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Jahnukainen, Markku

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# Chapter 25

## Inclusion in Finland: Myths and Realities



**Markku Jahnukainen, Ninja Hienonen, Meri Lintuvuori,  
and Sonia Lempinen**

**Abstract** Although inclusive education is a strong trend in education policy around the globe, there are different definitions and variations used in different nations. The case of Finland is interesting, because the long-term direction of the Finnish school system has supported every child's right to participate in education, but inclusive education is not mentioned or defined anywhere in education legislation. This absence of definition not only leaves the defining to the parties concerned, but also adds to creating inclusive myths and varying realities in everyday life. Meanwhile, in public discussion, there has been a constant and quite polarised debate about putting students with support needs in regular classrooms. The recent Government Program (2019) in Finland states that special education legislation should be investigated from the point of view of students as well as teachers' wellbeing. In order to define the current state and equality of the Finnish support system, the Ministry of Education and Culture has established a working group as part of the "Right to Learn" initiative 2020–2022. In this chapter, we discuss the historical development of Finnish inclusion and contrast myths and realities of the Finnish model in supporting students with support needs in the light of international trends in inclusive and special education. We also discuss possible future trends of inclusive education in the Finnish context.

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M. Jahnukainen (✉)

Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 8, 00014 Helsinki, Finland  
e-mail: [markku.jahnukainen@helsinki.fi](mailto:markku.jahnukainen@helsinki.fi)

N. Hienonen · M. Lintuvuori

Centre for Educational Assessment, University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 9, 00014 Helsinki, Finland  
e-mail: [ninja.hienonen@helsinki.fi](mailto:ninja.hienonen@helsinki.fi)

M. Lintuvuori

e-mail: [meri.lintuvuori@helsinki.fi](mailto:meri.lintuvuori@helsinki.fi)

S. Lempinen

Department of Education, University of Turku, Assistentinkatu 5, 20014 Turku, Finland  
e-mail: [sonia.lempinen@utu.fi](mailto:sonia.lempinen@utu.fi)

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Globally, inclusion is a contested concept in many ways, especially by its definition but also whether it is a goal or a means in educational policy. As Elizabeth Kozleski and colleagues have put it, inclusive education “has meant anything from physical integration of students with disabilities in general education classrooms to the transformation of curricula, classrooms, and pedagogies, and even the transformation of entire educational systems”.<sup>1</sup> This chapter is highlighting inclusion-related, often contested discussion, of policies and practices in Finnish compulsory schooling. The case of Finland is interesting, because the long-term political will and direction of the Finnish school system has supported every child’s basic right to participate in education, but even during recent reforms inclusive education is not mentioned or defined anywhere in education legislation. This lack of definition not only leaves the defining to the parties concerned, but also adds to creating inclusive myths that contrast with the realities of provision in Finnish everyday life.

Although the concept of inclusive education has not played any legislative role in Finnish development, it has been widely used in public discussion to define situations, in which students considered as ‘special needs students’ are placed in general education classrooms. It is clear that we can’t talk about inclusion without talking about special education and its tradition, which has long been exclusionary or segregative. Inclusion has emerged out of special education in Finland as elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of our discussion, we are using a broad definition of inclusion as meaning the equal right to belong to education and society for all, with adequate support, resources, staff, training, and equipment for participation in a neighbourhood school.

## **A Brief History and the Development of Unhelpful Myths About Inclusive Education in Finland**

One of us has argued previously that at the *system level* the current Finnish comprehensive school system is inclusive.<sup>3</sup> This is based on the fact that practically every student is served in the same comprehensive, compulsory school system.<sup>4</sup> However, system level inclusion does not necessarily mean inclusive placement in general education classrooms, not even in general education schools, although the number of separate special schools as well as other special education facilities has been decreasing steadily in recent years.<sup>5</sup>

Recently, we have celebrated the centenary of the first *Compulsory Education Act 1921* of Finland. Although the spirit of the law from the beginning was to include every child in basic education, it has taken a long time to get every student with disabilities even into the same school system. The first Compulsory Education Act stated as following:

The children of Finnish citizens are subject to compulsory education according to this law, which will be enacted as following. From the compulsory education are exempt: those residing further than five kilometres from the closest compulsory school in those municipalities, where the mean number of inhabitants per square kilometre does not rise over 3; and

students with intellectual disabilities as they are decreed separately. (Compulsory Education Act 101/1921, § 1).<sup>6</sup>

During the early years, it was easy to get an exemption to leave children out of schooling, in particular in rural areas and especially if the child was considered to have any kind of impairment. Indeed, based on disabilities this was possible even until 1985, when the Comprehensive School Act 1983 came into effect. The year 1997 was also significant for the rights of students with disabilities, as students with the most severe intellectual disabilities were the last group of students transferred administratively from the social and welfare services into the comprehensive school system. However, then and also later, many of these students were still educated in locations that were not connected to general education.<sup>7</sup>

Comparing Finnish special education to other school systems is a challenging task because what has traditionally been called ‘special education’ in Finland covers a broader area with low threshold services and focusing on students with milder difficulties than in many other school systems.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, it might seem that there is a lot of ‘special education’ students served in general education in the Finnish system, but not all of them are comparable with students with special educational needs (SEN) in other school systems. This complex nature of provision partly explains why it has not been an easy task to get an overview of inclusion in Finland. The complexity has also allowed many misunderstandings or myths to develop related to Finnish support services. Here we look at three such myths that we believe need to be challenged especially. Some have gained international attention and some are more related to national discussions about inclusion and its consequences. They are:

1. Myth 1: Finland holds the world record for the number of students receiving special education.
2. Myth 2: Special education students have overwhelmed general education classrooms.
3. Myth 3: There is only one future for inclusive education in Finland.

By discussing these myths in the following sections, we are trying to give the most accurate account of the state of affairs related to inclusion and special education in Finland. We start with a rather long-standing criticism about the sheer number of students getting special education in Finland, which is seen as so excessive that Finland leads the world (Myth 1).<sup>9</sup> This fallacy is partly entangled with our second topic, the fear of special education students conquering general education classrooms (Myth 2). This topic has been mainly debated in national media and supported by classroom teachers as well as by OAJ (Opetusalan Ammattijärjestö, The Trade Union of Education in Finland, see Nivanaho and Thrupp in this book). We respond to these myths by explaining the current support system and using available educational statistics and relevant research findings. We then start a discussion about unlocking the national vision for inclusion in Finland: is there really only one direction? (Myth 3).

### ***Myth 1: Finland Holds the World Record for the Number of Students Receiving Special Education***

In international comparison, at least since the OECD report 2000 titled *Special Needs Education. Statistics and Indicators*, the high total percentage and yearly increase of students served in special education in Finnish comprehensive schools has raised concern.<sup>10</sup> This is, however, a matter of the definitions used in different school systems. In a recent European cross-country report, the percentage of students with SEN varied from 1.02% to 25.12%.<sup>11</sup> If more equivalent definitions are used across countries, the comparison looks quite different. In many other school systems, special education is defined using a language of disabilities and the services available under the label of “special education” often refers mainly to special schools and separate special classes only.<sup>12</sup>

One aspect, often misunderstood, is that so-called ‘part-time special education’ has played a key part in the Finnish support system since the 1970’s.<sup>13</sup> Part-time special education is provided for any students who have, for instance, difficulties with linguistic or mathematical skills, learning difficulties or problems with their study skills, interaction skills or school attendance.<sup>14</sup> The objective is to reinforce the student’s capabilities for learning and to prevent difficulties in learning and school attendance. A total of 22% of comprehensive school students received this kind of part-time special education during the 2018–2019 school year.<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that these students are not actually counted in the special education quota for administrative purposes, even though special teachers are providing this support to them. In many other school systems, this kind of support by special teachers might be sparse,<sup>16</sup> or it might be offered under the name remedial education. It should be also understood that part-time special education can be offered as traditional clinic-type support (for example once a week), or by way of co-teaching between classroom teachers and special teachers in regular classrooms.<sup>17</sup>

