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# Inclusive and Special Education and the Question of Equity in Education: The Case of Finland

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## INTRODUCTION

Equity and quality are often mentioned as key ingredients of high performing education systems (e.g. OECD, 2012). According to Field, Kuczera and Pont (2007), equity consists of two dimensions: fairness and inclusion. Fairness is related to reducing the socio-economic barriers to participation, and inclusion is defined as ‘ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all’ (Field et al., 2007, 11). Both these qualities seem to fit well in the Finnish education system. The ‘education for all’ approach has been a hallmark of Finnish education policy since the early days. There has been a strong, shared political will to build a public-school system that will serve every student ‘as far as possible, and without cost’. As far as the compulsory basic education (Grades 1 to 9, ages 7 to 16) is concerned, this idea has been fulfilled at least at the system level: practically every student attends a school providing public compulsory education, including students with any kind of disability. The quality of the education and student

performance has also been claimed to be excellent when compared with many other school systems, and Finland has been an international high flyer in this picture (e.g. Takayama, Waldow, & Sung 2013). Finland is given credit for the high quality of its teachers, flexible curriculum and flexible accountability policy. However, it is clear that broader societal factors can also affect the educational climate, such as an overall commitment to equality, the incorporation of various welfare services and the strong culture of trust shown in teachers and the education system by parents and authorities (Sahlberg, 2011). The culture of trust, and also responsibilities, within the education system has been created and supported by using sample-based testing and reflective self-assessment, and by putting learning first, ahead of external accountability structures (Sahlberg, 2010). Interestingly, the well-developed services to meet the needs of special educational are also often mentioned as one of the key factors behind the observed excellence (e.g. Kivirauma & Ruoho, 2007).

Although the abovementioned picture is coherent at the system level, it has taken quite a long time to develop the current system and the reform is ongoing (Ahtiainen, 2017). In this chapter, we approach the questions concerning inclusive and special education and equity of education in Finland from historical and education policy perspectives, which, in turn, we bring into a dialogue with contrasting teachers' accounts. We will explain the logic behind the pragmatic 'small-steps' approach typical of reforms in Finland and analyze them in light of the ideas and values of the inclusive education movement. Firstly, we discuss the meaning of inclusion in the Finnish context at the policy level and reflect on it against the international discourses related to the issue. Second, we introduce the recent special education reform that took place in the first decade of the 2000s and look at it from the perspective of educational change at the international level. The idea is to examine the driving forces, triggers, and themes

that emerged from an analysis of the policy documents – what was done and why. Third, we move beyond the policy- and system-level conceptualization of inclusion by bringing in the interpretative and critical voices of Finnish teachers concerning the concept of inclusion.

## EDUCATION FOR ALL IN FINLAND = SYSTEM- LEVEL INCLUSION

The Finnish ‘Education for All’ approach has been developing during the decades since the first Compulsory Education Act 1921, and practically every student is served in the same comprehensive school system (e.g. Pulkkinen & Jahnukainen, 2016). It is reasonable to state that the Finnish basic education system has achieved an appropriate level of inclusion: practically everybody enrolls in the same system and the principle of being able to attend a neighborhood school also applies to students with disabilities (Lempinen & Niemi, 2018). However, system-level inclusion does not necessarily mean that every student should be served in a mainstream classroom. Although the number of students with special educational needs served in regular classrooms has increased steadily during the last two decades, and the number of students served in special schools has decreased, special education in small groups (self-contained classrooms) for students considered to have an ongoing need for additional support still exists (e.g. Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016) (see Table 35.1).

