

# Teacher Education for inclusive education in Finland

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- Background of the Finnish comprehensive education system development and its complex relations with inclusive education
- Brief history of teacher education
- Teacher education for inclusive education. Challenges and opportunities
- Future directions

# Complex situation with regard to inclusion in Finnish education

- A school system with strong background on social justice and equity has been gradually developed into a system of efficient teaching by highly educated teachers, who represent different teaching professions, including special education teachers
- Good results in academic achievement are at least partly produced by efficient support system for the learners who struggle with school
- However, this has meant that numbers of students identified as having special needs have increased from 2-3% in 1970s to more than 8% in 2010.
- Thus although the 1970s reform was based on ideas similar to inclusion in its wider understanding (social justice, education for all) guaranteeing the smooth functioning of the new school has led into an elaborate system of special education, and much of debate and rhetoric on inclusive education in Finland has been about inclusion in the narrow sense (students with special needs)

# Background in increasing equity

- Finnish school system has a strong background in Nordic ideal of “school for all”
- Comprehensive school reform in 1970s was based on the idea increasing equity in the society by providing equal educational opportunities to all
- Previous twin track system (academically vs. practically talented) was changed into a 9-year school for all
- A positive note: increasing equity in school system has happened simultaneously with increasing quality of the education system (e.g. PISA 2003-2010)

# Response to diversity after the comprehensive school reform

- Tracking system where students could opt courses with varying demands in languages and mathematics
  - Lowest courses did not give eligibility for academic secondary education
  - Course selection was related to students socio-economic background
- Tracking system removed in the 1980s
- Part-time special education system and a new teaching profession “Part time special education teacher” created as a new tool within comprehensive education system to meet the “increased needs” of students & to facilitate smooth functioning of teaching according to unified curriculum
- In 1979 ALL teacher education was moved into universities, all teachers required to complete Masters degree with the exception of Kindergarten teachers
- However students with severe intellectual disabilities were still exempted from education, until 1997.

# Developments during last 20-years

- Special education provision continued to increase until 2010, when more than 30% students (23%; 8%) received some kind of special educational support during their 9-years of comprehensive school
- At the same time Finnish school system was ranked to the top in international comparative studies like PISA
- Studies also show that especially the low achieving students in Finland outperform the low achieving students in other OECD countries
- Rapid increase among the students officially identified as having special needs (from 4% to 8% within a ten year period) raised worries
- A new special education strategy in 2007, a new law in 2010 which changed special education system into a three tiered system with three levels of support (universal, intensified, special)
- One pressure behind this reform was the need to respond to the international goal of inclusive education
- Short term results - two observations:
  - rhetoric is gradually changing,
  - numbers of students identified as having special needs dropping, numbers of students in special schools dropped dramatically.

# Teacher education brief history

- Teacher seminaries → Teacher colleges → Universities
- Now in 8 universities in 11 Campuses spread across the country
- Three majors types of teacher education & qualification (defined by national law on qualifications):
  - Subject teachers (varying subject majors who take 60 ECTS “teachers’ pedagogical studies (TPS) as part of their masters degree)
  - Elementary School classroom teachers (Degree programme that includes Education as a major subject, 60 ECTS TPS + 60 ECTS “Multidisciplinmary subject studies”)
  - Special education teachers, two types of programmes:
    - Degree programme vs. Post graduate studies
  - Two different qualifications
    - Special education teacher vs. Special class teacher
- Intake of students in Universities (2013-2016) in these three types 41% (subject teachers), 35% (classroom teachers), 19% (special education teachers) → every fifth new teacher is special education teacher

# Teacher education for inclusive education

- Inclusive education “in principle” an agreed goal for all education, including teacher education
- Much of inclusive education teaching related to special education programmes following the “Additional model” (ex Jyväskylä)
- In practice there are many more or less implicit forces for and against inclusive education
- Teacher education for inclusive education has many opportunities but also challenges in the Finnish context



# Challenges

- Too distinct teacher education programmes
- Growing professionalism may highlight difference between teachers at the expense of sharing teachers work
- Special education degrees (class vs, on class teacher) do not fit current more flexible use of resources in the 3 tiered system
- Having so many special education teachers in school may lower the threshold for other teachers to turn to their assistance
- The feeling of responsibility for students' achievement and well-being may be related to teacher stress and tendency to use all available support resources
- While autonomy of teachers & schools is an asset its challenge is that there is variance in the quality and type of learning support and attitudes towards inclusive education
- Teachers' union very critical towards inclusion of at least some students

# Opportunities:

- Teacher profession is very popular among youth coming to universities
- High competition gives universities a chance to select best candidates
- Teacher education has in general good quality and is linked increasingly closely to research in education
- “Teacher as researcher” principle in teacher education may increase critical and constructive attitude towards developing teaching
- Teachers are generally very motivated for their work
- Teachers and schools have large autonomy to decide on practical approaches and objectives of teaching
- The resource of special education teachers in all school offer possibilities to rethinking how support is organized
- There is a general culture of trust with regard to education and schools
- Vast majority of teachers are formally qualified for their jobs. Best situation in Eastern Finland and Lapland.
- Some municipalities are recruiting only classroom teachers that have also special education teacher qualification

# Future directions for teacher education for inclusive education

- Changes in teacher education programmes:
  - Joint BA-degree studies for elementary classroom teacher and special education teacher programmes
  - Inclusion of subject teachers 60 credit pedagogical studies to this programme
  - Using mixed groups in these studies – learning collaboration during teacher education
- Increasing teacher professionalism and putting it to good use through collaboration
  - Importance of critical reading of research and knowledge to use research methods for reflective monitoring of teachers' own work
  - Understanding collaboration as planning and improving pedagogical practices not only as discussing and "diagnosing a case"
  - While it is continuously important to understand each child and context where they come from, efforts in school should be shifted from finding a reason for problems into what can be done to support the child
  - This requires that all teachers adopt new roles in teaching and working together
  - Some promising experiences e.g. in consultation model to support classroom teachers to solve problem situations with the knowledge and skills they already have
- More collaboration between Universities and Municipalities
  - Research needs reflective practitioners and their insights and participation in research
  - Practitioners benefit from the critical look to teaching and learning that research can give

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