Sahlberg, 2011; Simola et al., 2017). Also, the success story is attributed to a well-developed part-time special education system (e.g., Kivirauma and Ruoho, 2007) and other factors, such as Finland being a Nordic welfare society (e.g., Simola et al., 2017).

However, providing equal access to education with the abovementioned attributes does not denote inclusion in education outright. According to the Finnish Disability Forum survey on how people with disabilities perceive their rights being met in Finnish society as per stipulated in the CRPD (Vesala and Vartio, 2019), students with disabilities[1] experience discrimination related to pedagogical accommodation, physical accessibility, accessibility for information, and language and communication throughout their schooling (Teittinen and Vesala, 2022). In addition, experiences of being bullied and excluded seem to shadow the school experiences of people with disabilities from generation to generation (Kivirauma, 2015; Laitinen and Pietilä, 2022). Discrimination, bullying, and exclusion are examples that reflect the non-inclusive state of the school system in terms of physical, pedagogical (e.g., information, communication), and socio-emotional (e.g., safety, belonging) accessibility of education, as they are system-level phenomena that cannot be reduced to representing individual level experiences. Instead, whether access to quality education is inclusive depends on how inclusion is conceptualised as a principle and as a practice.

We understand inclusion in education as being an ongoing principled *process* – not an *outcome* – that requires commitment and dedication to be carried out through alignment between inclusive policies, culture, and practices (e.g., Danforth and Naraian, 2015). This means that the values and aims of the philosophy of inclusion in education should be the guiding principles of the letter and the spirit of education policy. These include respecting and celebrating human diversity by denaturalising normality, rejecting medical and psychological explanations of educational difficulties, and the ensuing categorisations of difference, as well as promoting equality, equity, social participation, and a sense of belonging (see Armstrong et al., 2011; Graham and Slee, 2008; Thomas and Loxley, 2007; Schuelka et al., 2019).

In this chapter, we critically discuss the state of inclusion as a principled education practice in Finland. For this purpose, we present a literature synthesis (Jaakkola, 2020) to discuss and argue the multifaceted nature of inclusion in education in Finland. By synthesising the relevant yet distinct literature from the fields of education policy, disability studies, special education, and inclusive education, as well as relevant Finnish policy documents,

we establish that inclusion in education in Finland is not as straightforward and successful as it is often presented internationally.

The focus is on comprehensive schooling, also often referred to as basic education (grades 1–9, ages 7–16). In Finland, compulsory schooling ended after basic education until 2021. Since August 2022 compulsory schooling was extended to cover the last three years of post-basic education as well, called secondary education in the Finnish taxonomy (grades 10–12, ages 16–18). Our focus is on basic education because this is the period within compulsory schooling in Finland when equality and equity are the guiding principles in providing access to the same education for all. By contrast, secondary education, which is divided into vocational or upper secondary school education (or apprenticeship training), is selective in terms of study performance and not designed to be equally accessible – it is ableist by default. For instance, students' right to receive special education services in upper secondary school was not secured by law until 2018 nor enacted until 2021 (Act on General Upper Secondary Education 714/2018) and exclusionary vocational or apprenticeship training institutions for students with disabilities have long existed in Finland.

We will first provide an overview of the policy-level progress towards inclusion in education from the early years of Finnish independence to date, mainly focusing on 21st-century reforms and national-level initiatives relevant to understanding the state of current policy development. We will then move on to provide a critical overview of the ambiguous nature of inclusion in education at the national level, focusing on how inclusion as a principle of education practice is formed in education policy and governed to be implemented in practice. We will conclude by discussing competing ideologies that have an impact on education and challenge inclusion, followed by outlining some nationwide programmes and initiatives that illustrate the commitment in Finland to improve the basic education system on various fronts to respond better to some of the pressing barriers to inclusion in education. After all, Finnish education policy is strongly committed to reducing inequalities and meeting diversities in basic education and finding ways to change both the system and practice accordingly.

Inclusion as the agenda for special education – Progress towards inclusion in education in Finnish Education Policy

From the first basic education act to special education reform

UNESCO (2020: 25) defines inclusion as "a process that helps overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners", and equity as being "about ensuring fairness, where the education of all learners is seen as having equal importance". It is noteworthy that whereas the civil and human rights ideal of inclusion arose from disability activism, *inclusive education* emerged from the field of special education with long historical

roots in identifying, naming, and segregating differences and disabilities, and treating, rehabilitating, or accommodating it accordingly (Richardson and Powell, 2011). It is not surprising then that in Finland, the process of inclusion and equity is the history of special education tied to reforms relating to physical and social segregation and integration.

Finland has been committed to providing education for all since the first Basic Education Act in 1921 which declared a minimum of six years of compulsory elementary schooling. However, the Act exempted some students based on their geographical location or so-called feeblemindedness (Ahonen, 2021b; Jahnukainen, 2021). The first milestone on the path to equal access to schooling took place in the 1970s along with the Act on Basic Education Reform in 1968 (Act 467/1968). The reform secured a unified nine-year-long basic education system for all students, including students with disabilities (Jahnukainen, 2021; Kivirauma and Ruoho, 2007). Education for all was not fulfilled until the integration of students with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities from social welfare services into the comprehensive education system in 1985 followed by the integration of students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities in 1997 (Ahtiainen, Pulkkinen and Jahnukainen, 2021; Jahnukainen, 2021). Regardless of having achieved the goal of providing education for all at the system level, students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities were integrated into the system mostly by providing education in separate special schools or facilities with separate curricula (Jahnukainen and Korhonen, 2003).

