



THE STATE OF INCLUSION IN THE STATE OF INCLUSION? INCLUSION AS PRINCIPLED PRACTICE IN FINNISH BASIC EDUCATION

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ABOUT THE PRESENTATION

- **Question:** How inclusion as a principle of education practice is **formed** in education policy and **governed** to be implemented in practice
- **Aim:** Provide a critical overview of the ambiguous nature of **inclusion in education** at the national level
- **Focus:** The comprehensive schooling, also often referred to as basic education (grades 1 to 9, ages 7-16)
- **Source:** The state of inclusion in the state of inclusion? Inclusion as principled practice in Finnish basic education (forthcoming) In. Hisayo Katsui & Matti Laitinen (Edits.). Disability in the Happiest Country in the World. Helsinki University Press.
 - **Juho Honkasilta**, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland
 - **Päivi Pihlaja**, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland/Department of Education, University of Eastern Finland, Finland (1.11.2022 onwards)
 - **Henri Pesonen**, Department of Special Needs Education, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Oslo, Norway
- **Method:** Literature synthesis
 - Literature from the fields of education policy, disability studies, special education, and inclusive education
 - Relevant Finnish policy documents



Inclusion in Education

(Armstrong et al., 2011; Danfoth & Naraian, 2015; Graham & Slee, 2008; Thomas & Loxley, 2007; Schuelka et. al. 2019)

- Ongoing **principled *process***, not an *outcome*
- Requires commitment and dedication to be carried out through alignment between inclusive policies, culture, and practices
- The values and aims of the philosophy of inclusion in education should be the guiding principles of the letter and the spirit of education policy
 - Respecting and celebrating human diversity by denaturalising normality
 - Rejecting medical and psychological explanations of educational difficulties and the ensuing categorisations of difference
 - Promoting equality, equity, social participation and sense of belonging
 - Removing barriers to learning and social participation
- Examples of intersecting issues that pose potential barriers to inclusion in education
 - class, gender, race, and disability
 - racialisation, ableism, disablism, and hetero- and cis-normativity
 - geographic location, poverty and resource allocation



CONTENT OF THE PRESENTATION

1. Brief country context of Basic Education and progress of inclusion in education
2. Ambivalence of inclusion as principled education practice
 1. Ambiguous education policy guidance about inclusion in education
 2. Ambivalence of inclusion as principled practice
 3. Polarized teachers implementing inclusion in education
3. Concluding remark: The state of inclusion in education in Finland
4. Promising outlook on future trajectories



BRIEF COUNTRY CONTEXT OF BASIC EDUCATION AND PROGRESS OF INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

Main focus on 21st century reforms



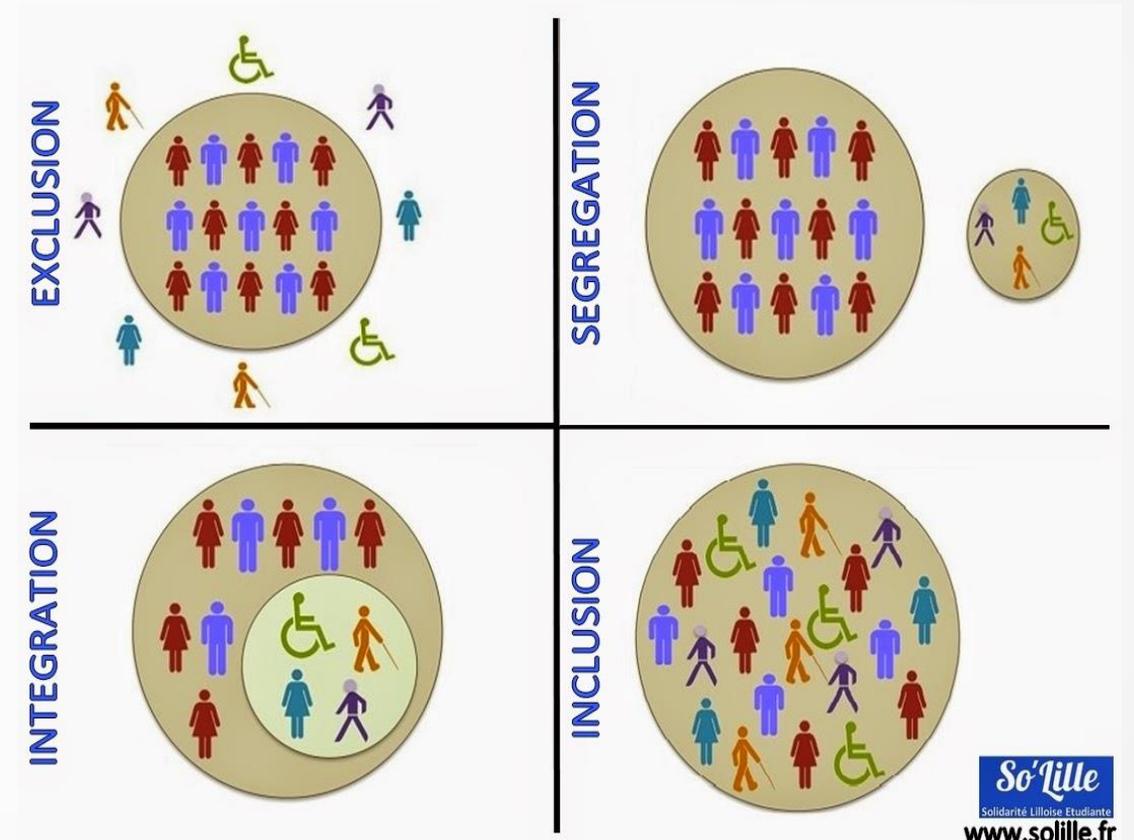
INCLUSION AS SPECIAL EDUCATION AGENDA – PROGRESS TOWARDS INCLUSION IN EDUCATION IN FINNISH POLICY