[TS: Insert Table 35.1 near here]

Since 2011, the current service model for students considered to have ‘special needs’<sup>1</sup> is a tiered model called *Learning and Schooling Support* (e.g. Thuneberg, et al., 2014). The Finnish three-tiered model is functionally equivalent to Tiers 1 (universal), 2 (targeted) and 3 (intensified) (Finland: general, intensified, special) in the United

States, however, in Finland there is only one well-defined national mandatory model (see Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016). In the United States' model, Tier 2 is rather controversial, because it makes it possible to offer additional support to students who do not necessarily have a diagnosis in a traditional sense. It is the same in the Finnish model, but this is not a recent modification. In the Finnish model, it has been possible to offer additional support (so called part-time special education) to any student since the 1970s and this support model has been developed to reach every school in Finland. In terms of inclusion, the tiered support model in Finland mainly placed more responsibility on classroom teachers and the whole school community by adding the Tier 1 level as part of 'additional support' (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016). It should be also understood that in the Finnish model, the testing of 'response' does not play the same role as in the US response-to-intervention model. The Finnish special education reform did not have a stance on that. The Finnish reform is more pedagogically built around the idea of supporting student learning and schooling, and factors related to student performance are absent from the agenda (Ahtiainen, 2017). Special education teachers play an important role in this system as consultants, co-teachers and educators specialized in learning and behavior support and student welfare.

In line with municipal and school-level autonomy, schools can determine how to assign students to classrooms. The Basic Education Act (628/1998 17§) states that support for students at the Tier 3 level is provided in regular classes or partly or totally in special classes or through some other appropriate facility (Table 35.1). This gives education providers a variety of options for serving Tier 3 students; thus, their placement can vary from full-time regular class placement to special education classes in segregated special schools. With this in mind, it can be reasoned that there is no uniform system when it comes to student placement. There are differences between

municipalities; the full-time regular class placements of Tier 3 students can vary between zero and 9% of all comprehensive school students (Lintuvuori, Jahnukainen, & Hautamäki, 2017).

When it comes to students at the Tier 2 level, there are no legislative regulations concerning placement, and the underlying assumption has been that all Tier 2 students should study in regular classes. This has apparently led to various interpretations across education providers. Consequently, the recent changes in the National Core Curriculum in 2016 (FNBE, 2016) specified that Tier 2 level support is provided as part of mainstream education. The information on Tier 3 students' placement is compiled through annual national statistics whereas information on Tier 2 students can be gained only through research. There are indications that some schools form small classes containing only Tier 2 students (Kupiainen & Hienonen, 2016; Lintuvuori et al., 2017). In addition, some schools place Tier 2 students in small special education classrooms with Tier 3 students (Hienonen & Lintuvuori, forthcoming). This forms a hidden structure within the system. However, at the same time, it explains why schools need to use different grouping mechanisms in order to manage and respond to students' different support needs.

## REFORMING SPECIAL EDUCATION

Reforms can be looked at from many angles. One approach to reforms is the policy-making level, and especially the strategic language guiding the reforms. The policy documents guiding reform and educational change tell us about the values on which the reform agenda has been grounded (Ahtiainen, 2017). For example, during the first two decades of the 21st century, the global language concerning education has been based predominantly on reports related to the results and comparisons of the international tests in student learning outcomes conducted by organizations like the Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the International Education Association (IEA). Consequently, this has affected the discourses about preferable ways and preferable goals for developing educational systems, and the internationally constructed ideas have been brought into national educational policy debates concerning the current status of education (e.g. Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Schleicher, 2009). The increased globalization of education and international comparisons over the past three decades have created drivers for educational change that promote competition and comparison between and within schools, narrow the scope of education to basic skills in selected subjects, and emphasize teacher and school-level accountability measures (Sahlberg, 2010, 2011). In general, accountability as such is not entirely damaging but the crucial factor concerning accountability policies is who is held accountable, and for what (Sahlberg, 2010). Further, the focus is on the way these policies are carried out in practice. At any rate, the international reform trends driving unhealthy competitive practices and punitive accountability policies have been highly criticized in the field of educational change as they draw attention away from teaching and student learning that would otherwise serve the development of the capabilities that are needed in today's knowledge society (e.g. Hargreaves, 2003; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Sahlberg, 2011, 2010).

Finnish education policy discourses at the national level are not free from influences stemming from international tests like PISA or TIMMS. The results, especially now as they have declined in Finland, are discussed in rather a critical light, which is in contrast with the discourses known at the global level (cf. Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). However, these aspects are still taken into account at a rather general level and are not used as justifiers for the directions of educational reform. All this builds the framework for the examination of the recent special education reform in

Finland that took place at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. The reform is examined here by visiting Ahtiainen's (2017) thorough analyses, in which the reform was explained through four theoretically-grounded phases, the first of which is called Entry. The aim is to explain the reform at the education policy level by answering the question about why the reform was introduced, and how it was justified in order to discuss factors that triggered the reform and factors that formed the value-base for it.