Finland took significant milestones relating to inclusion in education at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s by enabling the organisation of full-time special education for students with disabilities in mainstream classes along with the current Basic Education Act launched in 1998 (628/1998). The next milestone occurred in 2007 when a committee appointed by the Ministry of Education published the Special Education Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2007). Triggered by rapidly increased numbers of students in special education in the early 2000s, the Special Education Strategy laid the ground for two significant education policy reforms in the 2010s, one concerned the special education support system and the other the funding of the special education system.

Special education reform

The Special Education Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2007) stressed the importance of developing preventative strategies and early interventions. The special education reform (Act 628/ 1998, amendment 642/2010) activated in 2011 introduced the presently existing support model in comprehensive schooling. Until 2011, support provisions were based on a two-tiered system: general and special education. Support in general education consisted of a wide range of practices applied to short-term support for every student, whereas students were entitled to special education owing to challenges

in schooling caused by disability, illness, functional deficit, or the need for mental health or social support (Thuneberg et al., 2013). The transfer to special education required an administrative decision and an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and special education could be provided in a general education classroom or in a segregated special educational setting. Part-time special education was provided in both general and special education.

As was suggested in the Special Education Strategy in 2007 (Ministry of Education, 2007), an additional middle-tier called intensified support was added in the current support model. From 2011 onwards, the three-tiered model, officially called *Learning and Schooling Support*, was implemented (Act 642/2010, Ministry of Education 2007, 27, 58). G*eneral support* (Tier 1) consists of every action made by the classroom or subject teacher in terms of differentiation, co-teaching, as well as school-wide efforts to meet students' diverse needs for support; *intensified support* (Tier 2) consists of remedial support by the class or subject teacher via co-teaching with the special educator and/or temporal individual or small group learning in part-time special education; and s*pecial support* (Tier 3), which requires an administrative decision, consists of specialised means of support as formulated in the IEP provided either in mainstream classes, part-time or full-time small group, or special schools (Jahnukainen and Itkonen, 2016).

The aim of this reform was to improve the provision of a continuum of services at schools by intensifying the means of support when moving from one tier to another. The reform emphasised the preventative role of the first two tiers, whereas the third tier should be considered only after the two preceding steps to support schooling were shown to be insufficient, in which case an official IEP needed to be formulated. However, there are no normative descriptions regarding what means of support should be provided in each of the tiers nor when students should move from one tier to another. Municipalities and schools possess autonomy regarding how to interpret, apply, and realise tiered support as it is a matter of municipal policy to structure and implement education at the local level (see e.g., Pesonen et al., 2015).

It is also noteworthy that since the beginning of the 2000s, diagnoses have played no official role in the Finnish support system. In addition to structural change, the Special Education Strategy also addressed the need for a conceptual change regarding students' needs for support (Ministry of Education, 2007). Identification of the need for more support as well as planning and implementation of support should be grounded on pedagogical evaluation and only supplemented with psychological or medical statements if necessary. The idea of the reform was to place the child who needs various means of support at the centre of the pedagogical environment and focus on modifying the context accordingly. Through these emphases, the responsibility for educating the heterogeneous student population shifted from the professional realm of special education to general education. A new needs-based pedagogical language was also implemented. The earlier pedagogical

discourse construed the somewhat overtly stigmatising idea of *special pupils*, putting emphasis on child characteristics that deviate from "normalcy". The contemporary discourse communicates about *special needs*, allegedly placing the focus more on pedagogical contexts from which individual *special educational needs* (SEN) emerge. Thus, the discourse and rhetoric about *students with SEN* gained ground.

Reform of funding the special education system

The 21st-century policy reforms also had obvious ties to financial factors (see Ahtianen et al., 2021). The government financial aid system was changed at the same time as the special education support system. In Finland, the government allocates funding for education to municipalities, but the municipalities have autonomy in how they fund education and other public expenditures. The funding of the special education system was reformed in 2010 as part of a larger reform aimed at simplifying the government transfer system for basic services (Ahtiainen et al., 2021).

Prior to the reform, special education funding was weighted, meaning that a municipality received funding from the government based on the number of students receiving full-time special education. Weighted funding was 1.5 times more than the basic funding provided per student in most of the cases, but 2.5 or 4 times more than basic funding in case of students with severe disabilities or serious illness, owing to which the duration of their compulsory education was extended. After the reform, the education providers continued receiving weighted funding only for students for whom the duration of compulsory education was extended. The proportion of these pupils has been marginal over the years. In autumn 2022, 9,7 per cent of all students received some degree of special support (Tier 3), and of these, 22 per cent had the duration of their compulsory education extended (Statistics Finland, 2023).

Before the reform, the weighted system had functioned as an incentive to identify students for full-time special education. Despite allocating funding according to special education provisions, municipalities had the freedom to allocate the funds independently for other purposes. As research points out, the weak financial situation of the municipality increased the number of students receiving special education services between 2001 and 2010 (Kirjavainen, Pulkkinen and Jahnukainen, 2014). The purpose of the funding reform was to curtail the increase in the share of students in special education as well as the growth of costs of special education service provision. In this sense, it seems to have the sought-after effect at least in the early 2010s. Research shows that between 2008 and 2014, the reform incentivised municipalities to decrease the identification rate of students receiving full-time special education; however, full-time special education and special class placements were more common in large municipalities whereas part-time special education was more common in small municipalities (Pulkkinen et al., 2020).

