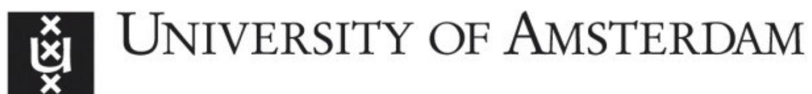

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pedagogues' perspectives in Iceland, Finland and the Netherlands

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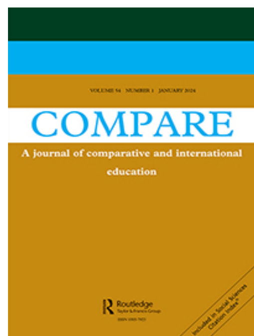

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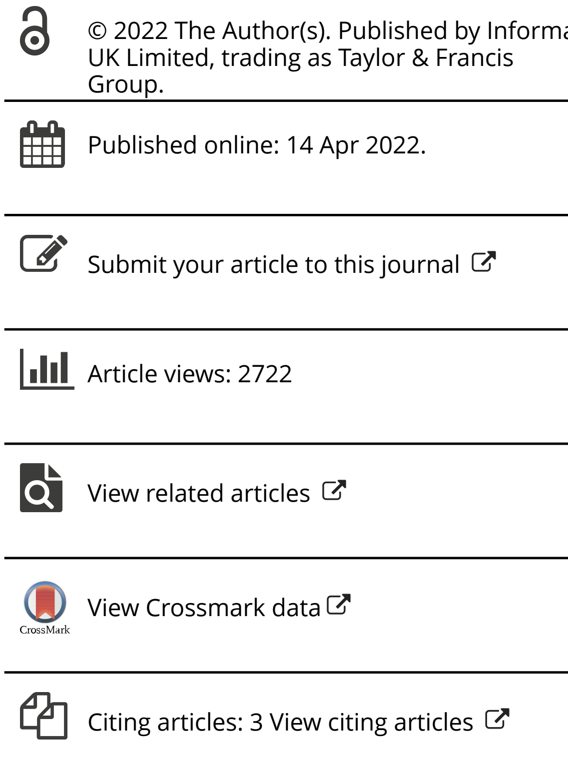

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Tensions between diverse schools and inclusive educational practices: pedagogues' perspectives in Iceland, Finland and the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT
Despite a global commitment to guarantee access to and participation in high-quality education for all, the acceptance of marginalised pupils into mainstream education and changing policies and practices to support the aim are still contested challenges. This article discusses how inclusive education policy is understood and applied by pedagogues at the micro level in three different countries, Iceland, Finland and the Netherlands, focusing on tensions. A qualitative thematic analysis of 22 interviews with teachers, tutors and school directors reveals that an inclusive policy frame does not prevent pedagogues from favouring a normative 'centre'. Pupils' local language competence becomes crucial for in-/exclusion. In addition, we find more emphasis on inclusive actions at the micro level as a response to exclusive policies and settings. This comparative study highlights the interplay among policies, practices and pedagogues' beliefs and attitudes and how they affect one another in striving to achieve inclusive aims.

KEYWORDS
Inclusive education; inclusive practices; language competence; comparative research; social inequality; marginalisation

Introduction

The value of inclusive education to enhance learning for all has been vigorously supported on an international scale for several decades through influential educational policy, practice and research (OECD 2012; UNESCO 2015; Waitoller and Artiles 2013; Wolff et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the way inclusive education is understood among different education systems is varied and contested, resulting in a wide range of teaching practices and mixed success (Schuelka et al. 2019). Inclusion in education is moulded by local contexts or, as Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller (, 2011, 2) put it, 'mediated by 1. the official and implicit purposes and goals of public education, 2. access to intellectual, human, and material resources, and 3. collective understandings and educational responses to sociocultural differences'. Contextual comparisons are necessary when different national policies aim to heed the same global ideology.

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Inclusion as a concept emerged in close connection with 'special education', 'exclusion' and 'marginalisation', and the conceptual obscurity among these terms contributes to the incoherence and complicity in policies, practices and research (Florian 2019; Richardson and Powell 2011; Waitoller and Artiles 2013; Wolff et al. 2021). On one hand, inclusive education is defined as a concrete matter of the placement of pupils considered to have special educational needs (Waitoller and Artiles 2013; Wolff et al. 2021). On the other hand, and as we define inclusion in this study, the concept broadly covers the effects of pupils' intersecting social categories as well as the value base on which the macro-level inclusion policies and micro-level practices are built (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006). This broad spectrum of how to approach inclusion emphasises that pupils' multiple social categories, such as social class, ethnicity and gender, along with expectations regarding, for example, language competencies should be directly accounted for when discussing inclusive education. In addition, those different categories pose problems and advantages in the tense relation between macro-level policies and school-level practices (Florian 2019; Richardson and Powell 2011; Tomlinson 2017).