To make the comparison between countries and over time even more difficult, significant changes have been made in the Finnish system of support. After 2011, the special education system became referred to as *Learning and schooling support* in the Amendments of the Basic Education Act.<sup>18</sup> Since 2011, the three levels of support have been general (Tier 1), intensified (Tier 2) and special (Tier 3).<sup>19</sup> A student can receive only one level of support at a time. The support methods and tools are almost the same at all tier levels; however, the intensity of the provided support increases from one level to the next.<sup>20</sup> Tier 1 general support is provided as soon as a support need arises, and no specific evaluations or decisions are required. Tier 1 support usually means individual pedagogical solutions and guidance as a part of daily school life.<sup>21</sup> Tier 2 intensified support is provided for students who need regular support or several support forms simultaneously.<sup>22</sup> Tier 2 student’s support is based on a pedagogical assessment and must be provided in accordance with a learning plan devised for the student. Tier 3 special support is provided for students who otherwise cannot adequately achieve the goals set for their growth, development and learning.<sup>23</sup> Tier 3 support consists of special needs education and

other support needed by the student provided according to the Basic Education Act.<sup>24</sup> Before making the decision on Tier 3 support, the education provider needs to draw up a pedagogical statement on the student. A decision on special support is made in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act and the reasons for the decision are contained in the pedagogical statement and in all other additional statements. The decision on special support must state, for instance, the student's primary teaching group. An individual education plan (IEP) is drawn up for any student receiving Tier 3 support.

Looking at recent (2019) educational statistics,<sup>25</sup> we find that on top of that share of 22% receiving part time special education (including 11% of Tier 1 students not counted separately) the Tier 2 level intensified support was received by 10.6% and Tier 3 special support by 8.1% of comprehensive school students (OSF 2020). These numbers, however, *should not* be simply added together, because part-time special education can be provided at all tier levels of support as a means of support. Based on this statistical information we can, however, estimate that the total share of students at compulsory schooling level receiving some sort of additional support under the tiers of *Learning and Schooling support* can be as high as approximately 30%. This, however, is not the correct number to use in international comparisons as a reference to special education students in Finland. If any of those classifications should be used, in most cases the share of students at the Tier 3 level is the most accurate option.<sup>26</sup> In a comparison between the United States, province of Alberta, Canada, and Finland, using the best available estimates for K-12 comparison, the percentage of students with official SEN definition (Tier 3 equivalent) were 10.8., 10.1 and 7.0 (respectively).<sup>27</sup> Using this as a reference, the myth of Finland as a world record holder in special education is probably not so evident anymore.

## ***Myth 2: Special Education Students Have Overwhelmed General Education Classrooms***

The kinds of changes in Finnish special education support mentioned above, along with complex ways of defining support needs, have evoked a lot of educators' opinions and some heated public debates about the possible 'invasion' of 'troubled students' into general education classrooms. For example, in recent years inclusion has remained a topic of public debate in Finland especially in platforms owned by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), using opinions gathered mostly from teachers and sometimes from parents.<sup>28</sup> The focal point of the argument has been the perceived advantages of placing pupils in special versus regular classes. A survey presented by the national YLE news<sup>29</sup> to members of the Finnish parliament revealed that most participants, especially from the centre and right-wing parties, would like to increase the number of special classes throughout the country. This opinion amongst Members of Parliament as well as many teachers and parents, arises from concern that the pupils are not receiving enough support and that teachers are not coping

with heterogeneous classrooms either.<sup>30</sup> The statements in the news are verified by studies highlighting teachers, assistants and principals views of not coping with heterogeneous classrooms due to lack of pedagogical training.<sup>31</sup> It is argued that comprehensive school subject teachers use few inclusive education practices of co-teaching, group work and differentiation, due to lack of training.<sup>32</sup> These frequently offered opinions have their roots in misinterpretation of inclusive measures.<sup>33</sup> Inclusion is often misinterpreted as integration, which can be used to describe the moving of pupils from classroom or setting to another, however, unlike inclusion, integration does not involve belonging automatically. Hence, the public discussion about special versus regular classes could be described as being about integration rather than inclusion.