The socioeconomic characteristics of the municipality seem to have some influence on special education provision in Finland, as segregated placement is more common in urban, densely populated areas which are in a better financial situation (Kirjavainen et al., 2014; Pulkkinen et al., 2020). The demographic reality may also be that urban areas entail more students with disabilities and more supply and demand for segregated schooling provisions, whereas in rural areas, this might not be the case. However, the result calculations made by the National Audit Office of Finland of special education within basic education after the reform pointed out that the socioeconomic background of students receiving special education support is lower than those in general education, suggesting that municipalities with a lower socioeconomic status have more students that could benefit from special education than other municipalities but no resources to do so. The report critically concludes that the economic perspective is strongly present in the reform, which seemingly gives the state some surplus but causes the municipalities to arrange even more multifaceted education with even more dwindling resources (Valtiontalouden tarkastusvirasto, 2013).

The development plan for education and research 2011–2016 formed by the Ministry of Education and Culture emphasised the economic point of view when bringing up the demand of cost-effectiveness in education (see Ketovuori and Pihlaja, 2016). This economic perspective follows the idea of neo-liberal policy focusing on efficiency and calculation (see Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). It seems as though the reform can also be interpreted through the words of Loxley and Thomas (2001) as being antithetical to inclusion as per promoting equality and equity in education. As argued by Pulkkinen and colleagues (2020), for the education reforms to improve the support services for students and to reduce regional differences in special education services, government funding should ensure that it is possible to arrange sufficient support services within all municipalities. Thus, funding reforms should align with the aims of education reforms.

Conceptualisation of "demanding special support"

Since the enactment of the three-tiered *Learning and Schooling Support* in Finland in 2011, concerns about the inclusive education arrangements for students who often require frequent interprofessional support in their schooling arose among special education scholars. This concern was explicitly directed at schooling arrangements of students with severe mental health issues, multiple, severe, or intellectual disabilities, or Autism Spectrum Condition. Singling out this diagnostic disability grouping of students was warranted by the observation that these groups of students had so far received little attention in previous research and development projects. Thus, a research and development project called VETURI, which was funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture and undertaken in 2012–2015, introduced the concept *vaativa erityinen tuki* (verbatim translation: *demanding special*

support) (see Kontu et al., 2017; Pesonen, 2016). The idea was to conceptualise child-centred praxis provided in interprofessional collaboration (Äikäs and Pesonen, 2022; Äikäs, Syrjämäki and Pesonen, 2022).

To some extent, the conceptualisation of demanding special support is contradictory to the idea of providing pedagogical support without diagnostic premises. In this regard, it seems as if it was developed as a reaction to maintain the Finnish interpretation of inclusion that existed prior to the special education reform or to a concern about the Finnish school system being inadequately prepared for the changes the special education reform called for and brought forth. Regardless of the misleading name that paints the picture of the fourth support tier, the initial idea of the conceptualisation was not restricted to the context of special education nor tied to any tier of support, but rather it was to complement the existing tiered support by emphasising the diversity of needs for means of support that cannot be met within the pedagogical actions in the three-tiered support frame alone (Äikäs and Pesonen, 2022). For example, pupils who require interprofessional support, such as temporary hospital schooling due to a sudden traumatic event, fall under this conceptualisation.

Although the concept is neither administrative nor has a role in normative governance, it has consolidated its position in the contemporary education policy documents and practice. In 2018 the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education established a nationwide network called *vaativan erityisen tuen verkosto* (verbatim translation: the *demanding special support network*) or *VIP network*, which currently includes most of the municipalities in Finland. According to the network's website, the name VIP (an abbreviation of *very important person*) stands for students *in need of demanding special support* and cultivates the child-centred focus of support provisions (VIP Network, 2022). The VIP network is coordinated by the National Centre for Learning and Consulting (Valteri), which operates all six government-owned special schools – so-called Valteri schools – under the Finnish National Agency for Education. The overall aim of the network is to establish best practices to support the principle of providing schooling for every student in their neighbourhood schools by developing *demanding special support* practices as well as preventative and early support in early childhood and comprehensive education (VIP Network, 2022).

Ambivalence of inclusion as principled education practice

Ambiguous education policy guidance about inclusion in education

Policymaking is a fundamentally political process. It involves major trade-offs between values. Public policies in education simultaneously deal with a range of values, such as equality, excellence, autonomy, accountability, and efficiency. This means policymakers must assemble, organise, and order

them, configuring them in such a way as to render them somewhat consistent. This requires privileging some values ahead of others and re-articulating their meanings (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010, 72). Policy is constructed and presented discursively in public documents, like legislation or core curriculum (see Ozga, 2000).

The guiding norms of education include laws, decrees, and the National Core Curriculum (NCC). Inclusion has occurred in the Finnish education system through a commitment to the international human rights frameworks such as the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca Declaration described inclusion as the new norm in education and demanded the principle that all students attend their neighbourhood schools. The values of the Salamanca Declaration are manifest in the Finnish Basic Education Act, perhaps the clearest in section 6 (Act 628/1998, 6 §), which emphasises the principle of allocating students to their own teaching group and neighbourhood school by means of various flexible arrangements – unless their best interests necessitate transfer to another teaching group or school in order to provide support – and in section 2 (Act 628/1998, 2 §), in which the promotion of equality and equity are declared to be the aims of basic education.

However, the term "inclusion" is not mentioned in the Basic Education Act at all (see Jahnukainen, 2011; Vitikka et al., 2021). A task force was established by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture to develop a programme to promote equal learning opportunities in early childhood, preschool, and basic education (Oikeus oppia [in English: Right to Learn] development programme). In their interim report, they stated that despite the lack of inclusion being mentioned in the Basic Education Act the views of inclusion are conveyed through sections 3 and 17 (Vitikka et al., 2021, 34). These sections state that the education should be based on the child's age and prerequisites for learning in a way that promotes the child's healthy growth and development (Basic Education Act 628/1998, 3 §) and that special needs education is to be organised in line with the student's interests and the prerequisites for the local education provision either within a general educational setting, a part-time or full-time special educational setting, or in some other suitable setting (Basic Education Act 628/1998, 17 §). The idea that these sections convey the views of inclusion is contestable. As Tervasmäki (2022) argues, section 3 outlines the principles for sensitive, child-centred education provision without taking a stand on how to implement this based on the principles of inclusion, whereas section 17 is merely about the special education placement ranging between integration and segregation.

