

Perspectives of the Finnish School for All – Inclusiveness, diversity and equity?

Sonja:

Welcome to this discussion, where we present and discuss the Finnish school for all from the aspect of inclusion. First, we begin by introducing the Finnish education system and its basic principles, after which we hear what an inclusive Finnish school is. After that we focus on two specific aspects of inclusion in the schools, namely special education and cultural and worldview diversity.

We have four experts in this discussion with us, welcome! University lecturer and researcher Anna-Leena Riitaoja from the University of Helsinki, you have the honor to begin our discussion.

Anna-Leena:

Finland has secured both financial and physical access to education for all learners regardless of their backgrounds. In a practical sense, all students attend a school providing public compulsory education at no cost to the families – a principle that covers education from preschool and 1st grade to higher education.

The quality of Finnish basic education is an internationally well-known success story written into the recent history of Finland. This story emerged after the high ranking in the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) over two decades ago. Finland still keeps ranking among the top OECD countries, although there has been a substantial decline in the results and an increasing performance gap related to gender and socioeconomic and migrant backgrounds.

The reasons for the quality of Finnish education are often attributed to four areas:

1. Finland has university level teacher qualifications in early childhood and basic education,
2. there is a firm belief in education and teaching profession in Finland,
3. teachers in Finland have pedagogical autonomy, and
4. There are no external inspections and testing in Finland.

Also, the success story is attributed to a well-developed part-time special education system and other factors, such as Finland being a Nordic welfare society.

Overall, ‘school for all’ and equal access to education have been central principles in the Finnish and Nordic welfare state contexts.

- The idea of 9–12-year comprehensive school system that replaced the dualist education system in the 1960s and 1970s is a concrete outcome education policy within the welfare state context.

However, from the perspective of inclusion it is important to notice that there is a connection between the idea of the welfare state and the nation state. The welfare of the people has first meant welfare of the citizens. Thus, all universal services, including education, that are targeted for everyone, are targeted to the citizens of the nation state.

But who are these imagined citizens?

- The idea of the Finnish-Nordic nation state is strongly built around the idea of homogeneity where diversity of ethnicities, religions, languages, indigeneity, social classes, genders and sexuality have been played down (Keskinen et al., 2019).
- Homogeneity has been created in narratives and imaginaries but also reinforced in institutional policies and practices of schools, social services, and public health care.
- Schools have been central places where the idea of the nation state and of the ideal citizen is inscribed in the students' minds.
- Despite the welfare state ideals of providing equality, welfare and universal services for all, the ideal student and citizen is not anybody.
- The ideal student is foremost white, Finnish speaking, able-bodied and Lutheran-secular student (Riitaoja, 2013, Juva, 2019, other refs).
- That kind of “normal, average” students the schools as mass education institutions are traditionally prepared to welcome and serve. That forms also the goal of normality, the educational ideal that the students are expected to achieve.

Without challenging the normativity, the education system keeps supporting those who fit in with the idea of the normal student while it fails others. For example, the education system seems to fail students with a migrant background (Helakorpi et al., 2023), and the problem lays at the systemic level. One reason for that is institutional racism.

The exclusionary idea of normal citizen and student has been further supported by the idea of understanding equality as sameness, as similar treatment.

- the assumption of homogeneity creates an illusion that everyone would start from the same line which obscures societal inequalities and makes it difficult to articulate the importance of affirmative actions.
- It is, therefore, important that our educators learn to unpack the ideas they have learned about equality, societal inequalities and diversity.

In the current situation schools are becoming increasingly aware of societal and educational inequalities and diversity, and about the need for affirmative actions.

- One reason is the rapidly diversifying school environment especially in urban settings.
- Another is that the current National Core Curriculum requires schools to align with diversity and language aware practices and to provide support for welfare and learning. The core curriculum is also explicit about the obligations of national legislation and international declarations to promote equity.
- The Finnish constitution law and the Acts of equality and non-discrimination clearly outline the principles of equality, and equity, and the responsibilities of educational institutions to promote equity and intervene discrimination.
- And, the emphasis on the principles of inclusive education and support for learning have also made visible the need for affirmative actions based on disabilities. However, there is still way to go to understand how other kinds of structural obstacles, such as prejudices or differentiated treatment influence young people's educational and professional careers.

