

# STEPS TOWARDS AND CHALLENGES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN NORTHERN FINLAND

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## INTRODUCTION

When the Finnish basic education system was implemented in the 1970s, its main goals were to reduce the differences in learning outcomes attributed to family backgrounds and to provide all citizens with equal opportunities (e.g. Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg, 2006). Establishing this system was a major step towards equality in education in Finnish society. At that time, the Finnish basic education reform was influenced by the so-called *mainstreaming approach*, which proposed the idea of the *least restrictive environment* for learning (cf. Kavale, 1979; Moberg, 2002). In the 1990s, views about placing children with special needs in the least limiting environments started to change, and new demands for including and supporting all children in their nearby schools began to gain more approval (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2010).

Inclusive school reform is an international trend intended to form 'a school for all' (e.g. Salamanca Statement, UNESCO, 1994). Finland has committed to international agreements designed to enhance educational equality. Over the last two decades, Finland has invested significantly in developing a socially coherent system of basic education, which strives towards inclusion. The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education was reformed in 2010 and 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education [FNBE], 2010, 2016). Today, classroom teachers, subject teachers and special education teachers are expected to work together to assess learning environments and to provide support to students in neighbourhood schools (Lakkala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2016).

Compared with students around the world, Finnish students perform well in three dimensions of education. First, participation rates at all levels of education (from lower secondary to tertiary levels) are relatively high. Second, there is little variance in student academic performance across schools throughout the country. Third, Finnish 15-year-old students perform much better than their international peers in mathematics, reading literacy, natural sciences and problem solving (OECDiLibrary, n.d.).

In this chapter, we focus on the educational circumstances in sparsely populated northern Finland from the perspective of national education policies. Since inclusiveness is emphasised in Finnish basic education, we discuss how the goal of inclusion is rooted and promoted in northern Finland and whether it increases student well-being. To analyse the educational circumstances in northern Finland, we concentrate on a few issues highlighted in the literature in terms of defining the elements of inclusive education.

## **FINNISH COMPULSORY EDUCATION WITHIN THE FRAME OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

UNESCO's (2017) definition of inclusion suggests that inclusive education requires structures, strategies, contents and methods that offer every student the opportunity to learn in a regular school. Inclusiveness is a desired form of education because of its emphasis on targeting equality in education, supporting the excluded and marginalised groups and providing all students with quality education

(UNESCO, 2017). Inclusive education highlights the need for an ongoing societal reform towards social justice and social sustainability and strives to counteract the negative impact of students' socio-economic backgrounds on their studies (e.g. Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2011; Lingard & Mills, 2007).

The Finnish Basic Education Act (628/1998) and its Amendments (642/2010) set the principles and norms of basic education, whose main goal is to offer all citizens equal opportunities to receive education, regardless of age, domicile, financial situation, sex, mother tongue or religion. As enacted by law, every student must be given an opportunity to succeed in learning according to their own abilities. Diverse learners, individual starting points of learning and students' cultural backgrounds must be considered in schoolwork, and special attention must be paid to the early identification of learning barriers and difficulties.

Finnish compulsory education lasts ten years. At the age of six, children start their pre-primary education. The following year, they advance to comprehensive school or basic education, which is organised as a single-structure system of education (integrated primary and lower secondary education) (Eurydice, n.d.). In the first six grades in primary education (years 7–12), classroom teachers teach most of the subjects. In lower secondary education (years 13–16), teaching is organised according to different subjects taught by subject teachers.

Following the national development projects of 2007–2012, which consisted of providing teachers with in-service training and support to develop locally relevant practices for teaching diverse students, the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education was reformed in 2010 and 2014 (FNBE, 2010, 2016). The new curriculum strengthens inclusive education by emphasising children's right to attend schools located near their homes. Students in basic education, including those with special needs, are expected to receive most of the support required in mainstream settings. The concept of the 'neighbourhood school' was introduced in the reform context and has to do with developing local solutions in children's neighbourhood schools. It also requires collaboration among teachers, other personnel and parents. For this reason, Finnish compulsory education emphasises the development of a collaborative school culture, which involves co-operation and shared expertise among personnel and parents (cf. Ahtiainen et al., 2012).

