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Students Negotiating the Borders between General and Special Education Classes: An Ethnographic and Participatory Research Study

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Abstract

Although Finnish basic education is based on inclusion, 37% of students receiving special support still study in either separate schools or separate classes in comprehensive schools.In this study we explore how policies of inclusion are implemented in a school with separated special educational needs (SEN) and general education (GE) classes. More specifically we conducted a two-year ethnographic study focusing particularly on exclusion and the sense of belonging in a lower secondary school (students aged 13–16) in the capital region of Finland. During the fieldwork, several students attending the SEN-class expressed an interest in changing from the SEN-class to a GE-class, or in breaking the borders between SEN and GE classes in other ways. As part of the negotiations with the school, students who criticised the GE- and SEN-class division were offered an opportunity to transfer to GE-classes but in the end, all of them wanted to stay in the SEN-class. In this investigation, we focus on the students' reasoning and the teachers' reactions when students negotiate the borders between SEN and GE-classes. In this study we found a clash between integration and inclusive thinking.

Keywords (3-6): special educational needs, exclusion, inclusion, integration, ethnography, collaborative research

Introduction

> 'Every year we offer (students attending the special educational needs classes) an opportunity to go to general education (classes) but during these three years, none of them has been willing to go' (a vice principal)

In Finland and other Nordic countries, educational policies and comprehensive education systems incorporate equality and the 'one school for all' principle, as opposed to differentiated educational streams (Juva and Holm, 2017; Kivirauma, Klemelä, and Rinne, 2006; Riitaoja, 2013). The Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE, 2018) states that '[t]he Finnish basic education system has

been based on the philosophy of inclusion for a long time. Basic education is the same for all. There is no streaming, but children are supported individually so that they can successfully complete their basic education.' The right to educational success, individual and flexible support, respect and a sense of belonging are also stated in the Basic Education Act 628/1998 and in the *Core curriculum for basic education 2014* (FNBE, 2016).

The spirit of Finnish basic education policy reflects the principle of inclusion over integration. With integration we refer to pragmatic arrangements to increase social, functional and physical belonging of students with special needs. By comparison, by inclusion we refer to structural changes to exclusionary practices to permit all students to go to the same local school, to gain individual support and to learn with a sense of belonging. (Allan, 1999; Barton and Slee, 1999; Vislie, 2003; Youdell, 2006; Oliver and Barnes, 2010.) However, as international research shows, inclusion can become an empty policy buzzword devoid of meaningful challenges to opposing educational practices (Armstrong, 2005; Youdell, 2006; Oliver and Barnes, 2010). While the policy has shifted from segregated to inclusive education within Finnish special education, general school-level educational practices are still often based on integration (Mietola, 2014; Jahnukainen, 2015).

As is often the case, the intent of the policy exceeds the actual practice. On one hand, special needs education supports students and provides them with equal opportunities. On the other, the special class arrangements constitute a 'parallel' system with different outcomes for students. (Kivirauma, Klemelä, and Rinne 2006; Niemi and Kurki, 2014; Vislie 2003)

In 2010, three categories of support were created by the FNBE: general support, intensified support and special support (FNBE, 2016). General support is 'a natural part of everyday teaching and learning' and every student is entitled to it. Intensified and special support means 'careful assessment and long-span planning in multi-professional teams and … individual learning plans for pupils'. (FNAE, 2016.)

In 2017, 9,8 % of the comprehensive school students received intensified support and 7,8 % received special support (Official Statistics of Finland, 2018). Regarding those students receiving special support, 20,7% studied in mainstream classes, 41,9% participated in part-time special educational needs (SEN) education and 37,4% studied in separate special needs classes or schools (Official Statistics of Finland, 2018). The number of students receiving special support or participating in part-time special needs education has remained rather steady since 2005 but the proportion of students studying in special needs classes or schools has slightly decreased (Official Statistics of Finland, 2018). At the school level, the division between general educational (GE) and special educational needs (SEN) classes is seldom problematised and the structural or peer exclusion of the students attending the SEN-class are rarely recognised by teachers (Karlsson, 2007). Although students studying in SEN-classes criticise the classroom practices in SEN-classes for the lack of academic knowledge they offer and the division between GE- and SEN-classes (e.g., Helakorpi et al., 2014), they still often prefer to study in a SEN-class (Norwich and Kelly, 2004). Students connect the reasons for this to social matters and experiences of difference. They also rank SEN-classes more highly owing to stronger social relationships (Karlsson, 2007; Helakorpi, Mietola, and Niemi, 2014). Students have also been 'socialised' to the learning culture of a special class (Mietola, 2014).