The Finnish system has been praised for its system-level equality and quality teachers, who are well-educated autonomous professionals. *Autonomy* is a central concept to the Finnish education system. In general, Finland has a rather low-hierarchical system, in which the decision-making power concerning the implementation of the education guiding norms, the Basic Education Act and the National Core Curriculum, has been granted to local authorities (i.e. mainly municipalities) (Simola, Kauko, Varjo, Kalalahti, & Sahlström, 2017). Therefore, many decisions concerning local educational arrangements are made at the municipal level, including the organization of support for students and resources allocated to schools. This structure has its pros and cons. Decentralization works when the system itself is sufficiently developed. Finland has been moving along the path of decentralization since 1990, and thus, this direction was politically decided on about 20 years after the comprehensive school system had been established in the 1970s. In general, local education organizers and schools need administrators, teachers and principals that are capable of maintaining and further developing the schools and education locally, or autonomy will lead to drifting at local level (Fullan, 2003, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009), and, in principle, Finland has all this capacity. One can say that the country as whole has schools of (almost) uniform quality. However, in

practice, the municipal- and school-level autonomy causes system-level ‘irritation’, of which the recent special education reform is one example.

The Finnish special education reform can be looked at from at least two perspectives: from the actual time when the reformed Basic Education Act came into effect; and the timespan through which one can follow the steps that lead to those legislative changes. The former is more exact, because it happened at the beginning of 2011, and schools were obliged to realize the new norms in August that year. The latter is open to interpretation. It is more interesting from the education policy’s and reform agenda’s development perspective, because it reveals the timespan within which the steps towards the reform are taken and describes the pace of policy-making (Ahtiainen, 2017). Ahtiainen (2017) has traced the ideas resonating from the reform back to the mid-1990s and the publication of an evaluation report entitled *The State of Special Education* (Blom et al., 1996), which was followed by several small-scale special-education-related development initiatives (Ahtiainen, 2017; Oja, 2012). The initiatives formed a meeting place for local-level educational actors, and enabled the creation of an arena for sharing experiences about the way the needs of students with special educational needs were met and supported at the local level.

The main happenings leading to the reform took place in 2004–2006 through the phenomenon described above as system-level irritation. It is a state of affairs from which an observation leads to some form of action. Thus, in this case, the irritation level reached its peak at the local (municipal) level, and the largest municipalities took action (Ahtiainen, 2017; Thuneberg et al., 2013). They approached the Ministry of Education in order to point out the observed differences in practices, and the need to develop special education within basic education. Therefore, the interpretation is that the actual reform process started in 2005 through the initiative of the largest municipalities,



consisting of a seven-point proposal to introduce the development of special education practices in terms of rethinking the status of special education students, renewal of administrative practices, and development of teacher preparation and professional development programs (Ahtiainen, 2017; Thuneberg et al., 2013). Further, the largest municipalities had to be given the opportunity to participate in the national-level development processes, and to have their own representatives on the central working groups. In addition, they presented the need for comprehensive national development projects, instead of small-scale or one-school-based ones (Ahtiainen, 2017). Moreover, this municipal action included a comparison of the larger municipalities in terms of the resources available for student support, the number of students receiving special education, and the means and practices used in making decisions, and providing the support accordingly. The municipalities proposed measures to be taken when developing the organization of special education in basic education (Ahtiainen, 2017). The municipal-level actions led to communications between them and the Ministry of Education, and consequently the Ministry set up a working group to formulate the Special Education Strategy that in the end guided the preparation of the reform.

The policy analysis by Ahtiainen (2017) explains the content of policy documents, including the Special Education Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2007) and the government bill (HE, 2009), in the change theoretical framework based on the North-American-bound change theories of Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves. Here the focus is on the theoretical model's first phase, Entry, which gives education-policy-level answers to the question: why? Entry introduces the reform and gives it a justification. Moreover, the aspect of Entry includes features that connect the reform agenda to a wider societal context and aims to convince the audience (i.e. educators in

Finland) about its meaningfulness and desirability (Ahtiainen, 2017). Entry introduces the ultimate purpose and is the opening point of the reform.