Since 2010, support for learning and schooling in basic education has been organised under general, intensified and special categories. Each learner is provided with support in their school through various flexible arrangements. *General support*, where designing an individual learning plan is voluntary, is implemented for all students. The common forms of support are differentiation, remedial teaching and guidance. If general support activities are insufficient, then multi-professional pedagogical assessments are conducted, and a plan for intensified support is implemented. An individual learning plan is mandatory on this tier of support, which can include pedagogical instructions, part-time special education and assistive devices or services. If this support is inadequate, then *special support* is provided, which requires extensive multi-professional assessment, an official administrative decision and an individual education plan. Only on this tier can the syllabus of various school subjects be reduced to the level of core contents (FNBE, 2016).

To enhance social justice and counteract the adverse impact of students' socio-economic backgrounds on their academic achievements (cf. Lingard & Mills, 2007; UNESCO, 2017), the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education of 2014 contains seven transversal entities (FNBE, 2016). As our changing society demands cross-curricular skills, it is important that school subjects also promote transversal competence. Transversal themes are taught, studied and assessed as part of the different subjects and refer to entities consisting of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and will, as follows:

- *Thinking and learning to learn*. Students learn to observe and search, evaluate, modify, produce and share information and ideas. They also learn to reflect on themselves as learners and to interact with their environment.
- *Cultural literacy, communication and expression*. Students grow in a world with cultural, linguistic, religious and philosophical diversity.
- *Managing daily life and taking care of oneself and others*. Students need diverse skills in everyday life regarding their health, safety and relationships, mobility and traffic, working in a technology-based environment and managing their own economy, all of which promote a sustainable lifestyle.
- *Multiliteracy*. Students learn to interpret, produce, evaluate and value multimodal knowledge from various sources and in different situations

and environments. Multiliteracy forms the basis of interaction among people and in understanding diverse forms of cultural communication.

- *Information and communication technology (ICT) skills.* Students learn to utilise ICT in their learning processes.
- *Entrepreneurial and work life skills.* Students develop insights that promote their interest in and positive attitude towards work life. Such knowledge helps them recognise the importance of and opportunities for work and entrepreneurship as well as their own responsibilities as members of society.
- *Participation in and building a sustainable future.* Students rehearse participation, responsibility, negotiation and conciliation to become agents of their own lives and to build their future on ecologically, socially and culturally sustainable premises (FNBE, 2016, 20-24).

The common aims of transversal skills are to support students' human growth and promote their competence in leading a sustainable lifestyle, as required in a democratic society. The most significant issue involves encouraging students to identify their specific qualities, strengths and abilities in order to develop and appreciate themselves (FNBE, 2016).

When examined from the perspective of inclusive education, the transversal themes seem to strengthen students' agency. Because Finnish children come from various family backgrounds, it is essential to equip them with wide-ranging skills that will enable them to be agents in control of their own lives. This means learning how to use their knowledge and skills in real-life situations (FNBE, 2016). For the transversal entities, the starting point appears to be diversity – when attention is paid to both metacognitive and everyday skills. According to previous research, promoting learners' metacognitive skills guards against social inequality (Lingard & Mills, 2007). The cross-curricular approach also goes beyond the goal of merely aiming towards students' employment or good citizenship, highlighting their growth to become mentally balanced persons with self-esteem (FNBE, 2016). The transversal entities thus align with Spratt's (2017) ideas of well-being in an inclusive school. Spratt emphasises the importance of equipping diverse students with appropriate skills so that in their future lives, they will have the ability and freedom to make choices that are of value to them.

The Finnish National Core Curriculum also frames the local curricula. Local education providers and schools prepare their own detailed curricula by considering local circumstances (Eurydice, n.d.). This curricular principle supports the implementation of inclusion because the indices of inclusion, developed by Booth and Ainscow (2002), stress the importance of policies in responding to the diverse needs of students in local schools. Much responsibility is left to municipalities and schools. However, Finnish teachers hold a master's level academic degree from a university, which makes it easier for them to take responsibility for their professional work (Niemi, 2012). Finnish teachers' pedagogical autonomy also makes it possible for them to choose suitable methods and to tailor them to each group that they teach (Eurydice, n.d.). According to previous research, the way in which inclusive education is implemented in classrooms largely depends on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education (Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2017). In a recent study (Saloviita, 2017), the Finnish teachers who participated in the survey (N = 434) commonly used methods that enabled teaching in inclusive classes. For example, 83% of the teachers used differentiation in their teaching, and 43% regularly engaged in co-teaching (see also Saloviita & Takala, 2010).