During this two-year ethnographic study, primarily focusing on marginalisation and belonging in a lower secondary school, several students in a SEN-class expressed a wish to change to a GE-class or to break the division between SEN- and GE-classes. Such students were offered an opportunity to transfer into GE-classes, but they refused. Alarmingly, in blaming the victim fashion, students' reticence to change classes shifted to questions of their individual sensitivity and need of support.

Inspired by a critical view of inclusion, we aim to understand how the push for students to

change a class turned into ‘not willing’ to go, and how the quest for structural changes turned into questions of individual students’ need for personal support. We primarily focus on how the division between GE and SEN-classes is seen by students as stigmatising them. Secondly, we focus on the collaborative process through which the students in one SEN-class challenged the division between GE and SEN-classes. Hopefully the results shed light on how discourses and practices of schools, perhaps especially those lacking an inclusive perspective, shape students’ hopes and positioning in school (Youdell, 2006). Under what circumstances are students attending SEN-class categorised or labelled as ‘troubled’ or ‘in need of further support’? When are such labels justified and helpful and when are they unjustified and harmful? (Mietola, 2014; Vaahtera et al., 2017). Following in-depth analysis we then fathom the educational implications.

Methodology

Our approach was ethnographic and through ethnographic research it is possible to create a holistic picture of how exclusive and inclusive practices work and how the sense of belonging is constructed. Moreover, ethnographic methodology enables an analysis of the ways the macro-level politics formulate the micro-level everyday life and students’ subjectivities in schools (Arnesen et al., 2014; Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma, 2007). The school we observed had 450 lower secondary students aged 13–16 with six parallel GE-classes and two SEN-classes.

The fieldwork was conducted from the end of 7thuntil the end of 9th grade and included three phases (figure 1). All the interested school personnel and students were included in the study. In our observations and interviews we focused on causes of exclusion v. sense of belonging at school. In the first phase, we interviewed teachers and school personnel. In the second phase we interviewed 8th graders and also observed lessons and other school-related activities. Observations were made in both GE- and SEN-classes. The third phase was collaborative, with the goal of illuminating exclusion and marginalisation processes at school, through a student-led change process. The

emphasis of the fieldwork was on students' views. We believed that was the optimal way to identify and address areas of concern regarding marginalisation (Messiou, 2012; Adderley et al., 2015). Often studies on student exclusion and marginalisation bypass students' views owing to time constraints (Messiou, 2006; Messiou and Hope, 2015). The idea of marginalisation and belonging was posed to the school community by the researchers but its contents, meanings and aspirations for changes came from the students.