Thus, Finnish education legislation does not explicitly provide a guide about inclusion in education. At a normative level, the term inclusion is mentioned only once in the NCC determined by the Finnish National Agency for Education. NCC is a significant educational policy document that defines the guiding operating principles of compulsory education, including values,

objectives, and general principles and subject syllabi of basic education that every teacher and education provider must implement. It creates the foundation for local curriculum work within the municipality and individual school levels. Despite the common framework, municipalities and individual schools have considerable freedom to interpret the curriculum in their own fashion (Lähdemäki, 2019).

The only reference to inclusion in the NCC is located under the section "Mission of basic education". To paraphrase the core message of this lone passage,

> schools comply with principles of inclusion in order to support every pupil's learning, development and wellbeing, and to build positive identity as a human being, learner and community member in a society built upon the values of democracy and human rights.
>
> (Honkasilta et al., 2019, 487)

In principle, the rhetoric in the NCC seems to live up to the inclusive ideology: equality and participation are the most cited values in the NCC which contains crucial content for building inclusive modus operandi at schools (Pihlaja and Silvennoinen, 2020; Tervasmäki, 2022; Vanhanen, Vainikainen and Mäkihonko, 2022).

However, guidance about inclusion in education in the NCC is ambiguous. First, inclusion is not conceptualised in the NCC (Honkasilta et al., 2019; Pihlaja and Silvennoinen, 2020; Tervasmäki, 2022) nor is any of the content including principles and practices explicitly linked to inclusion (Tervasmäki, 2022). In his in-depth discourse analysis on NCC, Tervasmäki (2022) points out how this translates into a contradictory portrayal of the ideology of inclusion. On the one hand, the values of social inclusion are present in the emphasis on accessibility of teaching and learning, individualised supports, as well as school cultures built on values of equity and equality, anti-discrimination, participation, interdependency, and reciprocity. On the other hand, this view of inclusion as social participation is weakened by simultaneously equating principles of inclusion with integration and segregation, paradoxically portraying inequality, exclusion, and marginalisation as both a threat to inclusion in education and a potential means of implementing it (Tervasmäki, 2022).

Second, the NCC is strongly written on ableist premises. As pointed out by Pihlaja and Silvennoinen (2020) and Tervasmäki (2022), the valued participation in the NCC is based on the idea of an active, self-regulated, and autonomous pupil while the message regarding the role of the community in which this valued participation ideally takes place remains weak. The scarcity of instructions on how to differentiate teaching for students with disabilities is another example of ableism in the NCC, sustaining the dichotomy between general and special education as pedagogical provisions and as professions (Tervasmäki, 2022). However, the most explicit form of ableism is the silence

on disability, as diversity is linked to language and cultural diversity (Pihlaja and Silvennoinen, 2020; see also Tervasmäki, 2022).

Current education policy in Finland seems to present a discrepancy between ideologies of inclusion and education excellence (Pihlaja and Silvennoinen, 2020, see also Lempinen, 2018; Silvennoinen and Pihlaja, 2012). Paradoxically, while inclusion as a concept and as a guiding ideology in education has established its central position in Finnish education policy (Hakala and Leivo, 2015), the status of learners with disabilities has increasingly been marginalised in normative policy documents. Researchers have pointed out the trend of reducing or omitting content and guidance related to learner diversity and diverse ways, pace, and the development of learning throughout the development processes of education policy documents (Ketovuori and Pihlaja, 2016; Tervasmäki, 2022). This reflects a change towards harder values in education policy as per neoliberal ideology, which emphasises competence, efficiency, and good learning outcomes and cultivates the idea of an economically independent citizen as being an ideal subject. Students with diverse cultural and language backgrounds seem to be worthy of paying attention to in the current neo-liberal education policy governance pegging the question, where do students with disabilities fit into this picture of inclusion in education?

Ambivalence of inclusion as principled practice

Education for all *preferably* provided in neighbourhood schools forms the liturgy of inclusive education in Finland, and municipalities are responsible for organising basic education accordingly. In this regard, student placement is one example reflecting the state of inclusion in education at the system level. As previously mentioned, the general trend of serving students who need more individualised support at schooling since the late 1990s has been towards full-time or part-time placement in general education, and the number of special schools[2] has decreased steadily (Jahnukainen 2011; 2021; Statistics Finland, 2023). However, no information is available on whether some special schools are closed instead of them being merely administratively merged with a general education school into one school unit while in practice still physically existing as its own service provider. According to the Register of Educational Institutions, some schools that have been merged are listed as mainstream schools (Statistics Finland, 2022a), yet they provide education full-time in separate small groups or classes based on the disability grouping of students (e.g., autism) or other rationale.

According to Statistics Finland (2023), in autumn 2022 9,7 per cent of all students received special support (Tier 3). Among them, 34 per cent received education full-time in a segregated setting in grades 1-6 and 29 per cent in grades 7-9, either in special schools (5,7 per cent) or in separate small groups or classes in schools listed as mainstream schools. In addition, another 32 per cent of students in the third support tier in mainstream schools received

education in an exclusionary setting part-time. Statistics Finland (2023) defines inclusion on the basis of placement, depicting that inclusion means that the student receives education 80–100 per cent of the time in a general education group. Although this statistical approach does not distinguish inclusion from physical integration (i.e., placement into a general education group without adequate support), and there is a huge difference between students spending closer to 20 per cent or closer to 100 per cent of their time in small classes or groups outside general education, it is illustrative of the use of separate small groups and exclusionary classrooms in Finland, which is among the highest in Europe (Saloviita, 2020a).