Recent research has highlighted the need to build a sociological, intersectional and comparative understanding of inclusion in education. Lacking are studies that focus on how wider social and political contexts inform and override inclusive aims at the micro level (Wolff et al. 2021; Tomlinson 2017) and examine difference and exclusion as a product of macro-level policies (Waitoller and Artiles 2013; Tomlinson 2017; Florian 2019). Some social categories such as class are often absent in inclusion studies (Waitoller and Artiles 2013; Wolff et al. 2021) or studies that are conducted at the micro level (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Wolff et al. 2021). Expanding research to examine practices found in inclusive settings has also been called for (Amor et al. 2019) in order to continue promoting inclusive aims.

We address this research gap by comparing interpretations and perspectives about inclusive education in Iceland, Finland and the Netherlands, concentrating on the tensions that inclusive education creates for primary-school pedagogues (teachers, school directors and tutors), the professionals who need to account for inclusion practices in the everyday life of schooling. First, we provide a detailed description of the country contexts, followed by our theoretical frame, and then describe the data and methods before presenting our findings and discussion.

Contexts: inclusive education in Iceland, Finland and the Netherlands

The emphasis on Iceland, Finland and the Netherlands, and specifically the metropolitan areas of Reykjavik, Helsinki and Amsterdam, is part of a *Mixed Classes and Pedagogical Solutions* (MAPS) research project, a larger comparative investigation on urban segregation and the processes and application of inclusive education from a macro policy level to a micro classroom level. These three contexts offer the possibility to contrast systems that appear to be at different stages in their implementation of inclusive education. Keeping in mind that urban segregation greatly affects schools (Boterman 2020), the three contexts differ on the levels of education system stratification, inequality and inclusion policy (see Table 1). Iceland has an education system in which compulsory schools have been formally declared inclusive with low, albeit modestly increasing (Magnúsdóttir, Auðardóttir, and Stefánsson 2020), levels of residential segregation. In contrast, the

Table 1. Country typology of strafication and inclusion (see also Wolff et al. 2021).

	Netherlands	Finland	Iceland
Education system stratification	High	Low	Very low
Widening inequality/segregation	Advanced	Early	Very early
Inclusion policy	Low	Low/Medium	High

Netherlands has a rather long history of high urban and school segregation (Boterman 2020), has adopted an early tracking policy and generally lacks strong inclusive policies in education. Finland is somewhere in between as it has incorporated official aims for inclusive education, though less ambitiously than Iceland, with modest but widening levels of urban and school segregation (Bernelius and Vaattovaara 2016).

Historically, the three countries have addressed inclusive education in policy and practice in various ways. In Iceland, there has long been a commitment to public schooling as is common among the Nordic welfare states (Blossing, Imsen, and Moos 2014). The Compulsory School Act of 1974 advanced the education for children with special needs by emphasising equal access to education and development of the individual (Jónasson 2008; Lög um grunnskóla nr. 63/1974 [The Compulsory School Act No 63/1974]), and inclusive education is now conceptualised in broad terms that include diversity and is consistently reflected as such in national and municipal educational policy (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2012; Reykjavíkurborg Skóla- og frístundasvið 2012). Similarly, the Finnish education system has long been committed to common public schooling for all children. Comprehensive school reform during the 1970s was instrumental, and the latest amendment to the Basic Education Act in 2010 (BEA, Basic Education Act 642/2010) has further steered the system towards the 'One School for All' principle. However, inclusion remains mostly framed within special education (Pitkänen et al. 2021; Wolff et al. 2021). All Finnish schools follow the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (NCC), most recently revised in 2014, where learning aims are defined with an emphasis on diversity but inclusion is mentioned only once. In the Netherlands, inclusion policy has traditionally been understood as integration of pupils with special needs to mainstream classes. The practice of separating such pupils from the general pupil population has been common (Pijl 2010). Outside of special educational needs, Dutch education policy rarely acknowledges inclusion (Joyce, Coppens, and de Wolf 2018), especially in terms of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

As an outcome of their historical trajectories, there have been recent policy shifts in response to various levels of exclusion and segregation in the three countries. In Iceland, while policies laid important groundwork towards inclusion in schools, they also favoured the establishment of segregated schools and classes for children with developmental and behavioural problems. Hence, after some early indications of increasing segregation, especially in Reykjavik, compulsory schools were formally declared inclusive schools in 2008 (Lög um grunnskóla nr. 91/2008 [The Compulsory School Act No 91/2008]) to guarantee equal access to education in regular schools, regardless of physical or mental abilities. With each change in educational policy, inclusive education has endured as the pre-eminent means to achieve social equity, strained by increasing pupil diversity (Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé, and Meckl 2019) and increasing vulnerability to marketisation of education (Magnúsdóttir, Auðardóttir, and Stefánsson 2020). In Finland, certain groups of pupils, such as the disabled, had been excluded from mainstream schools and school classes despite comprehensive school reform. A three-tiered framework of