Another misinterpretation of inclusive education on a municipal level has revolved around using inclusion to make savings. According to the OAJ, a reduction in the number of special schools has led to moving pupils to regular classrooms without sufficient resources following them.<sup>34</sup> Lack of support with resources in heterogeneous classroom groups where differentiation of learning ends up being a copious task, has become a major concern for many teachers.<sup>35</sup> The inclusive measures were intended to direct support along with the pupil to neighbourhood schools and regular classrooms, rather than shut down the support system along with the special classes and special schools.<sup>36</sup> However, it is often the idea of inclusion or, more specifically, the so-called inclusive reform of special education in 2011, that has become the target of blame—even extreme blame—for most problems regarding support needs. For instance, a recent devastating incident of long-term bullying ending with three teenagers ganging on their peer, and the loss of a life. The press then started hunting for where to attribute blame, and “inclusive” education was raised as a possible cause behind the incident. Inclusion in this case was seen as moving a pupil from special education to regular education, and without sufficient support measures.<sup>37</sup>

Looking at the national educational statistics and empirical data, the picture is more balanced. Although nationally the number of students in separate special schools has decreased over time and the number of students with special needs in general education settings has increased, the students with special needs in Finland still study both in regular and special classes, as well as in special schools.<sup>38</sup> Most of the Tier 3 level students placed in general education schools are studying in general education classroom only part-time: at the national level, only 23% of Tier 3 level students (1.9% of all comprehensive students) are fully included in general education classes.<sup>39</sup> This means that in a school of 200 students, there are around four fully-included Tier 3 students. If taking account of the Tier 2 students as well, there are special needs students in about half of the regular classes in lower secondary education.<sup>40</sup>

There are, however, wide differences between municipalities: these may explain the public debate. The proportion of comprehensive school students full-time in special classes ranged from 0 to 10% across municipalities. In 2019 there were 311 municipalities that differ in size enormously. For example, the number of comprehensive school students in a municipality varies from just 16 students in the smallest to 54,000 students in the largest and unsurprisingly this affects how they organised

their support (see also Kalalahti and Varjo in this book).<sup>41</sup> In addition, even amongst the largest municipalities much variation is evident, for instance 1.5 to 6.3% of comprehensive school students full-time in special classes in 2019. Some municipalities continue to support students mainly in special schools and some mainly in regular classes (OSF, 2020). It is also noteworthy, albeit based on just a few Finnish studies, that there are no obvious performance differences that can be traced to student placement between different educational settings.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Myth 3: There is Only One Future for Inclusive Education in Finland***

It is possible to speculate that there are many ways in which inclusive education could be developed in Finland in the future. Here we take the discussion to a general level mirroring general education policy trends on future inclusive education. So far, we have argued that there are no differences between student performance regardless of the setting, although municipalities vary greatly in their way of organising inclusive education and allocating resources, and that Finland has signed many international agreements to implement inclusive education. Furthermore, in public discussion, the future possibilities of inclusive education often seem to be restricted to resources, which indicate misinterpretation of inclusive education from policies to practice. In order to address this, the recent Government Program (2019)<sup>43</sup> in Finland stated that “special education legislation as well as functioning of inclusion should be investigated from the point of view of students as well as the teachers’ wellbeing”. As a way of defining the current state and equality of the Finnish support system, the Ministry of Education and Culture has established a working group as part of the “Right to Learn” initiative 2020–2022.<sup>44</sup> To add to previous discussions, some major trends concerning the Finnish education system are considered from the point of view of inclusive education. These trends include both technologies and access to resources in the future. Lessons from COVID-19 and the use of technologies and OECD perspectives on inclusive education have been followed by a discussion of general policy trends linked to resources that may impact the future of inclusive education.

Recent changes caused by the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19 and pressures for digitalisation could certainly change the way inclusive education is organised in the future also. Finland was amongst the countries that chose not to close its schools during the pandemic but to continue education in mainly digital form. Data gathered from Spring 2020 will give insight into the impact of highly digitalised education.<sup>45</sup> Another important angle on the future of Finnish education revolves around the organisation of municipalities after recent proposals for reform, this includes influences on how special and inclusive education will be organised, and the future of municipal and state funding. Diminished funding could potentially support a shift to relying more on private provision. This privatisation has already started in the area



of early childhood education and care,<sup>46</sup> which operates under different legislation than compulsory education. Furthermore, the way that the Finnish public education system has become influenced by the private sector could also have a considerable impact on the inclusive education. Whether inclusive education is high enough up the agenda of policy-makers, education providers, teacher and the community will also affect the extent to which inclusion is applied to education.