• Towards Education for All 1921-1997

- *Education for all at the system level*
- Students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities
 - from social welfare services into the comprehensive education system
 - integrated mostly in special schools with separate curricula
- General Education Schools & Special Schools

• Towards Inclusion in Education in 21st century

- Current Basic Education Act 628/1998
- Enabled full-time SE of students with disabilities in general education classes
- 2-tiered support model
 - General education
 - Special education (SE)
- Individual Education Plan (IEP) for SE support
 - Targeted, individualized instructions and related services at school
- Official diagnoses play no official role in support system



Picture of the So'Lille association : <http://www.solille.fr/>



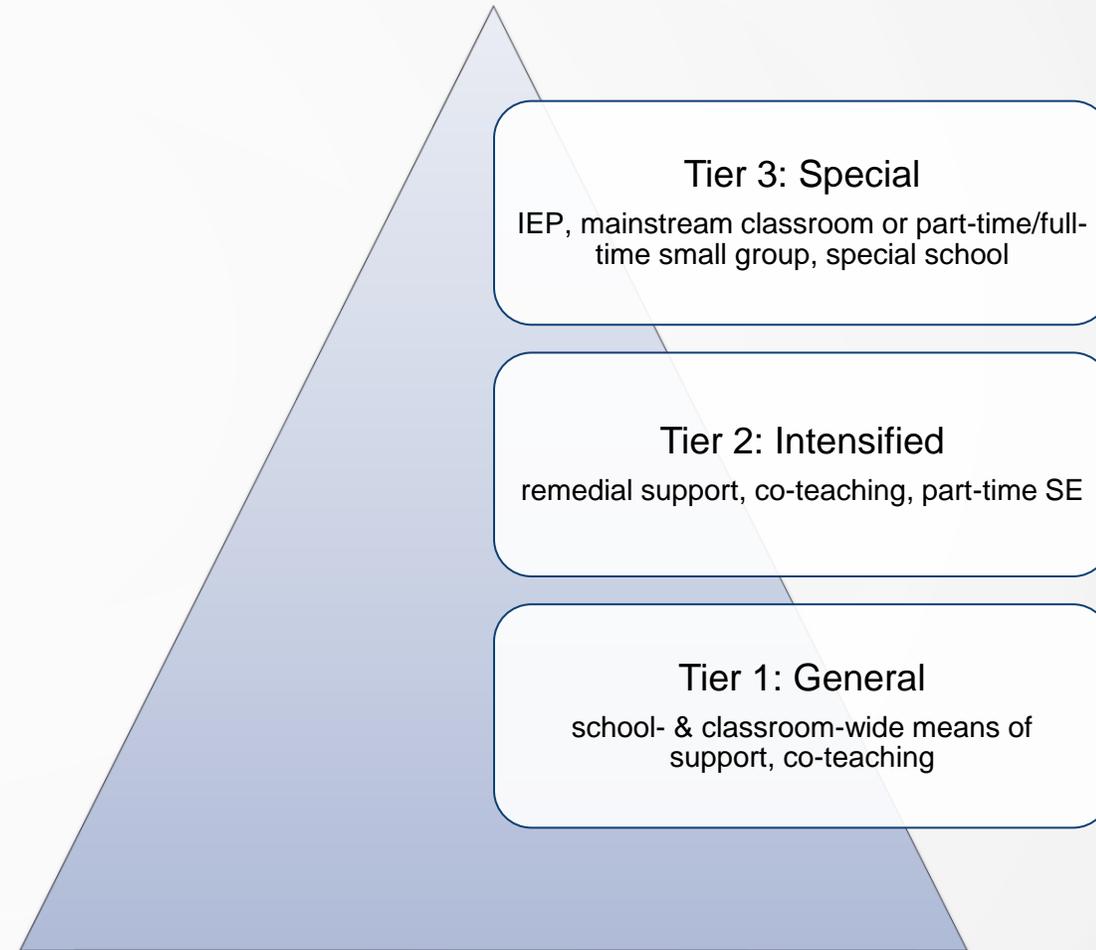
INCLUSION AS SPECIAL EDUCATION AGENDA – PROGRESS TOWARDS INCLUSION IN EDUCATION IN FINNISH POLICY