support was established in 2010 aimed at inclusion in education by increasing flexibility within the support system, moving the focus towards preventive practices and emphasising pedagogy instead of diagnosis (Ahtiainen 2017; BEA, Basic Education Act 628/1998; BEA, Basic Education Act 642/2010). More pupils are now integrated into the mainstream schools and school classes, although separate groups are not forbidden. Despite these inclusive developments, the system is segmented in many ways (e.g. Kosunen and Carrasco 2016). In contrast to the policies made in Iceland and Finland, the Netherlands' approach to inclusion policies focuses almost exclusively on special needs and only in a limited fashion on issues of disadvantage and (ethnic and class) background. The Dutch system has been criticised for utilising a substantive national tracking policy that has deepened (in)equality and ex-/inclusion divides (Hanushek and Wößmann 2006; Van De Werfhorst and Mijs 2010). It is the most stratified and segregated of the three countries' educational systems, not excluding various circumstances such as school choice, school enrolment policies and early tracking (Boterman 2020). As a result, a critical shift in education inclusion policy happened in 2014 with the newly formulated framework of 'passend onderwijs' (suitable education) aimed 'to reduce the number of pupils in exclusive special education, to improve the academic outcomes and school wellbeing of pupils with special educational needs' (Zweers 2018, 14).

There is a relationship with the levels of segregation, stratification and the extent of inclusion policy (see Table 1). However, the challenges of implementing inclusion are felt by 'street-level' pedagogues in all three contexts. In Iceland, inclusive education in practice has been challenging for pedagogues trying to simultaneously handle increasing diversity in the classroom. They question the viability of inclusive education when there remains a lack of special educational needs services (Gunnþórsdóttir and Ásgeir Jóhannesson 2014). Advocates of inclusive education are concerned that increased individualisation works against the principles of inclusion (Ólafsdóttir and Rós Magnúsdóttir 2017) and places much of the burden on pedagogues. In Finland, there are tensions between the official aims and the pedagogues' perceptions in inclusive education (Honkasilta et al. 2019) as well as scepticism of inclusive education's potential and its underlying political motives (Pitkänen et al. 2021). Even with the 'passend onderwijs' framework, perhaps the most influential educational feature of the Netherlands is still early tracking and pupil evaluation, which, according to studies, can heavily exacerbate inequality, using standardised tests or teacher assessments as primary tools (Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2018). The discussion on the levels of success of the 2014 shift in the Netherlands is nascent, and the benefits of inclusive settings over exclusive settings is still in dispute (Zweers 2018).

Inclusive education is a good example of a reform that travels across national boundaries and is moulded by local contexts in conceptualisation and practice as a dynamic process. National policy change heeds international incentive but is shaped by local meaning (Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller 2011; Antonio and Yariv-Mashal 2003). As we describe above, these three national contexts have historically and politically different approaches towards inclusive education. If we picture inclusive education as a line, which has a completely segregated system at one end and a completely inclusive system on the other, Iceland appears to settle closer to the end in which inclusive education covers the whole system, and the Netherlands is quite far from it. Finland is found between the two, closer to Iceland than to the Netherlands. We also note that because of wider social and urban segregation processes, the education system in the

Netherlands has been restructured to tackle the exclusion of marginalised pupils, even if this is not always conceptualised as inclusive education (Wolff et al. 2021). To avoid uncontextualised or ahistorical comparison, we have described the contexts thoroughly both historically and in the present (Cowen 2000; see also Steiner-Khamsi 2009). Our aim is to analyse 'tensions' as more than single incidents but rather as processes that have developed over time and continue to illustrate wider international and national tendencies in each context. We are aware of the limitations of qualitative interview data and the epistemological challenges of comparative research across different countries (Steiner-Khamsi 2009) and have carefully considered them as we have aimed to gain understanding of the common tensions found among our interviews.

Tensions in implementing inclusive education

In general, one of the challenges for inclusive practices at the micro level derives from the long history of separately treating the 'non-normative' (Tomlinson 1982, 65) throughout the education systems (Tomlinson 2017; Florian 2019; Richardson and Powell 2011). The systems are built on the idea that there is a normative centre within a bell curve structure (Florian 2019), and those pupils that fall to the margins of the curve require special treatment, often manifested as exclusive practices to secure efficient learning for the majority of pupils in the normative centre.

The idea of a normative centre is problematic because it places capability and ability as an intrinsic trait within an individual pupil and thereby emphasises the responsibility of individuals. According to Waitoller and Artiles (2013, 65), this unitary approach places too much emphasis on one social category, 'ability', and assumes that problems related to it can be resolved without understanding the intersecting forms of disadvantages that pupils might have. The psychologically oriented 'ability' paradigm, if used as the sole criterion, leads to deficit thinking, pathologises individual pupils and decontextualises schooling from societal connections. This may lead to misrecognition of the effects of social positions on pupils' learning and behaviour in schools and schools' role in the reproduction of social positions.