It is reasonable to argue that aspects of the Finnish basic education system are inclusive, in that students have relatively easy access to additional support without formal evaluation and diagnostic labelling of any sort, and the additional support for students with specific learning difficulties (i.e., reading, writing, and mathematics) has almost from the beginning been organised as part of general education and focused on early intervention (Itkonen and Jahnukainen, 2010). However, the extent and the way of using separate schools, classes, and a small-group pull-out model calls into question whether the Finnish interpretation of inclusive education contrasts with the notion of inclusive education. Of course, this depends on the view on inclusive education.

On the one hand, the Finnish approach is in line with the Salamanca Declaration's idea of education for all adapted to diverse individual circumstances (UNESCO, 1994). On the other hand, CRPD article 24 states that people with disabilities are not to be excluded from the general education system based on disability (UN General Assembly, 2007). In Finland, students with severe disabilities tend to be taught separately from the mainstream education (see Pirttimaa et al., 2015; Niemi, Mietola and Helakorpi, 2010). Also, parents seem settled and satisfied with the segregated schooling arrangement; the more support the children need and receive, the less important neighbourhood school allocation is (Lempinen, 2018). This is a revealing example of the paradox of inclusion in education. The child-centred approach provides education and a sense of belonging among peers deemed "special" while the system simultaneously excludes from social participation among peers deemed "normal" (see, e.g., Niemi et al., 2010).

The education policy provides an abstract, vague, and ambivalent notion of inclusion let alone weak guidance about implementing inclusion in education, leaving the idea of inclusion as principled education practice open to interpretation. Not surprisingly, municipalities and schools practice inclusion in education at the local level in several ways; some implement inclusive education by re-organising and resourcing practices accordingly, some practice physical integration by placing students in a mainstream education setting while cutting resources from special needs education provisions, and some maintain the already established segregating special education

practices (Lempinen, 2018; Lintuvuori & Rämö, 2022; Lintuvuori, 2019; Jahnukainen 2015). This ambivalence in practices also becomes reflected in teachers' accounts in Finland (Honkasilta et al., 2019) and those of the news media (Pitkänen et al., 2021). Inclusion is deemed unsuccessful based on attempts to provide cost-effective equal access to education by closing special schools or groups followed by integrating students formerly taught in these settings into mainstream classrooms without adequate means of support. Simultaneously, inclusion is portrayed as being feasible through resourcing, planning, and implementation of education provision (Honkasilta et al., 2019; Pitkänen et al., 2021).

The wide variation among municipalities originates from contextual causes, such as local political traditions, special education policies, and existing services (Lintuvuori, 2019). This is illustrated in the study by Laakso and colleagues (2022) on how the heads of local education departments perceive inclusion and inclusive leadership in basic education. The researchers found that the leaders generally have a positive attitude about inclusion, but they conceptualise inclusion in varying ways. Most respondents viewed special schools and classes as part of inclusive education; the discrepancy in views concerned the suitability of these education settings for students with learning difficulties, intellectual disabilities, or problems with the social and emotional spheres of schooling or life (Laakso et al., 2022). This view is shared by Finnish teachers and teacher students (Takala, Pihlaja and Viljamaa, 2022). Several studies have reported that teachers are critical of the idea that a non-segregated approach to inclusive education benefits all students, particularly students with intellectual disabilities (Moberg et al., 2020) or manifesting emotional or behavioural problems (Moberg et al., 2020; Yada and Savolainen, 2019; Saloviita, 2020a). The latter grouping of students also tends to be excluded from participatory practices more easily than other peers (Butler and Naukkarinen, 2017).

Furthermore, local education leaders regarded their job as mainly being about management, passing the leadership on implementing inclusion from municipalities to individual schools (Laakso et al., 2022). With schools possessing strong autonomy in interpreting and implementing inclusion as principled practice, it seems obvious that if the head teachers and teachers are not committed to inclusive education, the chances of success are greatly reduced. In her dissertation on school strategy and management, Kristiina Engblom-Pelkkala (2018) concludes that although head teachers are a central figure in school management, they face challenges doing so because of multiform oversight by the government, the way the school is treated as a unit of the economy, and the difficult-to-change practices of the school. In practice then, "our school systems do not become inclusive before the key players, namely teachers, have acquired the needed positive attitudes as well as the necessary skills and beliefs in their abilities to implement [inclusive education] successfully" (Moberg et al., 2020, 112).

Polarised teachers implementing inclusion in education

Teachers' attitudes to inclusion in Finland are ambivalent, polarised, and predominantly negative (Saloviita, 2020a, 2020b), and so is the media representation (Pitkänen et al., 2021). In turn, this translates into pre-service teachers' ambivalent and negative attitudes about inclusion (Takala et al., 2022). This ambivalence is well illustrated in a large sample size study on teachers' attitudes about inclusion, which found that despite the vastly negative attitude about inclusion – 20 per cent even strongly opposing inclusion – a small majority of teachers accepted the basic idea that students who need individualised means of support at school can be effectively instructed in regular classrooms (Saloviita, 2020a). Thus, it seems as if teachers simply do not want to get rid of segregated education arrangements even when acknowledging it as being pedagogically possible. In this regard, research on teachers' accounts (Honkasilta et al., 2019) and media representation (Pitkänen et al., 2021) reveal how inclusive education is both supported and opposed by referring to pedagogical and resource factors. Additionally, inclusive education is supported by arguing for students' right to equality and equity and opposed with arguments regarding teachers' strain, workload and lack of adequate expertise, and contemporary inclusive practices at local schools violating all students' rights to quality education (Honkasilta et al., 2019; see also Pitkänen et al., 2021; Saloviita 2020a, 2020b; Takala et al., 2012).