We now consider a number of issues that will be important in the future. One is how COVID-19 distance learning has impacted on pupils receiving support. Another is the OECD definition of inclusion, which links inclusive education to future workforce (tech-savvy) skills. A third issue is municipal and state funding and its impact on Finnish inclusive education.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the spring term of 2020 Finnish teachers went quickly from using technologies in education to teaching fully online.<sup>47</sup> Survey data from some 61,000 pupils in Grades 4–10 and more than 39,000 parents with children in Grades 1–10 indicates that distance learning practices varied widely between schools.<sup>48</sup> In the same study, teachers ( $n = 5361$ ), principals ( $n = 870$ ) and parents ( $n = 35,586$ ) highlighted that Tier 2 and Tier 3 pupils' support was not realised as well as before the pandemic. Nor was it as good for distance learning or in the classroom education that was arranged later in the Spring term for the most vulnerable pupils, for instance Tier 3 pupils and pupils in Grades 1–3.<sup>49</sup> By the Autumn term, pupils were mostly in classroom education in Finland and the state had directed extra funding to schools because of COVID-19. It is a relief that by this time the majority of respondents were suggesting that most Tier 2 and Tier 3 pupils had received learning and schooling support that was as good as before the pandemic.<sup>50</sup>

Another influence on the future of inclusive education in Finland is the OECD. According to the OECD, inclusion in education means the ability to reach a minimum level of skills, but these are also linked to twenty-first century employment.<sup>51</sup> This OECD definition of inclusion is driven by economics, which necessitates active participation to learning and instead of changing the environment, the emphasis is on the individual to learn skills. The future of inclusion in Finland may take a different route depending on whether this OECD definition of inclusion will become widespread or whether inclusion will be considered more as a right to participate, to get support, and to have the environment moulded to fit the person with special needs,<sup>52</sup> rather than the other way around. The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014<sup>53</sup> has looked towards twenty-first century skills, referred to as transversal competence areas, as a central part of the curriculum in all subjects.<sup>54</sup> The use of technology and technological industries have also become very important, such that alongside more traditional barriers to equity like special education, socio-economic status, migrant background and gender, the OECD has highlighted access and ability to use digital devices.<sup>55</sup> It seems that the increasing use of modern digitalised technology entails great possibilities but also possible risks for students with special needs.

Policy trends concerning municipal and state funding are presently affecting Finnish inclusive education, and will do so in the future also. The Finnish municipalities have the autonomy to organise education in ways that follow the national legislation and curriculum, but which also suit the municipality. One of the main discussion points in inclusive education is the allocation of resources. In a successful inclusive environment, funding is allocated in a way that supports pupils, teachers, and all others involved in the provision of special education to make choices enabling participation. For instance, allocation of resources to support special schools instead of funding inclusive settings will keep supporting the special education school system. On the other hand, funding that is saved from closing down special schools can be relocated back to the general system, in a way that more special education teachers and assistants can become available in regular neighbourhood schools.<sup>56</sup> Allocating resources to training teachers to meet the needs of children of all abilities and from all social backgrounds would help towards creating more inclusive learning environments for pupils. Professional learning about how teachers and students can collaborate, teachers can differentiate, and how teachers can understand the uniqueness of each person are also practical ways to create inclusive environments. One recent small-scale study suggested that by collaborating with special education teachers, Finnish primary school teachers were starting to develop relevant skills to manage in the tiered system.<sup>57</sup> A survey of 500 Finnish teachers in the Autumn term of 2020 suggested that half felt they had the expertise and knowledge to support SEN but lacked time and resources.<sup>58</sup>