Nevertheless, it has been shown that middle-class pupils, especially of ethnic majority backgrounds, wield considerable advantages that manifest in the field of education by helping them align with school practices more easily than working-class or migrant pupils (Crozier 2015; Lareau 2011). These advantages relate primarily to utilisation of family-based resources, applicable in the everyday life of schools, school choices and transitions in education (Bourdieu 1986; Boterman 2020; Kosunen and Carrasco 2016). In school institutions, there is often a general alignment between the 'middle-class' school culture and middle-class pupils (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Crozier 2015) as the capitals that certain social categories wield tend to cohere with the perceived needs of professionals running the schools. The school-based mechanisms that favour the middle-class background pupils come in tension with inclusive education's aims:

> The challenge for teachers, then, is to teach the academic skills and competencies required to enable their students to succeed in mainstream societies, while also ensuring that they acknowledge and respond to the cultural and linguistic diversity of the communities they serve. Political philosophers … conceptualise this 'as a tension between an impulse toward redistribution of power-elite capital on one hand; and, on the other hand, toward recognition and valuation of diverse social-cultural identity formations … (Mills 2008, 85)

To summarise, inclusion in education is directly in tension with the psychologically and middle-class-oriented nature of schooling at the micro level. At the macro level, some policies and related practices likewise appear to conflict with inclusive education, such as high stakes testing as a form of accountability, competitiveness between schools, freedom of school choice and ability grouping (see Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006). Market and competition-oriented practices are shown to either be in tension with inclusive education or shape it so that it becomes part of the same regime and simultaneously loses the 'education for all' framework (Hamre, Morin, and Ydesen 2018). Thereby, the enacted policies might initially hamper the execution of inclusive education and make inclusion appear only as a 'policy mantra' (Alexiadou et al. 2016, 18). Though the policy environment enables and hinders possibilities at the school level, schools also have some amount of power in their response to the diversity of pupils at the micro level (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006). In this, the school culture and pedagogues' attitudes impact significantly (Howes, Grimes, and Shohel 2011) and in return are simultaneously shaped by the country's cultural and political contexts.

The study

In this study, we examine how pedagogues in interviews articulate and experience the (possible) tensions between their attempt to implement inclusive education and pupil diversity in Iceland, Finland and the Netherlands. Our aim is to contribute to the existing research literature about inclusive education by trying to understand how the psychologically and middle-class-oriented nature of schooling presents itself in tension with inclusion policy at the micro level in the three contexts. Three research questions guide our thematic analysis: how the pedagogues change their practices to better adapt for diversity, how the responsibility of success and failure of pupils is discussed and how the pedagogues verbalise the system-level hindrances to educating all pupils together. With our analysis, we observe who (which social categories) in the three country contexts falls to the margins in different environments, who is responsible for the adaptation of all children to the mainstream schools and classes and how macro-level inclusion policies affect pedagogical practices according to the pedagogues.

We analyse qualitative interview data collected from school staff. The data were collected as part of the larger comparative *Mixed Classes and Pedagogical Solutions* (MAPS) research study on inclusive education in which, along with quantitative analysis on the macro level, pupils between 5 and 13 years old were observed and staff, parents and pupils were interviewed. Based on the criteria of the larger research study, each research team contacted urban primary schools where researchers could conduct fieldwork with the purpose of observing academic and social experiences in heterogeneous settings. Gaining access to schools in the Netherlands was challenging and required the scope of the study to include one school from a smaller, yet diverse, urban context, as well as school administrators of multiple diverse schools and the tutors who worked in them. To overcome this discrepancy, we ensured that all interviewees had regular interaction with a diverse pupil body and were therefore able to offer their experiences with inclusive and exclusive practices in their school in terms of gender, ethnicity and class and differing language competencies. The primary schools, one in Iceland, one in Finland and four in the Netherlands, were situated in urban neighbourhoods with a mix of heterogenous

socio-economic backgrounds and languages among families. All schools exhibited a risk of segregation through a pattern of middle-class rejection in school choice and received additional funding dependent on the socio-economic status of their catchment areas. Additionally, the Dutch schools located in stigmatised neighbourhoods were further compounded with academic intervention programmes in the schools.

For this study, we analyse 22 interviews that were conducted during the one-year-long fieldwork in these primary schools. Data were collected during the 2019 school year from seven pedagogues in Iceland, seven pedagogues in Finland and eight pedagogues in the Netherlands from the chosen urban schools. The interviews were conducted in Icelandic, Finnish and in the Netherlands in English. All interviewees volunteered to participate in the study and the interviews. The pedagogues included school leaders in all contexts, classroom and subject teachers in Iceland and Finland and programme tutors in the Netherlands. Hence, the data in all contexts consist of interviews with school leaders in similar types of positions. Teachers and tutors had daily teaching contact with pupils and thereby shared experiences at the grass-root level. The tutors and some of the teachers taught in smaller groups specifically giving additional support to pupils struggling in the regular class. The interviewees' work experience was diverse, from two years to over two decades of experience. Overall, our interviewees had diverse positions in their schools, and their attitudes about inclusive education varied. Those pedagogues who had daily contact with pupils in most disadvantaged positions (such as newly migrated pupils) generally had a more positive understanding about inclusive aims. Nevertheless, the interviewees all worked in a school culture that dealt with the diversity of pupils on a daily basis. The semi-structured interviews focused on diversity of the school and neighbourhood, inclusive education practices, academic grouping practices and specific challenges and experiences within their school. Diversity in this context included but was not limited to special educational needs and second language learners, as well as social distinctions of ethnicity, gender and class. All authors took part in the observations, were familiar with the interviewees and had an embedded and embodied knowledge of their own research sites.