Sonja:

Thank you, Anna-Leena. Next, we would like to hear about Finnish inclusive schools in practice. Principal from the Viikki University teacher training school and researcher at the University of Helsinki, Anni Loukomies, the floor is yours.

Anni:

The requirement for an inclusive operational culture has become even clearer with the curriculum reform. The guiding documents for education clearly state that the local school is the primary place for students' education. In the local school, teaching can be organized in larger or smaller groups according to the student's situation. It is not appropriate from the perspective of the student's sense of belonging or the use of resources to separate individual students from others to provide support. When considering practical teaching arrangements, it is important to think about what is being aimed for. A certain type of grouping may be beneficial if the goal is to support content learning, while another type may be more suitable if the goal is to support, for example, social skills.

The school leadership plays a key role in supporting the internalization of the value base of the operational culture. Opportunities for reflection must be arranged for the staff, but they must also lead by example. Technical solutions should promote equality and move away from the division between ordinary and special. If solutions cause conflict among community members, equality must be prioritized when seeking consensus. Formal

equality is not enough; actual equality must be promoted in the countless decision-making situations of everyday life. Equality and inclusivity are also reflected in teacher education by focusing on adopting inclusive teaching practices and addressing the needs of diverse learners. The training of future teachers also emphasizes collaboration skills and the ability to work in diverse learning environments.

The segregation in the society is reflected in schools as there is differentiation between schools and, because of certain decisions, even within schools. Pedagogical and technical leadership solutions are closely linked, and in terms of certain political decisions and phenomena taking place in society, the hands of school leadership and staff are somewhat tied. The media contributes by confusing and polarizing the discussion, which is not helpful, for example, from the perspective of the work engagement of future teachers.

Sonja:

Thank you, Anni. We will move forward to the first specific example of inclusiveness, special education in Finnish schools. University lecturer and researcher Juho Honkasilta from the University of Helsinki, you have the stage.

Juho:

It is reasonable to argue that some aspects of the Finnish basic education system are inclusive. On the policy level, the inclusive values of democracy and human rights, equality, equity, social participation and belonging, anti-discrimination, interdependency and reciprocity are present. Furthermore, Finnish education policy prioritizes organizing additional supports for students in their neighbourhood schools as part of general education. Emphasis is put on preventive early supports and interventions. In practice this means that students have relatively easy access to additional support for schooling and learning without any sort of formal evaluation and diagnostic labelling. In other words, support is not based on diagnoses.

However, barriers to inclusion in education also exist.

The education legislation and policy provide an abstract, vague, and ambivalent notion on inclusion let alone weak guidance about how to implement inclusion in education. This leaves the idea of inclusion as principled education practice open to interpretation. Not surprisingly, municipalities and schools practice inclusion in education at the local level in several ways; some implement inclusive education by re-organising and resourcing practices accordingly, some practice physical integration by placing students in a mainstream education setting while cutting resources from special education provisions, and some maintain the already established segregating special education practices.

Thus, the lack of centralised governance of the fundamental ideals of inclusion in education poses a threat to water down the agenda of inclusion.

So, in the end, the development of inclusive practices in Finland is demanding due to the existing historically evolved contradictions between the boundaries of general and special education. Paradoxically, Finnish child-centred approach to education legislation and policy enables equating the principles of inclusion with those of integration, assimilation and segregation.

This is most strikingly apparent in the case of students with severe disabilities who tend to be taught separately from the mainstream education. The rights of pupils with disabilities to physical, pedagogical, social and psychological access to schooling in their neighbourhood school among their peers seems to be generally marginalized in Finnish approach to inclusive education.

It is good to remember that inclusive education should not be reduced to an agenda for special education. It is an agenda for quality education for all. Changes to improve inclusion in education have taken place in Finland at the policy level. It remains to be seen how the formulated notion of inclusion in education in newly reformed policy documents will be interpreted, governed, and implemented in practice.

Sonja:

Thank you, Juho. Next we hear about cultural and worldview diversity from university lecturer and researcher Inkeri Rissanen from the University of Tampere. Go ahead, please.