Pre- and in-service teachers feel unprepared for implementing inclusion in education when it comes to teaching students with intellectual disabilities or manifesting emotional or behavioural problems (Moberg et al., 2020; Yada and Savolainen, 2019; Saloviita, 2020a; Savolainen et al., 2012; Takala et al., 2012; Paju, 2021; Saha and Pesonen, 2022). Although teachers' experiences of unpreparedness cannot solely be addressed in teacher training, these issues are currently scantly addressed in teacher education programme curricula (Kärnä et al., 2022; Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023; Närhi et al., 2022). Pre-service class and subject teachers study approximately five credits (i.e., one course) worth of special needs education contents as part of their mandatory course work (300 credits), at best providing them with an introduction to evidence-based instruction and differentiation. This hardly addresses the competence needs in schools.

Teachers' negative stance about inclusion in education let alone its predominance seems rather absurd when inclusion is viewed as actions taken in response to concerns over equality, equity, and desegregation rooted in social justice. Teachers, education administrators, and policymakers are undoubtedly not against these values, principles, and human rights when opposing or being negative about inclusion in education. Although teachers do regard aspiration to create inclusive schools and pedagogies as prerequisites for inclusion in education (Honkasilta et al., 2019) – suggesting that not all colleagues are that willing – the apparent negative stance and

polarised views on inclusion are not solely based on attitudes but on teachers' experiences regarding access to adequate resources. Coming from teachers, these resources include

> smaller class/group sizes, universal design, adaptable learning environments, pedagogical materials, teaching staff resources (e.g., special education teachers, co-teachers, supply teachers, school attendance and personal assistants), student welfare staff resources and services, updating career training and work supervision for teachers, and paid time for planning of teaching or co-teaching in an inclusive learning environment.
>
> (Honkasilta et al., 2019: 489)

Teachers' positive attitude about inclusion has been associated with their use of various instructional strategies and differentiation methods, a higher sense of teacher efficacy, co-teaching, and viewing special classes as inappropriate places for students who need individualised means of support (Kokko, Takala and Pihlaja, 2021; Saloviita, 2019; Savolainen, Malinen and Schwab, 2020; Saloviita, 2018). Adequate pre- and in-service training, reliance on one's own competence and involvement in the assessment and planning processes of individualised support (i.e., experience in teaching students with disabilities), confidence in support networks, and access to educational resources (e.g., co-teaching; in-classroom teaching assistant) are all associated with having a positive attitude about inclusion (Lakkala and Thuneberg, 2018; Saloviita, 2019, 2020b; Savolainen, Malinen and Schwab, 2020; Paju, 2021). In addition, age, gender, and teacher category are associated with positive attitudes in that younger, female, and special education teachers are reported to be more positive than older, male, and subject and classroom teachers (Lakkala and Thuneberg, 2018; Saloviita, 2019, 2020b). Thus, demographic (cultural) factors aside, teachers' stance reflects system-level factors deriving from how municipalities or schools interpret and implement inclusion in education.

Existing barriers to inclusion in education

The reduction of inclusion into the SEN discourse

It is argued within inclusive education and disability studies scholarships that to emphasise inclusion as a policy discourse advocating social justice, democracy, and equity, inclusion in education should be disentangled from market-based neoliberal values of governance and disassociated from the SEN discourse (Graham and Harwood, 2011; Danforth and Naraian, 2015; Glazzard, 2016; Schuelka et al., 2019). The well-meaning child-centred discourse focuses on the disability within the child instead of the disabling social, political, institutional and material factors.

The discourse on inclusion in education in Finland is the discourse on SEN, not so much a discourse on rights beyond that of access to education and

learning or being a valued profitable member of a society. In this discourse, whether cultivated by education policy documents (e.g., Tervasmäki, 2022), local education leaders (Laakso et al., 2022), school principals (Jahnukainen, 2015), teachers (Honkasilta et al., 2019) or news media (Pitkänen et al., 2021), the rhetoric of physical integration, and assimilation is equated with inclusion. The ethical and philosophical foundation of promoting social participation characterised by equality and equity among peers is muffled by pragmatic concerns regarding how to organise teaching for a group of students characterised by their so-called special needs in an education system originally not designed for including *them* in their peers deemed "normal".

As pointed out by Pitkänen and colleagues (2021) in their analysis of news media discourse on inclusive education, this arbitrary group of students with SEN is portrayed as a homogenous group of students with either behavioural problems or an immigrant background. As in the education policy discourse (Pihlaja and Silvennoinen, 2020), disability remains marginal in what is generally communicated to people about inclusion in education via news media (Pitkänen et al., 2021). In other words, inclusion is reduced to SEN, yet disability inclusion is excluded from the picture.