To answer our three research questions, we analysed themes inductively (Braun and Clarke 2013). First, we fed the Finnish data into Atlas.ti software and coded the transcribed interviews with 'talk about inclusive education' and 'talk about pupils' to separate relevant parts of the data for further analysis. Second, we analysed inductively themes to gain understanding on tensions. We analysed themes in relation to how different pupils are mentioned and how the policy of inclusive education and its impacts on the daily work is discussed to answer our research questions (how the pedagogues change their practices to better adapt for diversity, how the responsibility of success and failure of pupils is discussed and how the pedagogues verbalise the system-level hindrances of educating all pupils together). The Icelandic and Dutch data were then treated in a similar manner: the data were fed into Atlas.ti and MAXQDA and coded with the same codes as the Finnish data. To add inter-coder reliability, we had regular meetings and cross-referenced each other's interviews and excerpts with the research themes at all levels during the analysis process. The themes from each context were combined and analysed jointly to understand who in the interviews fall to the margins in different environments, who is responsible for the adaptation of all children to the mainstream schools and classes and how macro-level educational policies affect pedagogical practices according to the pedagogues.

Two larger themes, or rather tensions, were analysed in inclusive education across contexts: a perceived tension between pupils' inadequate language competencies and inclusion, and a tension between high-quality education and inclusion. Inclusion policies contributed to these tensions differently in each context, but while we found a different emphasis across contexts, we also found similarities. The Icelandic and Finnish interviewees shared similar types of experiences and verbalised this rather similarly while the Dutch interviewees concentrated on the pupils' transitions to lower secondary education and the policies and processes related to it. In the findings, we will present the two larger themes (tensions) we found across contexts and within them the different subthemes entailing difference in emphasis among the interviewees dependent of their origin.

Tensions between diverse schools and inclusive education in pedagogue interviews

Tension between the 'right kind' of language and inclusion

Tension between pupils' linguistic dispositions and successful inclusion is a central theme in all three contexts. In Iceland and Finland, language proficiency works as an important marker for inclusivity in the interviews. In the Dutch interviews, the challenges relate to the practice of testing and urban segregation, and they cover issues of social class.

In Iceland and Finland, pupils' ethnic backgrounds and language skills take a large share in the descriptions of pupils, the school and the neighbourhood. Pedagogues use expressions such as 'multicultural', 'immigrants', 'international school', 'pupils with Finnish/Icelandic as a second language' and 'foreign kids'. Languages and diverse ethnicities work as important characteristics for the schools. In Finland, even when explicitly talking about inclusive education, pupils with special needs are mentioned more rarely, which is uncommon (Wolff et al. 2021). In fact, most interviewees understand inclusion as a question of having pupils who do not speak Finnish as their native language in mainstream education. In addition, heterogeneity is understood as a mix of ethnic backgrounds.

While in Finland and Iceland language is mostly talked about in relation to pupils' ethnicities, in the Dutch data other social positions become relevant. In one of the Dutch schools, the school director (P1) and assistant director (P2) exclaim how around 90% of the pupils have language issues.

P1: Ninety percent of the school . . .

P2: Even some of the Dutch kids. . . . Because their parents are really [low educated]. . . . And they don't like to read so they don't get any support at home.

Unlike pedagogues in Finland and Iceland, the Dutch pedagogues' talk intersects with issues of socio-economic backgrounds. In this, the Dutch interviewees are more aware of the intersecting disadvantages that pupils might have (Waitoller and Artiles 2013). The quote below illustrates the importance of language for pupils regardless of whether they come from native/non-native or high/low educated families. When talking about the standardised testing process, the directors describe that language skills remain a major issue for test success even if pupils perform well in the subject:

P1: Because you've got low educated Dutch people, but you've got high educated Syrian people . . . . But [the Syrian parents] don't speak Dutch, it means that their children are smart but don't know the language after six, seven, eight years of education.

Interviewer: So, then they can't do well in the [test]?

P1: Yeah.

P2: And [so the schools need to] focus a lot on language.

P1: It's always language, language, language.

The Dutch discussion illustrates how language issues affect classroom activities. This is also evident in Icelandic and Finnish interviews. Using foreign native language in schools, especially during lessons, is perceived as problematic in both Finnish and Icelandic contexts. Several pedagogues express concern about the pupils' lack of language competence as a hindrance to participating in class discussions and activities, as well as requiring teachers to individualise assignments. Some Icelandic and Finnish pedagogues talk critically about the challenges that inclusive policy creates for new pupils who struggle with the language and are dropped into mainstream classroom activities. They are therefore positive towards the idea of a segregated reception programme. An Icelandic teacher considers being immediately immersed into a general classroom a disservice to the pupil:

> . . . it is critical for these kids to get just basic Icelandic vocabulary instruction . . . . they come here in the middle of the school year . . . . two or three who just moved to the country and went straight into class. Completely mute. Or, not mute but rather they don't know the language, and they have to sit for hours, and they understand nothing. (P11, Iceland)

In addition to classroom activities, the role of language becomes a major issue when pupils take the standardised tests, which provide information for the pupils' track selection. According to three Dutch pedagogues, even the maths exam of the standardised test uses too advanced language, and many pupils of ethnic minority and working-class backgrounds may perform poorly at maths simply because they do not fully understand the questions. Overall, the Dutch pedagogues acknowledge the connection between testing and language, and when they prepare the pupils for testing, there is serious focus on their native language skills. Pupils' lack of native language skills also challenges pedagogues in facilitating easily flowing classroom activities.