• Special Education Reform 2010

- Act 628/ 1998, amendment 642/2010
- Learning and Schooling Support in 2011: 3-tiered support model
- Emphasis on
 - The principle of neighborhood schooling among same aged peers
 - Preventative, timely, sufficient support for the learning and growth for all students
- Responsibility for educating heterogenous student population *from special education to general education*
- Hallmarked Finnish child-centered approach to promoting inclusion in education
- SEN-discourse emerged

• Problems with Learning and Schooling Support

- No normative descriptions regarding
 - what means of support should be provided in each tier
 - when students should move from one tier to another upwards or downwards
- Municipalities and schools possess autonomy regarding how to interpret, apply and realize tiered support
 - e.g., some schools have full-time tier 2 small groups





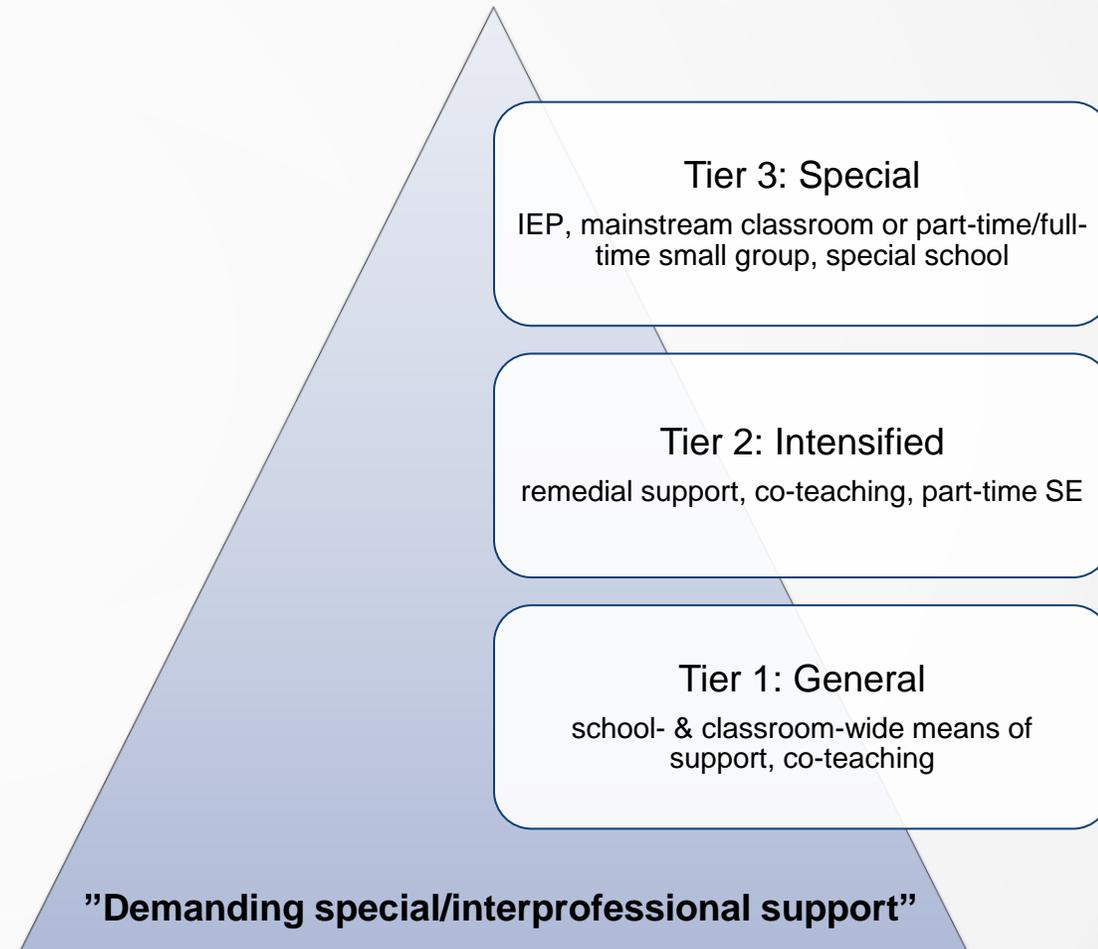
INCLUSION AS SPECIAL EDUCATION AGENDA – PROGRESS TOWARDS INCLUSION IN EDUCATION IN FINNISH POLICY