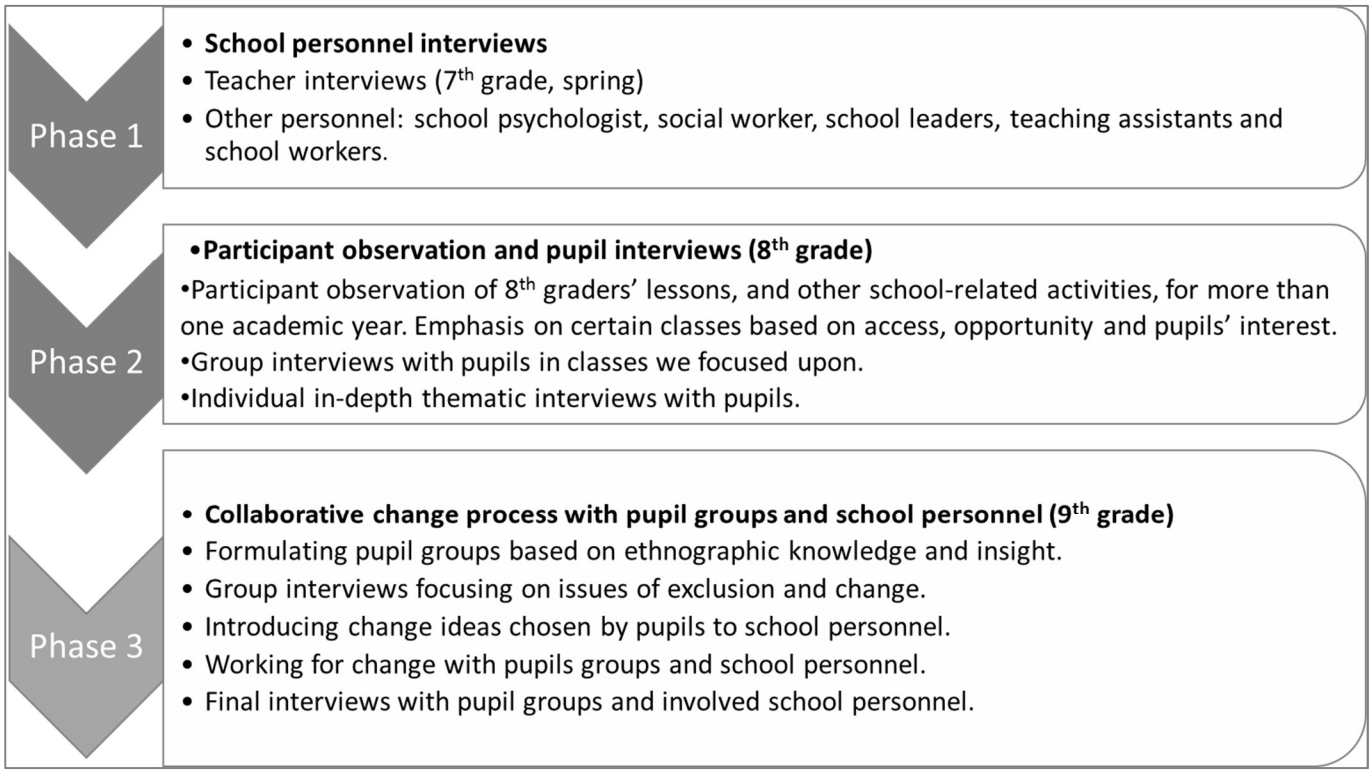


Figure 1. Phases of the field work.

The third phase started with interviews with students interested in the change process in groups of 2–4 students. In addition to the student groups, two individual students wanted to participate in the interviews and in the collaborative phase but wished to engage only with a teacher or staff member. We asked all students participating in the collaborative process what changes they would like to see at school to prevent exclusion and to increase the sense of belonging. We asked students about their reflections regarding the preliminary results from our observations and first interviews. Based on

the group interviews we compiled a list of suggested changes for each student group. The lists covered topics from school space, recess activities, bullying, exclusion and belonging, classroom and teaching practices and support. The students repeatedly pointed out the need to remedy bullying problems, to pay attention to individuals, to provide support when needed and to build a sense of belonging. We then took each group's concerns to a teacher or other staff member designated by the group/the student as the appropriate contact person and invited them to a meeting with the small group/the student to discuss students' suggestions and ways to change the school accordingly. Thus, the collaborative phase was built around students' ideas and the students and teachers negotiated and acted together to make changes in their school. The fieldworkers facilitated the process, discussions, negotiations and actions. We interviewed 39 students, both from GE- and SEN-classes and 21 teachers or other staff members. During the three phases of the fieldwork we interviewed most of the students several times, either individually or in small groups. Several interviews helped us to create a deeper understanding about exclusion and the sense of belonging in school from the students' perspectives, to listen to the students' hopes for changes and to work on changes and to reflect the outcomes with them.