Language is mentioned, especially in Finland and Iceland, as a marker of adaptation to mainstream culture and community. Adaptation is expected from the ethnic minority pupils, and pedagogues broadly equate building language skills with adapting to cultural and social norms. One Icelandic teacher comments that some 'groups' of pupils should be involved in recreational activities because that would bolster their chances to speak the local language.

> The more the kids are into . . . sports or something. Then they . . . speak more Icelandic throughout the day. But as soon as they go home, they have (native language) TV, speak (native language) to their parents, maybe have (native language) friends . . . They are not learning the vocabulary. (P10, Iceland)

Pupils who lack the normative cultural skills are not part of the community but are still expected to adapt to it. In the first quote below, a Finnish teacher ponders over asylum seekers' adaptation to the community and compares them to the ethnic minority pupils and families who have already 'managed to adapt'. Similarly, signs of adaptation are greeted with pleasure as in the Icelandic teacher's quote following.

> In 2015, when the bigger wave [of asylum seekers] came . . . they have needed to adapt to this neighbourhood even among [other ethnic minorities]. Some [ethnic minority people] have lived here for 20 years and some [only] a couple of years, you can still see [aims for adaptation] among [them] . . . (P16, Finland)

I think it's interesting to see how most foreigners, at least at this school, maybe besides the food, they just take in the Icelandic culture. They come in their nice clothes for Christmas even though they don't celebrate Christmas. They get quite involved in the community. But the food, they do not eat pork if they do not eat pork. It's just like that. But I think nevertheless, they still want to be involved with the whole community. (P10, Iceland)

Much of the burden of learning the local languages and adapting to the local habits, especially in the Finnish and Icelandic interviews, is seen as the responsibility of the individual pupils and their families, which emphasises the ability paradigm (Tomlinson 2017; Waitoller and Artiles 2013). Here, again, the Dutch pedagogues themselves take more responsibility. This is evident when discussing pupils' adaptation to more affluent schools and neighbourhoods. For example, the Dutch school directors talk about the difficult transition phase to secondary education, where some (inner-city) high schools discriminate against pupils with minority or low-class backgrounds or if they graduated from primary schools in certain areas of the city (see Merry and Boterman 2020). The school directors talk about trying to empower their pupils and boost their confidence until they go to high school in the affluent city centre so they become prepared to be away from their own poorer neighbourhood in the periphery. In the Dutch data, pedagogues are aware of the neighbourhood-related stigma and attempt to intervene. In the Finnish and Icelandic data, however, the responsibility for moving towards the normative centre, where pupils have adequate skills to participate in education, is placed more in the hands of the pupils, families and exclusive preparatory practices.

Tension between inclusive and high-quality education

The Icelandic and Finnish pedagogues share similar kinds of worries related to teaching a diverse pupil body and maintaining certain standards in their teaching. These standards are not related to external policies as in the Netherlands. In the Dutch data, the discussion revolves around exclusion that the early tracking might perpetuate. In Finland and Iceland, the themes in the interviews revolve more around how pedagogues could do their work as effectively as possible.

In the Dutch interviews, the tutors especially mention several examples of how pupils focus on tests and how affected they are by getting low grades, while the school directors describe how the tests are not reliable enough to assess pupils' abilities. We know from previous research that inclusive education and high-stakes testing culture

are a difficult combination (Hamre, Morin, and Ydesen 2018). In the following quote, a Dutch tutor describes the impact that teacher tracking assessment ('advice') had on a pupil:

> So [the pupil] had the problem of . . . low self-esteem and that happened actually because she wanted to go to [pre-vocational secondary level] and then her teacher told her 'No, it's not going to happen' [i.e. she would be placed in a lower track], and her mother told her as well 'no, you have to let that go'. And then . . . she became so demotivated with the idea [of doing better at school] . . . that she actually thought she couldn't do anything . . . like every time something became difficult, she said 'no I can't do it'. (P5, the Netherlands)

This is a strong testament to how high-stakes assessments at early school stages may implicitly lead to exclusion or at least challenge the attempts for inclusive education. First, ability tracking is, by definition, against the idea of inclusive education (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006), and second, by setting strict frames for both, teachers' and pupils' own expectations on their performance at an early stage, the tracking policy might predetermine who gets to succeed and who does not (Hamre, Morin, and Ydesen 2018). The Dutch interviewees struggle with the overall tension of trying to build up confidence and empower pupils while having to concentrate rigorously on improving performance and grades for the tracking phase. One school leader gives an example of how the struggle to build up this confidence continues after primary school:

> High[ly] intellectual children can do very bad on tests because they are not interested . . . and that happens in the primary school as well, so the test is just a test, just a photograph . . . just a moment. [It is important to] manage in the first two years [of secondary school] to make the child believe that he (sic) is better than they all told him (sic). (P4, the Netherlands)

In the Dutch data, the quality of education is defined through externally set goals, that of pupils' success or failure in tracking evaluations. However, in the Finnish and Icelandic interviews, there are similar kinds of themes that show emphasis on the importance of reaching certain academic goals, even if the policies do not steer towards it as rigorously as in the Netherlands.