Many municipalities in Finland are currently having significant financial difficulties<sup>59</sup> and as organisers of education, the effects on schools are inevitable. The OAJ suggests<sup>60</sup> some municipalities should merge, in order to create better municipal networks and providers of services. If proposed reforms of social and medical welfare systems are carried through, organising education will become the municipalities' primary duty. Yet the weak financial situation of municipalities poses a potential threat of reducing public funding. If this eventuates, compulsory schooling might even need to be opened to the market, increasing private actor provision, involvement and investment. This kind of privatisation of education could lead to similar concerns as in Sweden during recent decades. In Sweden special schools are strengthening again in large cities as there is less special support offered in regular schools, the project of social inclusion is failing, and parents who can afford it, send their children to better performing independent but socially segregated schools.<sup>61</sup> Finland is likely to have more successful future inclusive education through clearer legislation in support of special education and support by municipalities for more universal inclusive practices in public education.

## **Conclusion: Towards Unified National Guidelines of Inclusive Education**

It is worth noting that educational support and inclusive education in Finland has gained significant attention both internationally and nationally since the early 2000s. It seems that the motives for this attention have been wide-ranging. The international interest has been at least partly related to broader interest in Finland's success in PISA comparisons and trying to solve the mystery of the supposed 'Finnish miracle of education'.<sup>62</sup> Nationally, debates have been about the rights of students with special needs to participate in general education and, at the same time, what kind of consequences this inclusive education might have for teachers' workloads as well as for the learning results of those students without recognised special needs. Such debates rarely end conclusively because the field of inclusive and special education is fairly broad and definitions are not fixed nationally or even internationally,<sup>63</sup> and there are few studies that can offer hard evidence of the outcomes of different policies.<sup>64</sup>

Carrying out successful inclusion requires, amongst other things, resources, knowledge and a certain attitude.<sup>65</sup> When the prerequisites for inclusive education have been studied at the school and municipal levels, the views between Finnish teachers, principals and municipal-level administrators have differed slightly.<sup>66</sup> Teachers considered the reduction of class size as the most important prerequisite for inclusive education whereas principals mentioned co-teaching as the primary issue. Otherwise, teachers and principals often agree that educational assistants and support from special education teachers are important prerequisites for inclusion. Municipal-level administrators considered support for inclusion from school leaders as the most important requirement. It is clear that when inclusive education is provided, there are many views to be taken into account. This easily offers room for multiple interpretations—even the creation of myths—about the pros and cons of inclusive education. Furthermore, it is important to make unified efforts to clarify what the outcomes of inclusive policies and practices are, and to differentiate them from the outcomes of other reforms, societal changes and statistical definitions. More research, based on solid empirical data about the outcomes of different practices is also needed to get a more comprehensive picture of the state and effectiveness of the Finnish system for organising inclusive and special education. Forthcoming national guidelines related to legislation and definitions are needed to clarify procedures at the municipal and school level. The present lack of definitions unhelpfully leaves the defining to the parties concerned, and also helps to create inclusion myths that stray far from everyday realities.

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**Markku Jahnukainen** is Professor of Special Education and Vice-Dean in the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki. His expertise is in international and comparative research related to inclusive and special education policy. Jahnukainen is currently a PI and consortium leader in a project called INCLUSIVE about the cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes of inclusive versus special education placement funded by the Academy of Finland.

**Ninja Hienonen** is Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Helsinki and a Project Manager at Tampere University. Ninja is interested in the different levels of the education system and their relationship to student performance and learning-related attitudes. In her research she focusses particularly on students with special educational needs and measurement issues around performance of lower-achieving students.

**Meri Lintuvuori** is Postdoctoral Researcher in the Centre for Educational Assessment at the University of Helsinki and in the Research group for Education, Assessment and Learning at Tampere University. Her doctoral dissertation was about the learning and schooling support system and related official statistics of special education in Finland. Her research interests lie in the learning and schooling support in basic education. She is also interested in the equality and equity of education.

**Sonia Lempinen** is University Teacher in the Department of Education, University of Turku. Her expertise is in inclusive education, policy studies, and the commercialisation of education. Lempinen's postdoctoral research involves studies of policies and practices of commercial interests in public education. She is a researcher on the Academy of Finland-funded 'Hollowing Out of Public Education Systems? Private Actors in Compulsory Schooling in Finland, Sweden and New Zealand' (HOPES) research project.

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