In the Finnish case, the official start is traceable to November 2007 when the Ministry of Education came out with the first public presentation concerning future nationwide changes, and the Special Education Strategy white paper (Ministry of Education, 2007) was launched. The Strategy started directly from the reasons leading to its formulation. The main concern was tied to two system-bound reasons, the first of which was the increase in the number of students receiving special education in basic education. In the Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2007), the increasing number of special education recipients was explained by the system's structural factors and the growing knowledge base within the field of special education. The interpretation was that statistical methods and diagnostic practices had developed over the years along with overall knowledge about the various factors that affect students' learning, and these were at the core of the phenomenon (Ahtiainen, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2007). The second reason was the differences observed between municipal practices concerning decision-making processes and the realization of special education, and these factors are related to the autonomy of the local-level education organizers in deciding about the educational arrangements. Thus, they were related to the decentralized structure of the system. Consequently, these factors raised questions about whether students were treated equally in the processes related to the means and placements for their education and support, and further, they placed the reason triggering the reform in the functionality of the system, instead of looking at the achievement level or the abilities of the students (Ahtiainen, 2017).

Along with the introduction of the main reasons behind the reform, the emphasis was put on the value base of the education, and that was shown through two theory-

bound aspects: moral purpose and the greater societal purpose of education (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; 2012; Fullan, 2003). The moral purpose in education is about putting the student at the core of education, as that is what schools are for – to provide education for every student, and to see every student’s learning as being equally important (Fullan, 2003; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). The greater societal purpose is linked to the ideas that education is for the betterment of the whole society, and the quality and equality of education benefits every member of society (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Ahtiainen, 2017). These two value bases were approached by reinforcing the principle that teaching every student is every teacher’s responsibility, and within the context of moral purpose that can be interpreted as every teacher’s moral obligation. Further, the purpose of education and an adequate support system were laid outside the educational institutions (Ministry of Education, 2007; SiVM 4/2010); the meaning of support is to prepare students for the future because support throughout the school years was and still is seen as a way to increase the opportunities to be integrated into work life as an adult. These aspects were visible in the Strategy representing the political ethos underlying Finnish education, despite not being explicitly written in law (i.e. the Basic Education Act).

## BEYOND SYSTEM AND POLICY LEVEL

### CONCEPTUALIZATION OF INCLUSION:

## INTERPRETATIVE AND CRITICAL VOICES OF

### FINNISH TEACHERS

Above we have explained the state of Finnish inclusive and special education from a system and educational policy point of view. However, the fundamental question is: how to implement inclusive education in practice when it remains an abstract,

ideological and political concept open to interpretation? Divergence of views, a lack of clarity on implementation, and conceptual confusion surrounding inclusion have been well documented in the literature (see, Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2011; Dyson, 1999; Walton, 2015). Particularly problematized is equating inclusive education with the international Education for All (EFA) program, owing to its tendency to overlook some marginalized groups of children (see Miles & Singal, 2010), as is maintaining a special education knowledge base as the foundation for the development of the policy and practice of inclusive education (Danforth & Naraian, 2015; Graham, 2015; Graham & Slee, 2008; Honkasilta, 2017; Naraian, 2013). However, following Miles and Singal (2010) and Danforth and Naraian (2015), perhaps more important than reaching international consensus on inclusive education is to draw attention to the development of coherent and sustainable policies and practices at a contextual country level. This requires clarification of the concept of inclusive education.

It is noteworthy that the term ‘inclusion’ is not mentioned in the Finnish educational legislation at all (see Jahnukainen, 2011). At a normative level, the term inclusion is mentioned only once in the National Core Curriculum, under the section ‘Mission of basic education’. The core message of this lone paragraph can be paraphrased as follows:

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. (FNBE, 2016)

Rhetoric-wise, this pious declaration seems to be in line with the aims of an inclusive education philosophy in terms of denaturalizing normality, rejecting medical and psychological explanations of educational difficulties and the ensuing categorizations of difference, and celebrating human diversity. It also resonates with the aspiration of social inclusion which incorporates meaningful involvement and participation – a sense of belonging – in one’s communities (see Armstrong et al., 2011; Graham & Slee, 2008; Thomas & Loxley, 2007). This, of course, is a matter of interpretation by the reader, given that inclusion itself is not conceptualized in the policy document and the description of its implementation is abstract, vague, and open to interpretation.