Inkeri:

An appreciation for cultural and worldview diversity, as well as intercultural learning, are key objectives in Finnish basic education. However, studies continuously demonstrate a gap between these principles and reality. There are very few faith-based schools in Finland, which means that questions related to worldview diversity and religious freedom should be negotiated and solved in the “one school for all”. This can be seen as an opportunity, but it also demands worldview awareness and religious literacy from all teachers, and it has been quite slow to add these dimensions to teacher education programs. The operational cultures of schools are very typically still based on secular Lutheran norms and ethos, but there are also big differences between schools.

In Finnish schools, students can receive religious education according to their own religion under certain conditions. The subject is not confessional but brings together students who identify with the same religious community for common classes. Religious minorities such as Finnish Muslims have considered religious education an important space for supporting

identities and addressing questions of belonging to society as a minority. However, issues of inclusivity and equality related to religious education are complex and under continuous debate in society. These issues relate, for instance, to the right of students to choose which form of religious education they participate in, the qualifications of teachers, and the very idea of separating students according to their worldview - this is seen as discriminatory by some, but defended as a minority right by others. Actually the organisation model of religious education has been debated in Finland since its origins. At the moment, a shift to some sort of integrated form of religious education, where all students would study at least partly in shared lessons, or even shift to one common religious education subject for all students is advocated by many. However, these are mostly political debates, not so much grounded on educational research on the subject, and at the moment no radical changes seem to be happening, at least not in the near future.

Sonja:

Thank you, Inkeri. Based on research and public discussion there are concerns that newly qualified teachers do not feel confident enough when they enter the profession. Thus, we would like to ask you: Based on your expertise, what would be critical next steps to take in teacher education to reduce their praxis shock?

Anna-Leena:

- I regularly discuss with my teacher students about the expectations they have concerning teacher education. Often, they expect that teacher education would give them practical tips on how to handle everyday school situations. There is an expectation of mastery concerning teaching work which is related to the assumption of control of the everyday situations in school. However, we cannot find ways to intervene the normativities that produce inequality just by practicing control over people and situations.
- Instead, we need to learn to see the everyday school reality differently and to be in the middle of it differently, which then helps us to *do* things differently as teachers.
- To get there, we need different kinds of theories, not just practical theories but also theories that help us to see behind the evident, taken for granted aspects of the school life.

Anni: Teaching practicums that take place in university affiliated teacher training schools are very important. Student teachers practice their future profession under supervision of educated mentor teachers. It is crucial that during their practicum they deepen their understanding of inclusive values and see how they appear in everyday classroom and

school activities. It is really important that teacher training schools represent authentic educational context, and future teachers have the possibility to practice various forms of supporting different pupils.

Juho: I agree with Anna-Leena and Anni. Research shows that teachers' positive attitude about inclusion has been associated with their use of various instructional strategies, differentiation methods and co-teaching. As for inclusive values and attitude, viewing special classes as inappropriate places for students who need individualized means of support is also associated with teacher's positive attitude about inclusion.

Thus, to promote inclusive values, attitude and practices, pre-service teacher training should include a lot more courses not only about special education but disability studies as well.

During course work and practicum, student teachers should gain competence through involvement in the assessment, planning and implementation processes of individualized supports. This can be done by means of co-teaching and collaboration with multiprofessional and multi-agentic support network.

Inkeri:

I think we've seen more focus on intercultural and worldview education in Finnish teacher education programs, and student teachers seem eager to learn more about this during their studies. It would be so important to find ways for them to gain experience teaching in schools with a high level of linguistic, cultural, and worldview diversity already during their studies, so we can help induce and support deep self-reflective processes. I believe it's through these processes that their self-confidence will grow – teacher education can't give them manuals or toolkits for every situation they'll face in their work, but we can help build their confidence that, by developing deeper understanding, orientations, and dispositions, they'll have the capacity to navigate those situations and come up with solutions on their own.

Sonja: Thank you for interesting and critical perspectives, which illuminated the policy practice challenges in the Finnish education system. We hope that the audience was able to detect the positive aspects of the system, but also the challenges that exist. Teacher education has a significant role in the progress of Finnish schooling. Thank you.

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