For this study, we utilise the data and analysis from one SEN-class. In this noteworthy class we interviewed eight students out of ten, most of them several times. In the collaborative phase, four change groups emerged in the SEN-class. We interviewed all the groups at the beginning and two of them at the end of the process. We also analysed the material from other teacher, staff and student interviews when the discussion was about SEN-classes and their students.

Taking students' knowledge seriously in participatory research

Throughout the fieldwork, we aimed to listen to the students as individuals who construct relevant knowledge on exclusion and on the changes that were needed. That meant challenging the notion that there would be those who have knowledge and those who only have experiences or subjective

viewpoints (Tuori, 2009). Many studies in which it is claimed that students' views have been listened to still tend to ignore what the students have to say (Messiou and Hope, 2015; Pihl, 2015). Either students are not perceived as being reasonable individuals who offer valuable, consistent or accurate information about what is happening in schools, or their views are perceived as incidental remarks within a highly structured system created by experts (Messiou, 2006; Ryan, 2009). It is also possible that only certain students are heard, or that students are heard differently. For example, at times only the views of dominant groups are heard, such as when the knowledge provided by students with special educational needs are taken as views of *students with special needs* and thus heard through their difference (Alderson and Goodey, 1996; Messiou, 2006). To be careful not to frame students through the lens of difference, we never asked students about diagnoses or reasons for their SEN-class placements. Some still told us about those things themselves.

Our way of analysing the data draws from post structural feminist studies in education (Davies, 2004). Accordingly we are not claiming to 'give voice' to the students, but instead we are analysing historically and discursively formed reasoning (Davies, 2004). That makes all knowledge and representations (including those of the researchers) partial but also demands that attention is paid to what kinds of subjectivities, positions, reasoning on the problems and treatment of students the discourses in school enable and disable (Youdell, 2006).

GE-classes and SEN-classes in the Practices of the School

In this section, we describe the different formal practices in SEN- and GE-classes and the marginal position of SEN-classes and their students in the school community. Different spaces, activities and schedules resulted in separate time–space paths (Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma, 2000) during the school day for students attending the SEN- and GE-classes.

The Distinct Formal Practices

We identified two areas in the formal practices where differences between the students in SEN-classes and in GE-classes were produced and maintained. The areas are different teachers, classrooms and books as well as different schedules and events.

1. Different teachers, classrooms and books

Students in GE-classes had their own groups (18–25 students/class) within which they studied most of the time. In subjects like mathematics and English, and in elective subjects, the groups were smaller and were held in common with students from parallel classes. The students attending GE-classes went to the subject teachers' own classrooms situated on different floors of the school building making the students use the entire school space.

Students attending the SEN-class had their own group of ten with their own classroom and one teacher who taught most of the subjects. Unlike the spatial routes of those attending GE-classes, the routes of the students attending the SEN-class were mostly between the dining room, their own class and the library with their own teacher and teaching assistant; the everyday school space was different and narrower for the students attending the SEN-class than their peers in GE-classes. There could be days when the time-space paths (Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma, 2000) of some of the students attending the SEN-class and GE-classes hardly crossed.

The students in GE- and SEN-classes also had different books, mainly in academic subjects. Such books (marked as special books) contained adjusted materials and tasks for the students. The teacher claimed there was not much of a difference. The students studying in SEN-classes, however, found the books easier than those used in GE-classes.

2. Different schedules and events

The SEN-classroom was centrally located adjacent to the classrooms where students attending the GE-classes studied. The formal 'time-space paths' of the students of the SEN-classes crossed with the students of the GE-classes when waiting for the next lesson to start. However, the times of the lessons and breaks of the SEN-class did not completely follow the collective scheduling of the lessons and breaks in the school. As well, due to teacher-related practices, the SEN-classes were shorter, because their lessons usually started later and ended earlier than the other lessons. Students from the SEN-class would go to the dining hall at lunchtime while students of GE-classes were still in class.