Next, we describe some contradictory ways inclusive education is perceived by Finnish compulsory school teachers (n = 105).<sup>2</sup> These teachers took part in an online questionnaire during March 2017 regarding their views and opinions about inclusion. Out of the three open questions, two presented imaginary cases and directed teachers to reflect on (1) their thoughts if they found out that their municipality had invested in their school and presented it as the model school for inclusion, and (2) actions they would take to promote inclusion in their school if chosen as the chair of a committee in charge of inclusion. The two questions directed teachers to reflect on both their experiences and views of inclusion at the municipality and school levels. The third question requested teachers to take a stand on claims that inclusion is unrealistic, impossible and undesirable, thereby eliciting their attitudinal stances. We have not presented a detailed analysis of the data. Instead, we use the data here in a descriptive manner to illustrate the divergence of views in teachers’ accounts on inclusion and student rights. The term inclusive education is used here to refer to ways teachers portray inclusion in educational practice. Teachers’ background information is presented in Table 35.2.

[TS: insert Table 35.2 near here]

## **Inclusion as a Means of Cost-efficiency**

In my opinion, an inclusive school is not realistic, possible nor even worth trying to attain, because contemporary resources don't support that. The fact is that government has made huge educational retrenchments, so in that light I doubt there will be more resources. On the contrary, inclusion is seen as cost cuts: expensive small groups can be discontinued and students in need of support placed in big groups without particular extra resource allocation ...

(Female classroom teacher, 5–10 years of work experience, reply to question 3)

The above quotation from a classroom teacher provides an overview of the data regarding both the attitudinal climate about inclusion, and the conceptual understanding of inclusive education. As for the attitudinal climate, the vast majority of the answers portray (social) inclusion to some extent as a desirable ideology, yet question whether inclusive education is realizable owing to contemporary resourcing. Rhetoric-wise, resources are often depicted as an abstract obstruction to inclusion in the data, however, the following concrete defects in the educational system in regard to lack of resources provided by municipalities to schools are identifiable: class/group size, universal design, adaptable learning environments, pedagogical material, 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. Other prerequisites for inclusive education presented in teachers' accounts covered the will to create inclusive schools

and changing pedagogical thinking and pedagogies – in other words, attitudinal climate and pedagogical expertise. However, as these prerequisites were strongly intertwined with those of resources, inclusion becomes dominantly portrayed as a top-down political savings agenda rather than an education reform with an aim of living up to values of inclusive education.

As for the conceptual understanding, it is striking how the term inclusion in our data is associated with physical place or placement; a view strongly shared by school principals (Jahnukainen, 2015):

Small groups are necessary. Inclusion is not the best place for everybody, no matter the general will. (Female classroom teacher, 0–5 years of work experience, reply to question 3)

Student allocation decisions concern all students and are seldom a result of straightforward decisions. This is in line with the idea of education for all (EFA) and the non-categorical approach to education. It also contains the acknowledgement and acceptance of classroom heterogeneity. This is also where discordance, or rather the polarization of views regarding what inclusive education is, whom it is for, and how to realize it and why, occurs strikingly in teachers' accounts. Thus, we will next look at the implementation of inclusion through the lens of student assignment processes. Although they mainly describe physical integration (or segregation) and assimilation, and, to some extent at least, available support resources and student and teacher priorities, they do reflect the interpretations of the idea of inclusion at municipal and school levels. Furthermore, focusing on the issue also provides the lens through which teachers dominantly construed their understanding of inclusive education. As for rights

to education for all, one camp portrays inclusive education as violating student rights, whereas the other equates inclusive education with student rights.