• Concept “Demanding Special Support” 2012-

- Will be changed to “Demanding interprofessional support”
- Directed at schooling arrangements of students with severe mental health issues, multiple, severe, or intellectual disabilities, or Autism Spectrum
- Child-centred praxis provided in interprofessional collaboration
- Complement the tiered support; all means of support cannot be met within the pedagogical support frame
- VIP network 2018
 - Established by Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education
 - Coordinated by the National Centre for Learning and Consulting (Valteri)

• Problems with the Concept within Basic Education

- Contradictory to non-diagnostic approach?
- No administrative and has no role in normative governance
- Confusing and open for interpretations
 - 4th tier of support?
 - What does “demanding special/interprofessional support” mean?
- Whose voice is represented?
 - Demanding support Vs. Reasonable accommodation (CRPD)





AMBILAVENCE OF INCLUSION AS PRINCIPLED EDUCATION PRACTICE

- 1. Ambiguous education policy guidance about inclusion in education**
 2. Ambivalence of inclusion as principled practice
 3. Polarised teachers implementing inclusion in education



1. AMBIGUOUS EDUCATION POLICY GUIDANCE ABOUT INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

Assumed values of inclusion

- **Basic Education Act assumed values of inclusion**
 - Equality and Equity as aims of basic education (628/1998, 2§)
 - Neighborhood school principle (628/1998, 6§)
 - Child-centered schooling to promote healthy growth and development (628/1998, 3§)
- **National Core Curriculum (NCC)**
 - Principles of social inclusion present
 - Emphasis on accessibility of teaching and learning
 - Individualized supports
 - School cultures built on values of equity and equality, anti-discrimination, participation, interdependency, and reciprocity

Contradiction

- **Basic Education Act**
 - Inclusion is **not** mentioned in the Basic Education Act
 - Principle: neighborhood school *preferably* for all
 - Does not explicitly provide a guide about inclusion in education
 - Inclusion in education equated with SEN education
- **National Core Curriculum**
 - Inclusion only mentioned ones
 - Inclusion not conceptualized
 - None of the content explicitly linked to inclusion
 - Equates the guiding principles of inclusion with integration and exclusion



DIVERSITY VS. DISABILITY IN EDUCATION POLICY

- Ableist premises of the National Core Curriculum
 - Valued participation based on an idea of an active, self-regulated and autonomous pupil
 - The role of the community in which this valued participation ideally takes place remains weak
 - The scarcity of instructions on how to differentiate teaching for students with disabilities
 - Guides towards sustaining the dichotomy between general and special education as pedagogical provisions and as professions
 - The silence on disability: Diversity linked to language and cultural diversity
- Education policy in Finland presents discrepancy between ideologies of inclusion and education excellence
 - Trend of reducing or omitting content and guidance related to disabilities throughout the development processes of education policy documents throughout years
- The silence on disability reflected in news media representation
 - Inclusion equated with SEN
 - SEN equated with various cultural backgrounds and behavioral problems



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2. AMBIVALENCE OF INCLUSION AS PRINCIPLED PRACTICE: PLACEMENT

- Student placement reflects the state of inclusion in education at the system level; does not distinguish inclusion from physical integration
- The number of special schools has decreased steadily since the late 1990s
- 60 special schools in 2021
 - Unknown how many former special schools are administratively merged with schools listed as mainstream schools, while still providing education full-time in separate small groups based on the disability grouping of students (e.g., autism) or other rationale
- In 2021, 9% of all students received special support (Tier 3)
 - 33% in a full-time segregated setting: 6% in special schools, 27% in separate small groups or classes in schools listed as mainstream schools
 - 30% in part-time exclusionary setting in mainstream schools
- Statistics of Finland: Inclusion is 80-100% in mainstream schools



HOW TO INTERPRET FINNISH APPROACH IN LIGHT WITH THE NOTION OF INCLUSION IN EDUCATION?