The students attending the SEN-class were not expected to participate in all school practices and social events. For example, they did not have a representative on the student council nor did they have to produce anything for the school Christmas celebration. They did not always have to participate in the between-class competitions at school. Some of the students applied for a place in official out-school activities like the school's international exchanges but they were not chosen as representatives.

'They Are Their Own Group' – Not a Part of the School Community

Based on observations and the teacher and student interviews, the SEN-class and its students *were not considered to be a part of the school community but as their own separate group*. In discussions and practices addressing 'all the 8th graders or 9th graders' the SEN-class would often not be included. For instance, in rollcalls, all classes were addressed except the SEN-class:

> Morning assembly in the assembly hall for 7th and 8th graders starts with a rollcall of all classes by a teacher.
> Teacher: 'Is 8A here? 8B?' (etc.)
> The teacher is about to finish after 8F.
> A student shouts: '8S!' (the code of the SEN-class).

In this situation, it seems that 8S was not counted as one of the classes nor were the students expected to be present. It required a student to remind the teacher of their presence.

Some of the students in a SEN-class also remarked that they were separated from other same-graders on the school's sport day:

> Manu[1]: For instance, now when we had the sport day.
> Lotta: Yes… they separated us (from others). We were the only 9th graders in the whole group yesterday.
> Manu: We had to stay with those annoying 8th graders all the time.
> Fieldworker: So, you would have preferred staying with other 9th graders?
> Lotta: It would have been much better.
> Manu: Then we could have been with our friends.
> Lotta: In school, indeed, don't separate the special class from others, that's stupid…What's the point of separating this class from others? That these (two SEN-classes) are right here, separated from other classes.
> Manu: Because they are special classes.
> Lotta: Just because it's a special class.
> (interview, 9th grade)

Lotta and Manu criticise the practice of separating the SEN-class and questioned the reasoning behind the practice. They argue that getting support should not be a reason to separate them from their peers and they dissociated themselves from the discourse that positions them as problematic and different.

When interviewing the subject teachers, we also found that *the teachers do not know the students attending the SEN-classes, nor do they count them as part of the student group.* When asked about the exclusion of students with special educational needs, many teachers would talk

[1] To secure confidentiality we have either changed or removed the names of the people and places.

about students in GE-classes receiving special support in their own class or in part-time special needs education. Many teachers said that they do not know the students in the SEN-classes:

> Aapo: I don't have any of these special groups. They have their own class and routines.

> Meri: I can't really say about the special class students… I mean because they are so much on their own. They are there on their own floor and in their own classroom and I think one doesn't really react to them. I mean they are their own group.

The teachers described the relationships of the students in the SEN-classes to the rest of the school community:

> Erja: They are a little at the margins.

> Sanni: The SEN-class is kind of its own community that isn't in touch with the other youngsters in the same way.

As in the previous studies, (e.g. Karlsson, 2007), teachers and staff members did not generally problematise the GE/SEN-class division or the separating practices.

In the interviews, students attending the SEN-class were aware of the entire student community and reflected on their own position in it, whereas most of the students attending GE-classes seemed not to be aware of the students in the SEN-class and in the interviews they did not consider them as part of the school community. Most of the students of the GE-classes were disengaged with the students in the SEN-class and some of them considered the students in the SEN-class to be weird. Of course there were exceptions. Students from GE-classes who had friends attending the SEN-class, a minority though, considered them 'like anybody else'.

To summarise to this point, the borders between GE- and SEN-classes and their students were not only related to space, scheduling and other official practices but also to social relationships and how the school as a community was conceived. In what follows, we describe how such borders

were negotiated and challenged in the collaborative phase by students attending a SEN-class.