## **Inclusive Education as a Violation of Student Rights**

IE = EFA-SE

Contrasting inclusive education with special education provision provided in the form of small group and self-contained classroom teaching is a dominant way of conceptualizing inclusive education in teachers' accounts. This view can be formulated as in the formula above: inclusive education (IE) is education for all (EFA) without traditional special education (SE) support. Inclusive education then becomes defined in terms of physical placement in mainstream classes and related available resources (or lack of them), and, as such, as oppressing students' and teachers' rights and needs. The next teacher's account is illustrative of these experiences and perceptions:

Everybody suffers. Municipalities don't hire enough educational assistants and resources for inclusive learning are misused. Teachers' workloads increase, gifted students suffer because there's no time to guide them forward. Besides, those who'd need a small class don't receive the support they'd be entitled to but have to get along by themselves in a bigger group. And this is commonplace in my class, not only a gut feeling. For municipalities, inclusion means savings, not investments. (Female classroom teacher, 5–10 years of work experience, reply to question 1)

When experienced and conceptualized in this manner, both students – 'special', 'gifted' and 'mainstream' – and teachers are victimized by inclusive education. Teachers' accounts reveal a vicious circle that culminates in the lack of resources followed by



individualized pedagogical support being neglected. On the one hand, students categorized as ‘special’ or described as requiring individualized pedagogical attention in a mainstream classroom setting owing to their behavioral or functional traits (e.g., distractibility, inattention, tics) are portrayed as misfits in an inclusive setting. Similarly, inclusive settings are portrayed as unadaptable to their needs. On the other hand, directing scarce resources to those struggling to keep up with the curriculum leads to neglecting the learning processes of students who are more advanced than their peers and who would benefit from individualized pedagogical instructions.

Apart from learning diversity, the other way of portraying inclusive education as being undesirable and unattainable is to contrast the execution of its agenda with matching the diversity of learners. Two concerns are raised in this regard: stigmatization and the safety of learners.

The noble sentiment of inclusion is to increase the sense of belonging and to provide a model for students in need of support. Surely this works for some students, but one has to also consider those other students. It is also to be considered that a student in need of support isn’t stigmatized as ‘retarded’ or ‘stupid’ or doesn’t stay alone regardless of all grouping arrangements. This is possible regardless of support and help. (Female class teacher, 5–10 years of work experience, reply to question 3)

In addition to special need children’s rights one should also remember that so-called normal students ought to have the right for a safe school day. (Female classroom teacher, 5–10 years of work experience, reply to question 3)

Such accounts are clearly polarized between ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ learner categories that pose a threat to each other. In the case of stigma, teachers’ accounts view ‘deviant’

learners as being potentially victimized by ‘normal’ learners. Instead of conceptualizing inclusion as an educational goal which cultivates the celebration of human diversity, it seems to be conceptualized as a project or intervention with the aim of assimilating or integrating ‘difference’ into the hegemonic culture of ‘normal’ development, behavior, performance, capabilities or functioning (the issue of ‘normal’ body does not play a role in our data). However, when safety is at stake, these roles exchange. ‘Normal’ learners and learners whose academic attributes are the pedagogical focus can become victimized by ‘students with emotional and behavioral disorders’, ‘violent or disturbing students’ and similar learner categories based on behavioral attributes and related ‘conditions’ located within an individual by teachers.

According to the majority of teachers, the discontinuation of small groups and self-contained classrooms and merging them into mainstream classrooms in the name of inclusion poses a threat both to learning and to learners. These teachers’ accounts portray inclusive education merely as municipality-level retrenchment, which is camouflaged as social inclusion and executed by means of physical integration and attempts to assimilate. There is thus a clear differentiation between education for all and inclusive education agendas which emphasize that inclusive education is not for all, nor desirable.

## **Inclusive Education as a Student Right**

$$IE = EFA + (S)EN$$

Similar to previous accounts, even when inclusive education appears desirable and attainable, it remains tantamount to the discontinuation of special education provision executed by means of small groups. In contrast to the previous formula, however, this view defines inclusive education (IE) as consisting of education for all (EFA) with

adequate special educational (SEN), educational (EN) and human needs (N) taken into account in executing inclusive education (see Honkasilta, 2017). Special education provision is thus not regarded as opposing the values of inclusive education, nor is the concept of inclusion associated with place or placement. Instead, whether a pedagogical setting lives up to the values of inclusive education or not is student and case dependent.