These internal goals seem to conflict with inclusive aims, especially in the Finnish data. Even when pedagogues talk nicely and respectfully about their pupils – some consciously avoid bringing up challenges – the analysis shows the emergent tension between their understanding of high-quality teaching and learning vis-a-vis a diverse pupil body. The pedagogues speak critically and sceptically about being able to initiate differentiated tasks for pupils who have different starting points, while simultaneously teaching properly, maintaining order and building well-functioning group dynamics. They discuss this as a potential element for endangering the well-being of teachers, even causing potential burnouts and a worrying element for pupils' learning:

> It's very challenging . . . [and] problematic . . . You have the whole class and in the worst case those who need special support, and someone integrated from a special group, it's so much work . . . and in teacher education . . . [there is only] one book about special education . . . [inclusive education is] against the rights of the pupils and more just for saving money . . . I wish someone could show without doubt that mainstream education is good for all pupils. (P22, Finland)

According to the Finnish pedagogues, the problem with truly diverse classes is that they tend to exacerbate low academic performance. Maintaining diversity requires a lot of effort from the teachers and is blamed for bringing the level of adequate performance so low that some pupils are left without support because their weaknesses do not stand out. Some of the Finnish pedagogues describe how weak their pupils are and how what is 'normal' is forgotten and obscure nowadays. Inclusion is mentioned as the main reason behind this obscurity:

> But my personal opinion in the background is, like no. If we have so many pupils in need of that much support . . . then it's so much [work] to do . . . You do your work with the terms you are given. But is it good for the pupils' rights, the right placement for everyone? No way. If I needed to be frank about it, I'm not in favour of inclusion . . . Personally, I say no, but as a teacher, we adapt to anything . . . I don't see [inclusive education] as wonderful. (P17, Finland)

We interpret this as an indication of a bell curve mindset (Florian 2019; Tomlinson 2017), where inclusion changes the curve and creates tensions when the pedagogues are used to another kind of curve. The pedagogues' professionalism is challenged when pupils in the bell curve margins who previously were excluded are now increasingly placed in mainstream education. There is a tension between maintaining a standard of teaching and nurturing a classroom of mixed backgrounds and abilities. This applies to our Icelandic data as well. For the Icelandic pedagogues, striving for social inclusion is more present. However, they struggle for the same reasons as their Finnish counterparts: Inclusive education requires a lot of work and resources and may hinder academic achievements. Because the school culture is established as having culturally diverse backgrounds, Icelandic pedagogues in this study view mixed classrooms as inherently inclusive, a point of departure in both pupil body and practice, yet when discussing classroom practices, they are sceptical. One teacher expresses dissatisfaction with the virtues of inclusive education in the absence of funding trained professionals or support staff. Juggling mixed abilities in the classroom is a burden for teachers and becomes a risk for all learners. This is illustrated in the next quote, which is similar to the previous Finnish quote above.

> You can't drop teaching for everyone to teach a single child because you are ignoring 18 other children if you do that. So, it is tricky. And the only thing I try to do with her is pair her with like-minded students who are good in Icelandic, and they are patient and can support her. (P15, Iceland)

The argument is that the success of inclusive education only works if the support system is intact. Additionally, support personnel may not be trained or qualified to work with pupils in need. Both points were also raised by the Finnish teachers. In general, the Icelandic teachers feel the pressure to move forward whether or not the necessary support systems are in place. In that regard, they feel that they are compromising quality teaching to manage special education issues. This might lead to pedagogues' negative attitudes against inclusive education.

Discussion

The shift in inclusive education beyond disabilities and special education is evident in the data, but they have also revealed that there are social and academic barriers for those pupils that nevertheless fall to the margins of the perceived normative curve. Often, these

barriers relate to questions of pupils' placement and marginalise the ethical and philosophical aspects of inclusive education. The increasing diversity of schools is compounded as evidence of inclusion while also challenging the notion that mainstream schools can serve not only the normative but all pupils.