Negotiating Breaking the Borders between Classes

At the beginning of the collaborative phase, we interviewed students attending the SEN-class and asked them which exclusionary practices they would want to change at school. As Norwich and Kelly (2004) observed several students problematised the distinctive practices between GE/SEN-classes and the inferior position of the students attending the SEN-class. The breadth and depth of the distinction became visible when we started to negotiate students' ways to blur the lines or cross the border to GE-class with the contact persons and other school personnel. In this way, various reactions emerged. Teachers and other staff members did not acknowledge the distinction, its troubling meaning for students attending the SEN-class, or the difficulty of crossing the border between SEN- and GE-classes. Some even denied the existence of a distinction, and others did not consider it to be an issue. Some recognised the division and tried to make a change but focused more on individual students than on the distinction. We see that while the students attending the SEN-class were hoping for an inclusive school and structural changes (Allan, 1999), teachers acted on their wishes by trying to integrate the individuals in the current school environment (Vislie, 2003). This clash between inclusion and integration became more noticeable when the students attending the SEN-class wanted to challenge othering in school and when one student attending the SEN-class asked for a transfer to a GE-class. The school personnel downplayed the marginalisation of students in SEN-classes and the school personnel put their emphasis on individual integration into the current practices of the school.

School personnel downplaying the practices of exclusion of students in SEN-classes

Students attending the SEN-class wanted to challenge the othering (Helakorpi, Mietola, and Niemi, 2014) or the stigma (Pesonen et al., 2016) attached to students attending the SEN-classes. In the group interviews with students, two students - Lotta and Manu - pointed out the discriminatory aspects of separate classes. They found that there are negative attitudes towards students in SEN-classes which are connected to the distinctive practices of the school. They wanted to put both issues on the change list:

> - There is a need for general change in attitude to stop the negative attitudes and name-calling towards students in SEN-classes.
> - Students studying in SEN-classes should not be separate from others during the events or sports days arranged by the school. There should be an opportunity to meet and make friends with students in other classes. The school should alleviate discrimination, but the separation of classes only contributes to discrimination of students in SEN-classes. (group 1, change list)

However, in the collaborative change process, changes that were meant to target school structures turned into individual remedies to integrate students into the current school practices. In the next excerpt Iira, the contact person for Lotta and Manu's group, acknowledges the othering and exclusion of students attending the SEN-class but downplays the fact that attending a SEN-class can be more stigmatising than visiting special needs teacher in some subjects, which also downplays the consequences of distinctive structures between SEN and GE-classes. She wonders whether the students attending SEN-classes are actually too worried about being stigmatised:

> Iira: We have two special needs classes. We've got feedback from students, when they've had integration trials and have been placed in a GE-class. If someone has been the only one in a GE-class, they've been left alone. Things like that other students don't want to stay close to that student, that's painful. Going into special needs education is so common these days that I think it shouldn't be (an issue). Maybe the students themselves are also a bit too worried that they

> become stigmatised, even though going into special education doesn't matter really among the students.

After the change process Iira reports that the process made it visible how separated SEN-classes are from other classes, something which should be reconsidered in the future. However, when trying to proceed with the changes the students requested, the individual students and their feelings became the focus. Iira for instance connects students' notions of negative attitudes, name calling and gazes to students' fragile self-image and sensitivity and claims that negative comments about students attending SEN-classes are a result of young people's immaturity. She also talks about 'natural fear of difference' derived from evolution biology. Thus 'difference' becomes pathologised as something that people naturally recognise and fear instead of seeing these differences as constructed in the school practices such as dividing students in GE- and SEN-classes (Juva and Vaahtera, 2017).

The individual perspective also comes up in a meeting with Iira and some students, in which Lotta pointed out how one must fit in with the crowd to avoid being bullied. She explained how the style of clothing and appearance matter and how those who have a different appearance from the norm (e.g. girls not wearing makeup or styling their hair) can easily be bullied by other students. Instead of considering how the school could change the norms of gender representations, the discussion turned towards how the student could take the comments in a positive way and learn not to be offended.

During the meeting, no further plans were made on how to proceed with making changes at the school. Instead, the focus was on how to do something differently at the individual level. For example, Lotta and Manu, both fluent in English, were recruited to the GE-class for English lessons with another student but they both refused. Both told us about their bad experiences related to studying in a GE-class. The school's aim for changes at the individual level included a quest to change individuals themselves. During the collaborative phase, Iira explained that Lotta has been

asked to join a group of girls that consisted of lonely and timid girls from grades 7 to 9, aiming to empower them.