- Salamanca Declaration
 - Education for all adapted to diverse individual circumstances
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)
 - People with disabilities are not to be excluded from the general education system based on disability In Finland, students with severe disabilities tend to be taught separately from the mainstream education (article 24)
- Students with severe disabilities taught separately from the mainstream education; the extent of using full-time small groups for the host of reasons
- Parents seem settled and satisfied with the segregated schooling arrangement: the more support the children need and receive, the less important neighbourhood school allocation is
- Paradox of Inclusion in Education



2. AMBIVALENCE OF INCLUSION AS PRINCIPLED PRACTICE: LOCAL LEADERSHIP

- Municipalities possess autonomy in organizing schooling and related funding
- Schools have autonomy in implementing the National Core Curriculum in practice
- **Various ways of implementing inclusion in education at schools:**
 - Some implement inclusive education by re-organizing and resourcing practices accordingly
 - Some practice physical integration by placing students in mainstream education setting while cutting resources from special needs education provisions
 - Some maintain the already established segregating special education practices
- The wide variation originates from contextual causes: local political traditions, special education policies and existing services
- Heads of local education department mainly positive towards inclusion
 - Mainly view special schools and classes as part of inclusive education; discrepancy in views regarding to whom these settings are suitable
 - Regard their job as management, passing the leadership on implementing inclusion to schools



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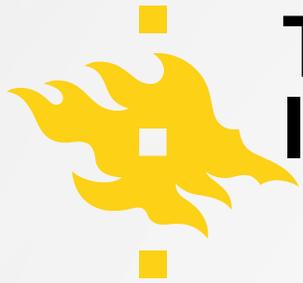
3. POLARISED TEACHERS IMPLEMENTING INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

- Pre- and in-service teachers are critical towards the idea that non-segregated approach to inclusive education benefits all students and feel unprepared
 - Students with intellectual disabilities
 - Students deemed “having” emotional or behavioral problems
- Teacher education programs scantily address these issues
- Teachers attitude towards inclusion ambivalent, polarized and predominantly negative
 - **Inclusive education supported** by referring to pedagogical and resource factors and arguing for students right for equality and equity
 - **Inclusive education opposed** by referring to pedagogical and resource factors, teachers’ strain, workload and lack of adequate expertise, and inclusion being viewed as violating all students’ rights for quality education



THE STATE OF INCLUSION IN EDUCATION IN FINLAND?

CONCLUDING REMARKS



THE VICIOUS CIRCLE OF THE AMBIGUITY OF INCLUSION IN EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

1. Education legislation and policies do not explicitly govern the implementation of inclusion in education; The notion and implementation of inclusion left open for interpretation
 - Exclusion, and marginalisation paradoxically portrayed as both a threat to inclusion in education and a means of implementing it
 - The ethical and philosophical foundation of promoting social participation characterized by equality and equity among peers is muffled by pragmatic concerns regarding how to organize teaching for a group of students characterized by their so-called “special needs” in an education system originally not designed for including them
2. Varying practices at the municipality level reflect the **lack of clear education policy governance** and the **lack of willingness to lead** towards inclusion in education from the top-down
3. Teachers’ stance and experiences reflect system level factors deriving from how municipalities or schools interpret, resource and implement inclusion in education
4. Dominantly negative media representation reflects the state of inclusion: Inclusion as means to save costs followed by physical integration
5. Inclusion is (on the verge of becoming) a politically correct empty signifier



THE FINNISH PARADOX OF INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

- The child-centred approach provides education and sense of belonging among peers deemed “special” while the system simultaneously excludes from social participation among peers deemed “normal”
- Resistance of both the status quo and of inclusion in education emerges from both the top and the bottom
- The Finnish education system is not governed for implementing inclusion in education through interprofessional collaboration that could provide support for all students in their neighborhood schools in ways that would ensure social participation and a sense of belonging in that very school.



PROMISING OUTLOOK ON FUTURE TRAJECTORIES

- The need for defining inclusion in the Basic Education Act as the **premise** and **value system** in preschool and basic education is recognized
- Practices supporting these premises are planned to be clarified in the next National Core Curriculum
- The tiered Learning and Schooling support system will be strengthened in the Basic Education Act and the NCC by providing clear definitions and guidance for their implementation
- Integration of SE knowhow more into teacher training programs
- VIP network – a national network of demanding interprofessional support
 - Includes almost all municipalities
 - Consultation and support for schooling and learning in collaboration with local schools



THANK YOU