The reforms in Finnish compulsory education have increased the number of students with intensified or special needs who are taught in general education groups. Before the reform in year 2009, nearly half (46.5%) of the students who received special support (8.5% of all students in basic education) were taught in special education groups or in special schools (Official Statistics of Finland, 2009a, 2009b). In 2017, among all students in basic education, 9.7% received intensified support, and 7.7% received special support. Over 39% of the students who received special support were taught fully or at least half of their lessons in general education groups. Almost a quarter (23%) of them were taught less than half of their lessons in general education groups and partly in flexibly formed small groups taught by a special education teacher in a local school. Just over one-third (37%) of the students who received special support studied fully either in special education groups or in special schools (Official Statistics of Finland, 2018a, 2018b). There are no available statistics of the places where students who needed intensified support were taught, but they mainly studied in mainstream classes. Such high numbers of students with special and intensified needs studying in mainstream

classes raise the question of teachers' competence in meeting the needs of all students (see also Jahnukainen, 2011).

Norwich (2013) has criticised the sort of implementation that considers inclusive education merely as the placement of students with special needs in mainstream classes. This oversimplified interpretation is problematic because it ignores personnel resources and professional competence. It also overlooks the multi-professional and collaborative school culture, which are the main issues involved in striving towards inclusive education.

### **STRIVING TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN NORTHERN FINLAND**

Finland has a large geographic area that is disproportionate to the size of its population. The various parts of Finland differ significantly, with quite heavily populated large cities and municipalities in the south and west and large, sparsely populated areas in the east and north. Similar to other Nordic countries, Finland is undergoing urbanisation (Jauhiainen & Neuvonen, 2016). In the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2015 results, the differences among the learning outcomes in various schools were on the rise in Finland. The learning outcomes in southern Finland, especially in the metropolitan area around Helsinki (the nation's capital), were better than those in the country's remote areas (Vettenranta et al., 2016).

Notably, Finnish basic education is experiencing the same contradictory trend that researchers have detected globally. On one hand, the emphasis on economic values aims to mould education into a market-like service, which accentuates freedom of choice, the necessity of competition and cost-efficiency (cf. Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). The focus on economic values represents a challenge for northern Finland because the sparsely populated rural areas are located mainly in that region. On the other hand, the tendency towards inclusive education is aimed at improving learning for all students and emphasises a sense of community and belonging in Finnish schools (cf. Hargreaves, 2000; Spratt, 2017; Vainikainen et al., 2018). Inclusive values enhance the vitality of schools in northern Finland.

Many small northern schools have to adopt multi-age classrooms (Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009), which complicates teachers' work. Multi-age groups require multiple plans for each lesson, challenging teachers' professional competence and their imagination in creating appropriate learning environments for heterogeneous classes, often without the support of a co-teacher, such as a special education teacher. Various multi-professional services are available in the cities, but in the small schools of northern Finland, it is difficult to provide versatile support for the small number of students. Oftentimes, the economic limitations mean that support is inhibited, or it is simply difficult to find people to occupy posts in geographically distant places. In sparsely populated areas, special education teachers often just visit schools instead of staying there permanently, and support and consultation possibilities are not available every day (Pettersson, 2017).

Väyrynen and Rahko-Ravantti (2014) examined the ways in which northern Finnish teachers have implemented inclusive education in their work. They found that teachers worked collaboratively when possible and adjusted their teaching solutions, depending on the context and situation of the individual environments. Similar results were found in a study exploring Lappish teachers' perceptions about successful inclusive arrangements (Lakkala et al., 2016). The teachers underlined the importance of positive and collaborative attitudes among teachers, students with diverse needs and all students. Corroborating these results, Pettersson (2017) found that the small schools in northern Finland had a familiar atmosphere, close relationships, collaboration and flexible ways of organising educational activities. According to Pettersson, these small collaborative schools constituted an inner force that combats outer pressures, such as the threat of school closure, the lack of resources and the lack of appreciation from municipal authorities.