The collaborative process made the excluded position of the students in SEN-classes visible to the school personnel. As a result, the school started to make sure that the views of students attending SEN-classes were taken into account in the new support systems, such as in the girls' group. However, the problem of distinctive practices, remains.

Multiple Borders between General Education and Special Education

As stated above, prior research indicates that students in SEN-classes often prefer studying in a separate SEN-class. Separate classes, such as SEN-classes, aim to provide better academic outcomes for students. However, the students emphasise social reasons and the safe environment for staying in the SEN-class (Norwich and Kelly, 2004; Karlsson, 2007). One of our research participants, Janne, expressed a wish to transfer to a GE-class, because he was hoping to continue to an academic upper secondary school and he was worried that the SEN-class did not offer him sufficient knowledge and skills for that school (see also Helakorpi ym. 2014). However, Janne ended up staying in the SEN-class as a result of the multiple borders an individual needs to cross when transiting from a SEN-class to a GE-class. In the following we show how the school focused on integrating Janne whereas Janne was hoping for a more social inclusion.

Janne's plan to transfer to a GE-class and later on to matriculate into an academic upper secondary school was discussed in the interview with him in 8th grade. At that point he talked about the embarrassing negative reputation garnered by othering and name calling of students attending the SEN-class by their peers in GE-classes, and about social divisions and tensions within his SEN-class. Janne said he was bullied in his class and lacked friends there, as 'we (students attending the SEN-class) don't really have many friends to choose from'. The practices of the school tend to exclude students in SEN-classes from the school's social sphere and make the students in SEN-class

most likely to associate only with each other. However, Janne was subjected to double exclusion since he also experienced exclusion within his SEN-class.

Although Janne wanted to switch to a GE-class, he had not told anybody about this wish nor his desire to attend an academic upper secondary school. Janne explained that he had not told anyone about the problems in the SEN-class because he was worried that by expressing his desires he would be immediately assigned to a GE-class without anyone listening to his views. Also Manu talked about an experience of being placed in a GE-class alone and separated from the other students in the SEN-class. During the collaborative phase Manu was asked whether he would be willing to transfer, but he said that having to transit to a GE-class 'would be a nightmare'.

These stories and fears of loneliness and 'nightmare-like' placements in GE-classes indicate that the school did not realise how the students attending the SEN-class were otherised, seen as different or inferior by their peers in GE-classes. Neither did the school understand the social pressure that the students attending the SEN-class endured when moving to GE-classes. Othering and the 'stigma' cannot be easily washed away. Janne said he could make it in a GE-class but he didn't want to go there in this school because 'the other students would know that I've been in a special class'. He considered that changing school (by moving to another housing area) would allow him start again in a GE-class.

The school initiated Janne's transition to a GE-class. In a series of discussions with the contact person, Janne's transition to a GE-class was seen as urgent. In the meetings, Janne pointed out that he did not want to go to a GE-class alone, but with other students. The contact person promised to explore transition options and find other students who might be interested in transitioning with Janne. Things moved on quickly. When Janne attended the meeting after a one-week vacation and a two-week period of work experience, the vice principal suggested three alternatives to Janne for transition, 'full integration' to a GE-class for the next period, 'partial

integration' in some subjects, and continuing in his SEN-class. Janne was interested in the second option, integration in English lessons but wanted someone else from the SEN-class to come with him.

Janne also suggested a solution for the pressure on the students attending the SEN-class when entering GE-classes. He suggested that the students in SEN- and GE-classes should study together whenever possible, but he pointed out that in order to feel safe, the students from SEN-classes should go to GE-classes as a group or at least as a pair, not alone. Thus, Janne suggested a more collective and holistic approach to transition. Such an approach is currently lacking, and the focus is on individual students and their individual learning needs. In Finland, schools routinely create individually tailored educational plans that include the teaching arrangements (FNBE, 2014) for every student designated as having special support needs. The individualistic nature of the support may lead to a lack of opportunities for thinking about integration as anything other than individual teaching arrangements. For many students this means inevitable discomfort and unsuccessful integration experiments that make border crossing between GE- and SEN-classes nearly impossible.