We asked how pedagogues adapt their practices in diverse schools, how the responsibility of success and failure of pupils is discussed and how pedagogues verbalise the system-level hindrances to educating all pupils together. We aimed to understand tensions between the school institution itself and inclusive education policies in our interview data. As a summary of the findings, we identified the pupils' language dispositions as a central theme causing tensions. In the Icelandic and Finnish interviews, the pedagogues' proficiency to reach academic goals was challenged, and the responsibility of pupils' successful and failing inclusion to mainstream education was placed on pupils and their families. Insufficient resources, meaning macro-level policies, were also being blamed. In the Dutch interviews, despite the distinct nuances, the tensions were similarly related to language and academic goals. The interviews revolved around the effects of policy, which guides the actual pedagogical practices. Such macro-level steering by policies appeared to collide with the general inclusive aims in terms of pupil placement and access. Thus, according to our analysis, the responsibility of failure is a complex issue that may seem to fall on the shoulders of individual pedagogues but may equally be a failure of policy and/or educational infrastructure.

Pedagogues in all three nations struggle to manifest the general idea of inclusive education in daily schooling under progressive or reactionary national policies; hence, our conclusion is twofold. First, some pupils are pushed to the margins regardless of the policy frame. This is dependent on the pupil composition in school settings that are more homogenous in terms of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds so that socio-economically disadvantaged positions appear scarcer. Pupils in this environment with inadequate local language competence become the 'problematic' ones; they are the ones whose positions in mainstream education become negotiable. Gaining 'appropriate' language competence played a large role in bringing pupils into the normative curve and in the mainstream classroom. In this process, it became the individual's responsibility to adapt and move from the margins to the normative centre (Florian 2019; Tomlinson 2017). In addition, pupils' other social positions were not considered. Even though Iceland and Finland execute an inclusive policy frame and inclusive practices in daily schooling, the bell curve phenomenon continues to exist, which we interpret as a sign of how the pursuit of universally understood inclusive education is in tension with the school institution itself, as schooling is geared towards favouring the pupils regarded as 'normal' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Tomlinson 2017).

Second, there was more focus on implementing intervention practices that function within a segregated school system. The Dutch pedagogues appeared more tolerant and, in that sense, more inclusive in their response to an exclusive system. They recognised the multiple intersecting disadvantages as they worked with pupils from lower socio-economic positions and neighbourhoods than their Finnish and Icelandic counterparts. Their aim was to support and empower these pupils amidst a current segregating school system that precludes sweeping inclusive education policy. In the case of the Netherlands, we see how the policy frame becomes crucial in defining how inclusive education may present itself (Hamre, Morin, and Ydesen 2018). The early tracking policy, backed by

high stakes testing and teacher evaluation, works against inclusion. Therefore, there was an emphasis on targeted interventions aimed to repair existing problems mainly caused by exclusive policies.

With our qualitative analysis and a limited sample, we cannot argue that the perceptions and experiences in the interviews are shared across contexts. We have evidence from Finland that when a school is socio-economically disadvantaged, the school staff is more tolerant (Huilla, Peltola, and Kosunen 2021), and thereby, the bell curve might be wider than in the case school of this study. The broad principles of inclusive education, as a social reform that supports equitable access for all learners, are unanimously agreed upon but become murky in the macro context of national education systems and also at the micro level in the everyday life of schools. We agree with Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller (2011) that each country's approach to inclusion is moulded by three perspectives, namely the official goals, access to resources and the collective understanding of socio-cultural differences, and these take shape with different emphasis in different schools. To promote inclusiveness in education, we conclude both aspects must be considered: the policy level and the mindsets. It is evident that policy and practice are co-dependent, but in their wake is also the reasoning, attitudes and beliefs of the pedagogues. If the policy frame itself fights against inclusion, inclusive education is riposted to repair what the policies produce (Alexiadou et al. 2016; Hamre, Morin, and Ydesen 2018). However, having a policy frame as favourable towards inclusive aims is not enough due to the inherent feature of the school institution to marginalise some groups of pupils. The interviews from Finland and Iceland suggest that the pedagogues need more tools to understand this feature.

The Icelandic pedagogues in our data, though critical, have a broader understanding of the importance of inclusive aims compared to their Finnish and Dutch counterparts. In Finland, the interviews revolve around academic high-quality teaching, in which there is a 'normal' level that is obscured due to inclusive aims. Inclusion as such is not a goal as visible as in Iceland (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (NCC) 2014; cf. also Alexiadou et al. 2016). We suspect that the strong macro-level steering, the official goals of public education (Artiles, Kozleski, and Waitoller , 2), towards inclusive education in Iceland are evident (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2012). In our study, the pedagogues in schools with inclusive policies in place nevertheless call for intervention practices found primarily in exclusive settings to mitigate tensions in diverse classrooms.

Based on our comparative analysis with these data from these country contexts, we argue that if we understand inclusive education broadly as access and participation of all pupils, first, regardless of the inclusion policies, it is still easiest to succeed in the school if the pupil comes from an advantaged background. Second, success with a disadvantaged position is even more difficult if the macro level does not support inclusive aims. In addition to inclusion policies, we should continue to examine the inherent and historical reproductive tendencies of the school institution (see Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Crozier 2015). This could help pedagogues understand why inclusive education is sometimes in tension with the school institution and thereby also challenge this feature. It might shift the responsibility for pupils to adapt and allow the institution to adapt instead.

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