This view on inclusive education receives different emphases in our data, one of which comes down to the provision of various forms of resources in the classroom, enabling the transformation of physical integration into inclusion.

The claim is incorrect. I currently execute strong inclusion myself, as an Asperger, formerly violently behaving student is integrated in my class. My class already had one [student] with special support and six with intensified support. Class size is now 28. I do great, because along with a new student I received a special class teacher as my partner, with whom collaboration is going very well. We also have an assistant in the class, so the teacher-student ratio is good. In my opinion, students now receive sufficient support and consider student diversity tremendously. Now I can only wish that the same system continued next year. (Female classroom teacher, 0–5 years of work experience, reply to question 3)

Another way of conceptualizing inclusive education as attainable shifts the focus from physical placement and pedagogical means to an individual learner. While varying forms of resources still play a central role, the means of their distribution and execution are more versatile and dynamic, and dependent on individual and contextual factors, as illustrated below.

Complete inclusion, if that refers to everybody being in the same group all the time, is in my opinion prevention of support. Others need a smaller group to be able to function. It would be wrong to demand of these children that they function in a big group all the time. In our case, motivation and the level of performance has verifiably increased along with being able to go into a small group. In our case one is able to [willingly] go into a small group, very seldom it is a matter of [unwillingly] having to go. (Female special needs teacher, 10–20 years of work experience)

While still maintaining the dichotomy between inclusive and special education settings, these accounts question its meaningfulness and, at the very least, displace it from center stage in conceptualizing inclusive education. Instead, inclusive education as a student right emphasizes know-your-student and needs-based pedagogies being met on an everyday basis. This means both the provision of adequate support for learners to respond to academic, behavioral, functional and performative expectations – this is often referred to in educational terminology as (special) educational needs – and respect for human needs such as autonomy, solidarity/affinity and recognition (see Honkasilta, 2017). It reminds us that as much as education is a right of all, so are the values of inclusion that fundamentally place the individual at the core of all considerations of learning and well-being.

It is realistic, but also requires real investments in the buildings, resources and training. One must remember the right of every individual child to receive good education adequately directed at one's level in the class. Including those who 'learn despite teaching', that is fast advancing students. The recognition of every student in the class must also be secured. Including that child who

silently sits in the class, raises hand, does all assigned tasks and always remembers to be polite and friendly to the others. S/he also deserves to be seen and recognized as valuable every day. However, these may not come true in a big group with the last drop squeezed out of the teacher. (Female classroom teacher, 10–20 years of work experience, reply to question 3)

## **Does Everybody Suffer?**

To conclude, the multifaceted incongruence present in teachers' accounts comes down to balancing between narrow and broad definitions of inclusion, that is, responding to both *learning* and *learner* diversity among students (see Ainscow et al., 2006). In teachers' accounts, the narrow definition of inclusion with the focus on learning seems to be equivalent to the education for all agenda. It adheres to the special educational knowledge domain and focuses on responding to learning diversity among students by promoting the participation and learning of specific groups of students, such as students with certain impairments (i.e., absence of ability or lesser ability) or those labeled as 'normal' or 'gifted'. Paradoxically, in our data the narrow definition so fundamental to inclusive education is dominantly regarded as opposite to inclusion, which by contrast is portrayed as attempts to discontinue and suspend special educational services to some extent.

Portraying inclusion in this light bears similarities with the broad definition of inclusion, which promotes social inclusion by removing barriers for learners embedded in the political, social, physical, pedagogical and emotional environments that disadvantage, exclude and disable people deemed to be impaired. However, this cannot be achieved when political impetus behind the inclusive education movement is perceived as municipality-level retrenchment by teachers expected to carry out inclusive education. Nor can it be achieved through means of coerced physical

integration and attempts at assimilation. As student assignment processes are far from random, in terms of equity they should be examined carefully, from school-level decision to classroom practices. In other words, being placed in a regular classroom with support needs does not necessarily guarantee inclusive classroom settings. Nor, perhaps, does studying in a small-group setting necessarily preclude experiences of social inclusion. What happens in the classroom, how the support is provided, and how students' and teachers' needs are met are also worth examining. If inclusive education is experienced or perceived as violating equity and the rights of learners as well as hindering learning, it is not the ideals and aims of inclusive education but rather the policies and practices carried out in the name of inclusion that ought to be critically examined.