While Finnish municipalities and schools are quite autonomous in organising local compulsory education (Eurydice, n.d.), local education providers are allowed to emphasise cultural sensitivity in education. According to previous studies, when there is a discontinuity or mismatch between a child's culture and that of the teacher and classroom, difficulties in the student's learning and thinking processes, as well as issues relating to cultural identity and self-image, may arise (e.g. Keskitalo & Määttä, 2011). For this reason, cultural sensitivity is perceived as an important element of inclusive education (cf. Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Hargreaves, 2000) and is especially relevant in Finnish Lapland where the indigenous Sámi people live. Additionally,



the northern local culture as a whole differs from the Finnish mainstream culture because of the traditions of herding reindeer, fishing, hunting and berry picking in the forests. Sodankylä's local curriculum, which incorporates northern Finnish culture, provides a good example of cultural sensitivity; for instance, students are taught about the eight northern seasons and how they reflect the important elements of nature. The eight seasons are *frost winter*, *snow crust spring*, *ice run spring*, *nightless night*, *harvest time*, *nature's autumn coat (ruska)*, *first snow* and *polar night (kaamos)*. Another example in which the local culture is appreciated in school involves inviting parents to introduce their occupation as reindeer herders and students visiting reindeer-gathering places and becoming acquainted with the reindeer earmarks (see Figure 1).



**FIGURE 1:** A student's handcraft of their family's reindeer earmark in Sodankylä

According to the Basic Education Act (628/1998), § 10, native students living in the Sámi homeland region are entitled to receive instruction mainly in the Sámi language. This law is enforced in municipalities located in the Sámi region. However, there are certain problems with using the students' mother tongue as the medium of instruction. The three endangered indigenous languages in Finnish Lapland are Inari Sámi, Skolt Sámi and North Sámi, and because of the lack of bilingual teachers, it is not always straightforward for the municipalities to arrange instruction in all three languages. All three Sámi languages have their own literary features, and their native speakers often do not understand one another without studying the others' mother tongues as foreign languages (Institute of Languages in Finland,

n.d.). Another problem arises from the escape clause in the cited law, which states that instruction should be provided *mainly* in the Sámi language. Sometimes, this means that 49% of the instruction can be delivered in Finnish (Rasmussen, 2015). Moreover, only the children who live in Utsjoki, Inari, Enontekiö and the northern part of Sodankylä have the right to receive instruction in their mother tongue. Today, over 70% of Sámi children under seven years old live outside the Sámi region (Rahko-Ravantti, 2016). A similar problem affects children from various ethnic groups. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture (Opetusministeriön asetus 1777/2009), the Sámi and Romani people can only receive two additional mother tongue lessons per week. Additionally, deaf children using sign language encounter difficulties in terms of being taught in their own language in school because in the sparsely populated northern region, a deaf child seldom has another deaf classmate with whom to communicate in sign language (see also Takala & Sume, 2017).

Concerning student welfare services, in a survey by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2014), the municipalities reported some deficiencies in the provision of psychosocial services to students. Currently, several students do not receive services from school-based social workers and/or school psychologists. Unlike large municipalities, small municipalities cannot afford to hire school-based welfare specialists because of the high cost of providing services in remote areas with small populations. While northern schools do have school nurses, who are similar to special education teachers, they only visit the schools. Nonetheless, alternative solutions for delivering healthcare and social welfare services have been created for the people of northern Finland. The Lapland Hospital District and the hospital organisations and authorities of northern Norway and Sweden engage in cross-border co-operation, mainly in emergency and psychiatric care (Lapland Hospital District, n.d.-a). Figure 2 shows the co-operation areas.



**FIGURE 2.** Lapland hospital districts (Lapland Hospital District, n.d.-a)

Psychiatric care for children is delivered throughout the Lapland province. Workers from the Central Hospital of Lapland provide consultations using digital devices. They also travel around the province to personally visit children and their families. This work is executed in co-operation with the local health and social care services (Lapland Hospital District, n.d.-b).