Janne's idea of moving students attending the SEN-class to a GE-class as a group faced challenges from two different directions. One was class size and composition formula, that did not permit transitions of several students from one class to another.

> In a meeting with the social worker and vice principal after meeting with Janne, I (fieldworker) mentioned that there could be three, four or even five students interested in transition. The vice principal says that in the GE-class there were already 21 students and not many more could be taken in, because some students already needed special needs support or an adjusted syllabus. With many more transition students, the class would just become a big special education class and too challenging for the teacher, although she did not believe the teacher would be against the plan. (fieldnotes)

Instead, the school wanted to allocate the students to different classes and that solution was non-negotiable. Thus the school located the problem and the need for change in individuals rather than in the distinctive and stigmatising practices. Neither did they understand the extent of the transitions for the students attending the SEN-class in terms of crossing all the borders. It is also safer to implement minor changes at an individual level than changes at an institutional level.

Another challenge was related to the students in GE-classes. When the school personnel tried to recruit other students into the SEN-class (Manu, Thomas or Lotta) to go with Janne, they all refused. Two of them mentioned previous bad transition experiences. In general, the school personnel said that refusal was common. Instead of considering such a collective refusal as a signal about something to be explored in more detail, such refusals were interpreted as students' vague transition desires, incapability to transit and sometimes misinterpretations of students' will. From the school's perspective, refusals meant failure and wasted time and energy.

Janne was given two weeks to decide before the new period was due to start. However, during the following week Janne was worried about his family's economic situation. He said that in this demanding situation 'there is so much to think about that I cannot even think about that (transition) now'. Janne decided to continue in his SEN-class and not to go to the GE-class for any lessons except in the optional subjects he had always taken with students from GE-classes. In the final interview he said he would have gone if someone else had gone with him. The only student who volunteered was not an option because he was not Janne's friend and based on our fieldnotes, that student had bullied Janne in the SEN-class. However, at the end of 9th grade, Janne finally applied for entry to the academic upper secondary school he had talked about.

Conclusions

SEN-class practices are maintained because they are thought to safeguard an effective learning environment (Allan, 1999; Barton and Slee, 1999; Youdell 2006; Oliver and Barnes, 2010). This, however, leads to eventual problems which we have observed in our analysis, namely the establishment of a socio-cultural distinction between SEN- and GE-classes. The distinctive practices resulted in differentiating time-space paths and exclusion of students attending the SEN-class from the school community by most teachers or peers within GE-classes. This in turn led to othering and stigmatisation of students attending the SEN, which was belittled in importance or made invisible to school personnel.

We used the critical lens of inclusion to understand the reasoning of students and school personnel and we analysed how school personnel belittled students' critique of the borders between the SEN- and GE-classes and the propensity to individualise problems. We have conceptualised this as a clash between integration and inclusion thinking (Vislie, 2003; Oliver and Barnes, 2010). To cross the border between SEN- and GE-classes, students attending the SEN-class had to cross several borders related to structures, practices and social relationships, and also to stigmatisation. Instead of working to change the distinctive practices, institutionalised ways of organising the school (e.g., curriculum, class sizes, transitions) and conceptions that maintain othering of the students attending the SEN-class, school personnel perpetuated individualisation. Single students criticising the distinction were offered integration into GE within the existing structure. Yet as nothing in the structure changed, there would still be the inevitable social distinctions, multiple borders to cross and multiple ways of othering to overcome. The students in our study refused to transfer to GE-classes for reasons school personnel misunderstood or simply ignored. Regardless of the inclusive tone in Finnish education policies and legislation we found that in practice the idea of integration and exclusion are maintained (Mietola, 2014; Jahnukainen, 2015). Distinctive practices,

marginalisation in the school community and the lack of a sense of belonging by the students in SEN-classes indicate that the policy of inclusion is not implemented.

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