## AFTERTHOUGHTS: EQUITY, INCLUSION OR 'JUST' SYSTEM FUNCTIONALITY

Drawing on the issues discussed earlier in this chapter, the aim has been to reflect on the Finnish education system, and students' support within it, from the perspective of equity. This can be seen as one factor in interpreting whether the system meets its ideals. At the system level, inclusion is mainly portrayed as the provision of interventions, services and physical placements designed to fit the pupil identified as being 'in need' into a system designed to ensure 'a basic minimum standard of education for all' (Field, Kuczera & Pont, 2007, 11). Although scarcely overviewed here, our data suggest that in practice, inclusive education remains a catchphrase ('education for all') and can at best be described in terms of physical integration, assimilation, and, to some extent, physical exclusion, rather than social inclusion.

Although the Finnish school system is inclusive at the system level, the terms inclusion and inclusive education are empty signifiers. They have no agreed meaning, enabling municipalities to harness the philosophy of inclusion into cost-efficient practices as well as leading teachers to conceptualize the agenda in the polarized manner presented, both of which contrast and misrepresent the values and goals of inclusive education. Since contrasting inclusion with special education provisions hardly benefits students, conceptualization and guidelines of what it means to live up to an inclusive education agenda, drawn up in conjunction with students and teachers in each municipality or school, could be a starting point to improve inclusive education. For now, the system-level language and definition of inclusion still fail to live up to the spirit of inclusive education in practice. This begs the question whether inclusion in Finland is a failure in terms of the policy, philosophy or implementation, or perhaps a mixture of them all.

## NOTES

[TS: insert end notes here]

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1. We are deeply aware of the problems in using ‘special needs’ phraseology (e.g. Norwich, 2009; Honkasilta, 2017); however, for the purposes of describing the existing system it is necessary.
  2. Dr Juho Honkasilta obtained the data via a Facebook group for teachers with the help of his former undergraduate student Tuomas Linnanmäki.

**Table 35.1 Proportion of students placed in full-time special education (special support/Tier 3) by the placement options calculated as a percentage of total enrolments in Tier 3 level special education in compulsory schools from 1994 to 2016**

| Year | Placement Type %   |               |                |
|------|--------------------|---------------|----------------|
|      | General Education* | Special Class | Special School |
| 1994 | 4.5                | 35.0          | 60.5           |
| 1998 | 8.1                | 37.8          | 54.0           |
| 2002 | 36.9               | 31.6          | 31.6           |
| 2006 | 49.4               | 32.5          | 18.2           |
| 2010 | 53.8               | 32.5          | 13.7           |
| 2016 | 62.1               | 28.3          | 9.6            |

*Note:* \* Full- or part-time in general education classrooms. *Sources:* Jahnukainen (2011) and OSF (2016).

**Table 35.2 Teachers' background information**

| Gender (N=104) |       | Age (N=105) |        |        | Work experience years (N=105) |        |       |        | Profession* (N=105) |       |        |        |
|----------------|-------|-------------|--------|--------|-------------------------------|--------|-------|--------|---------------------|-------|--------|--------|
| Female         | Male  | 20-35       | 36-45  | 46<    | 0-5                           | 5-10   | 10-20 | 20<    | CT                  | SCE   | SET    | ST     |
| N=100          | N=4   | N=34        | N=35   | N=36   | N=27                          | N=14   | N=40  | N=24   | N=53                | N=23  | N=17   | N=12   |
| 96.15%         | 3.85% | 32.38%      | 33.33% | 34.29% | 25.71%                        | 13.33% | 38.1% | 22.86% | 50.48%              | 21.9% | 16.19% | 11.43% |

*Note:* \* CT = Classroom teacher; SCE = Special class teacher; SET = Special education teacher; ST = Subject teacher.