The entire country is serviced by centres for social services, which are enacted by law (Laki sosiaalialan osaamiskeskustoiminnasta 1230/2001). The Lappish centre has the special responsibility of handling the provision of services to the Sámi people. Northern Finland's centres for social services include a virtual service that allows people to engage in video consultations with various experts and to receive information, materials and tools to enhance their well-being, both in the Finnish and North Sámi languages (Pohjois-Suomen sosiaalialan osaamiskeskus [POSKE], n.d.).

## CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we have investigated the policies and legislation on Finnish compulsory education, specifically regarding the situation in northern Finland. Based on our analysis, we conclude that the reforms in Finnish compulsory education have

strengthened the prerequisites for inclusive education. The tendency towards a co-teaching and collaborative school culture and the positive signs of developing virtual and consultant support services increase the possibilities of improving education and well-being in remote areas.

Children living outside urban centres, particularly in northern Finland, are strongly engaged in nature. In particular, they participate in outdoor activities, such as reindeer herding, fishing, hunting and berry picking. These children's way of life is distinguished from that of their peers in the mainstream Finnish culture. To some extent, the educational legislation and norms in northern Finland provide the space for local solutions that allow for cultural sensitivity, as shown in the examples cited in this chapter. Nevertheless, there are still limitations in the legislation concerning the Sámi students' right to be taught in their own language. Their mother tongue should be fostered; otherwise, the Sámi languages may become extinct.

The tendency to prioritise economic values in education poses a threat to the sparsely populated areas in northern Finland, as this will lead to reduced educational opportunities. The Finnish state provides a certain level of financial support for each student, however, the municipalities are the accountable education providers. When the number of students in small municipalities drops to unsustainable levels, these municipalities cannot afford to maintain the local school buildings and teachers. They have to close the affected schools and send the students to distant ones. The only law that restrains school closure is the Basic Education Act (682/1998), Article 32, which stipulates that travel distance to and from a school cannot exceed a 2.5-hour drive, or if the student is 13 years old or above, a maximum of 3 hours, including waiting times. The long distances to urban centres and the polarisation of services also diminish children's rights in northern Finland. Unfortunately, many of these children will have to leave home when they grow up because of few possibilities of post-compulsory education and limited employment prospects (cf. Kiilakoski, 2016).

Due to the modest possibilities of small schools in terms of offering multi-professional support for their students, special attention must be paid to the vulnerabilities of those children in the north with special and diverse educational needs (cf. Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Hienonen, Lintuvuori, Jahnukainen, Hotulainen, & Vainikainen, 2018). Researchers must consider that measuring inclusive education

quantitatively, for example, via the place in which teaching is provided, is an insufficient index (cf. Norwich, 2013). Instead, developing qualitative indices for inclusive education supports schools in becoming more responsive to students' diverse conditions, interests, experiences, knowledge and skills (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Research-based qualitative indices also help remote areas justify their need for multi-professional support and sufficient resources.

It is important that diversity, cultural sensitivity and special educational issues are discussed throughout teacher education. One example is kindergarten teacher education for Sámi-speaking student teachers, which is organised by the University of Oulu and offered in Inari. Moreover, the Faculty of Education at the University of Lapland develops Sámi teachers' in-service training and further education in collaboration with the Training Centre of the Sámi Region, the Giellagas Institute and the Regional State Administrative Agency of Lapland. For teacher education, a quota is allocated specifically for Sámi-speaking student teachers. In the DivEd project – which is carried out by five Finnish universities and two universities of applied sciences and funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture – for example, the focus is on expanding awareness of indigenous cultures and languages (DivEd, n.d.).

According to the Basic Education Act, Amendments (642/2010), teachers are responsible for providing support to all students, and student teachers must be competent to teach diverse students. The goal of inclusive education requires not only pedagogical skills but also knowledge about dialogical processes and the ability to collaborate with other professionals and parents. It is encouraging that Finnish teachers engage in frequent use of co-teaching (Saloviita & Takala, 2010). The Ministry of Education and Culture wants to enhance multi-professional and co-teaching strategies in schools and has funded the Supporting together! (n.d.) project, where six Finnish universities engage in co-teaching and co-operation in teacher education. Finally, the strong research-based tradition of Finnish teacher education equips teachers with the capability to reflect on their teaching so as to create appropriate learning environments for their students.

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