The contemporary rhetoric on *demanding special support* has to some extent further strengthened this trend. The well-meaning yet confusing conceptualisation of the child-centred interprofessional collaborative praxis distinguishes students categorised under certain pathological diagnoses from the already vague concept of SEN by creating a distinction between SEN and demanding SEN. This is already seen in practice. Äikäs and Pesonen (2022) report how the concept of demanding special support is regarded as a fourth tier of support by some teachers and students in teacher education. This can potentially strengthen the professional boundaries, related responsibilities, and segregated practices between different agents in support of provisions of schooling. Thus, to clarify the concept and its role in relation to the existing three-tiered support system, scholars have later suggested describing the concept in the literature as *vaativa monialainen tuki* (verbatim translation: demanding interprofessional support) or *vaativa tuki* (verbatim translation: demanding support) (Äikäs and Pesonen, 2022; Äikäs, Syrjämäki and Pesonen, 2022) and use the concept *significant support* in English (Äikäs et al., 2022).

As per suggested by scholars, the concept will change in the near future within the compulsory schooling as a result of the development programme called *Oikeus oppia* (in English: Right to learn) initiated by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The concept *demanding interprofessional support* will be adopted in both early childhood education and basic education (Alila et al., 2022) whereas in vocational education *demanding special support* is already a legal requirement for students with severe learning difficulties, disabilities or illness (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö [OKM], 2019), and six institutions alone are permitted to organise demanding special support in a segregated setting (Opetushallitus [OPH], 2021). Thus, in vocational

schooling, the concept is strongly segregative whereas it is not yet known in early childhood and basic education wherein the concept will settle between the boundaries of segregation, integration and inclusion, and with what outcomes.

While changes in nomenclature may communicate better about or clarify the core idea of praxis under conceptualisation, they do not address the issue of whose voice is being represented. The language of "demanding (special) support" or "special needs" is not supported in the language of the CRPD. This is simply because they gain meanings vis-à-vis ableism and established typical practices (e.g., Vehmas, 2010). In other words, so-called needs – that is means of support that likely represent the viewpoint of professionals authorised to name what the subject's support needs are (see, Honkasilta, 2017) – are described as *special* because they deviate from the business-as-usual practices and established norms and normative expectations for being, functioning, and performing. Also, this bureaucratic nomenclature tends to be used as identity categories and as such comes with stigmatising effects (e.g., Honkasilta 2019; Niemi, 2022). In this regard, as the rhetoric of *children with SEN* emerged along with the special education reform, so has the rhetoric of *children with demanding SEN* emerged in vernacular in recent years in the field of education (see, Äikäs and Pesonen, 2022). Instead, the CRPD uses the term *reasonable accommodation* with the following definition:

> [N]ecessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.
>
> (CRPD, Article 2)

The language of CRPD is relevant when discussing the support provisions within the framework of inclusive values in education. It is particularly relevant in the context of conceptualising *demanding (special or interprofessional) support*, since apart from the notion of reacting to sudden needs for support, these concepts are based on singling out certain disability groups as per the medical model of disability. In their definition of reasonable accommodation, the disability advocacy movement built on disability activism refrains from imposing a burden on service providers while seeing the varying needs for support being met. This begs the question about what the provision of reasonable accommodation determined as special, demanding, or significant is based on: is it available resources, institutional operating cultures, attitudes, the number of services or service providers, or what?

Both the contemporary concept demanding special support and the forthcoming demanding interprofessional support encapsulate the viewpoints of service providers, education policymakers, administrators, and teachers, not the viewpoint of individuals who rely on reasonable accommodation to function in schooling and/or participate in it as a valued member. At best, the

contemporary conceptualisation and its proposed alternatives communicate that administering a support network is demanding owing to existing system-level structures. When child-centredness is promoted or advocated through disability labels (SEN, demanding special support) and diagnoses (intellectual disability, autism), and coordinated by institutions operating special schools, the question remains about the extent to which the child-centred focus – the flagship of Finnish education – enables segregation and exclusion to be maintained under the banner of promoting inclusion in education.

The vicious circle of the ambiguity of inclusion in education governance

Inclusive ideology portrays a risk for the status quo prevailing in school cultures and professional practices in Finland (Paju, 2021; Mäkinen, 2018; Pitkänen et al., 2021). Successful inclusion in education requires strong simultaneous top-down support (e.g., policy) and bottom-up support (e.g., teachers) (e.g., Pesonen et al., 2015). Presently, resistance of both the status quo and inclusion in education emerges from both the top and the bottom.

One conclusion of Birgit Paju's (2021) dissertation on factors influencing the collaboration of teaching staff to develop so-called inclusive teaching practices (i.e., pedagogies that enable social participation and learning) was that the development of inclusive practices is demanding due to the existing historically evolved contradictions between the boundaries of general and special education. Similarly, Hakala and Leivo (2015) concluded their investigation on the contradictions between an inclusive education ideology and the national education policy in Finland that the implementation of inclusion has been slow due to the national policy having been cautious and burdened by this dual system. This cautiousness creates a vicious circle, as Saloviita (2020a) concludes:

> the negative climate towards inclusion prevents the legislation that would guarantee adequate resources for mainstream teachers who have students with support needs in their classrooms. The lack of legal guarantees, in turn, prevents negative teacher attitudes towards inclusive education from changing.
>
> (Saloviita, 2020a: 64)

Not only do varying practices at the municipality level reflect the lack of clear education policy governance but also the lack of willingness to lead towards inclusion in education from the top-down.

Inclusion in education could be promoted by pre- and in-service teacher training with particular emphasis on special educational knowhow and adequate resourcing to support teachers, students, and their families, as well as restructuring collaborative pedagogical practices and interprofessional support networks (e.g., Paju, 2021; Äikäs and Pesonen, 2022; Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023). This requires a more explicit commitment to leadership towards inclusion in education in policy, local

practices, and in teacher training programmes at universities. The Finnish education system is not governed for implementing inclusion in education through interprofessional collaboration that could provide support for all students in their neighbourhood schools in ways that would ensure social participation and a sense of belonging in that very school.

Towards clearer principles for promoting inclusion in education

A recent report by UNESCO (2020) on how inclusive education has been globally implemented and promoted 25 years after the Salamanca Declaration outlines the following six recommendations to inform actions that should be taken to promote inclusion and equity within education systems: (1) establish clear definitions of what is meant by inclusion and equity in education; (2) use evidence to identify contextual barriers to the participation and progress of learners; (3) ensure that teachers are supported in promoting inclusion and equity; (4) design the curriculum and assessment procedures with all learners in mind; (5) structure and manage education systems in ways that will engage all learners; and (6) involve communities in the development and implementation of policies that promote inclusion and equity in education.

The threat of inclusion being a watered-down cost-saving agenda has been acknowledged by policymakers, and actions to promote inclusion better are on the horizon. The Ministry of Education and Culture launched a two-year development programme in 2020 called *Oikeus oppia* (in English: The right to learn) to improve the quality and equality in basic education. The aims of the programme targeted at strengthening (1) equality in education and learning outcomes (e.g., socioeconomic, regional, and gender factors in learning outcomes); (2) the existing Learning and Schooling support provision system and pupils' well-being (e.g., best practices to promote inclusion and three-tiered support); and (3) the quality of teaching (e.g., pre- and in-service teacher training) (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022a). These measures would assist in striving to establish effective operation models for consideration in the preparatory work of new reforms aimed at securing the neighbourhood school principle, positive discrimination funding, and free basic education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022a).

Based on the final report of the programme (Alila et al., 2022), it appears that inclusion as a principled practice will be strengthened in education policy in a range of ways (also, Poikola, 2022; Pihlaja, 2022). The need for defining inclusion in the basic education act as the premise and value system in preschool and basic education is recognised, and practices supporting these premises are planned to be clarified in the next NCC. Also, the final report shows that the tiered Learning and Schooling support system will be strengthened in the Basic Education Act and the NCC by providing clear definitions and guidance for their implementation (Alila et al., 2022). Thus, forthcoming changes are likely to address the ambivalence and ambiguity

caused by the current lack of normative descriptions regarding the implementation of the tiered support system.

As for ambivalence practices, the Ministry of Education and Culture has also supported many projects aimed at developing inclusion in education at all stages of the education system, and action plans to improve the inclusive mode of operation in local schools (e.g., co-teaching, multi-sectoral, and interprofessional collaboration and consultation) and in teacher training programmes. One example is the HOHTO project (2021–2022), the aim of which is to strengthen the special educational skills, as well as the technological and pedagogical skills of teacher educators to support their well-being and learning in the profession (see Ministry of education and culture, 2022b). In addition, regardless of the conceptual critique of the demanding special support presented in this chapter, the concept has helped to summon the will to develop school systems through the national VIP network, which plays a significant role in these future steps towards improving inclusion in education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022a). The idea of establishing a national network that provides consultation and support for schooling and learning in collaboration with local schools is promising if ambitiously governed according to the letter and spirit of inclusion.

Concluding remarks

The aim of inclusion in education should go beyond ideas, structures, and practices currently conceptualised through the rhetoric of "inclusive education", "special education", "special needs", or "integration" (Schuelka et al., 2019). Such conceptual rhetoric reflects and strengthens the distinction between mainstream, special, and inclusive and maintains the idea of inclusion being about providing education for marginalised and/or disadvantaged groups either into mainstream education (i.e., inclusive education setting) or as part of segregated education (i.e., special education setting). As depicted by Schuelka et al. (2019: xxxiii) in their introduction to "The handbook of inclusion and diversity in education", "inclusive education is meaningful only when embedded in understandings about community and communality; only when seen as both reflective of, and as creating, inclusion in society". A positive sense of belonging and identities, health, safety, acceptance, learning, recognition, and friendships, as well as meaningful societal participation and contribution, including employment opportunities, are all part of inclusion in society and thus are aims for quality education. In turn, class, gender, race, and disability, racialisation, ableism, disablism, and hetero- and cisnormativity, as well as geographic location, poverty, and resource allocation are examples of intersecting issues that pose barriers to inclusion in education (Schuelka et al., 2019).

This chapter has highlighted how varied the inclusive educational arrangements can be due to the interpretation of policy by municipalities, principals, and teachers. These different actors are bringing their experiences,

values, and professional norms into their interpretation of policies and pedagogical practices which impacts the state of inclusion in diverse ways. So far, regardless of the political liturgy of strong commitment to inclusion in Finland, the vagueness of the conceptualisation, the reducing of inclusion to a special education agenda cultivated through (demanding) a special needs discourse, and the lack of centralised governance of the fundamental ideals of inclusion in education pose a threat of watering down the agenda of inclusion.

In line with Armstrong and colleagues' (2016) notion that when the term inclusion is used in diverse ways with varying meanings it becomes meaningless, we are concerned whether inclusion or inclusive education are (on the verge of becoming) politically correct empty signifiers in Finnish education policy. It appears that changes to improve inclusion in education are gradually taking place in Finland at the policy level. It remains to be seen how the notion of inclusion in education will be formulated in policy documents and how will the principles of inclusion be interpreted, governed, and implemented in practice.

Notes

1 The survey did not use a predetermined disability classification. Respondents reported disabilities related to sensory, physical, and cognitive impairments, sign language, neuropsychiatric disorders, intellectual disabilities, or other factors (progressive neurological conditions, sensory defensiveness, epilepsy, brain damage, or mental health problems) (Vesala and Vartio, 2019).
2 A total of 60 special schools existed in 2021 with 3500 students (Statistics Finland, 2022b).

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