Towards inclusive schooling policies in Finland: a multiple-case study from policy to practice

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ABSTRACT
New education laws that emphasize inclusive ideology were recently introduced to the Finnish educational system. In this study, I examine whether these laws provide more inclusive practices and assess whether the changes in the laws meet the views of the participants on education. Semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers and assistants of three children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (age: 6–8 years) were conducted around the period of transfer from kindergarten to schools in three municipalities. The official municipality websites were examined to find types of classrooms offered. The results showed that classrooms did not meet all expectations of the participants and were not satisfactorily inclusive. To enable structure and safety, the classrooms should be smaller (in the catchment area school) and should include pupils with and without special education support to learn from and support each other. The importance of one-to-one interaction with professional staff was also emphasized. In conclusion, the effect of the new laws could be seen through varying and to some extent unequal organizing of special educational support in the municipalities.

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Introduction
The worldwide inclusion movement is evident in Finland, especially in the new educational system that has been introduced in kindergartens and schools. The Special Education Strategy of 2007 (Ministry of Education 2007), the Basic Education Act (642/2010) and Programme reflect the Salamanca Agreement, an equality movement (UNESCO 1994) that states that all children should be taught in the regular educational system when possible. The central idea in this system is that all children should be provided with education and support in their catchment area (Finnish National Board of Education 2011) through the three-tiered framework for support: basic education, intensified support and special support (642/2010).

All children are entitled to basic educational support as part of a regular education. Intensified education is indicated when a pupil needs support on a regular basis in order to attend school. A pupil with intensified support studies according to a general syllabus and has a right to assistants, part-time specialized education and student welfare services. If intensified support is not sufficient, which is decided by administrational and pedagogical evaluation, the pupil is entitled to special educational (SE) support. Pupils attending special education are entitled to student welfare support, part-time and full-time special education, learning instruments and assistant services while they receive personal education plans to support their individual needs. The three-tiered system in Finland was
organized to ensure flexibility in the support system and to distance pedagogical decisions from medical decisions. Municipalities in Finland decide on matters that include the budgets for education, health and social services and creating curricula that are suitable for the local schools; they can also execute their own self-evaluations. Municipalities can also decide whether school principals have managerial power or are more pedagogical leaders. The principal, together with the teachers, decides how the laws, curriculum, teaching methods, special education and continuing education are applied in their school (Juusenaho 2004). Consequently, there are wide variations in the types of classrooms and schools even within a city.

Although inclusive education has multiple definitions and therefore practices, most researchers agree on the background factors for inclusion, such as justice and involvement (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006). Avramidis and Norwich (2002) stated that inclusion is sometimes favoured as a term because it represents a range of assumptions about the meaning and purpose of schooling. Inclusion is not used in Finnish law as a term; rather, the practicalities are explained in detail as to how special education should be provided alongside regular education when possible (SA 1998/628, 17 §).

Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006) suggested six different ways of viewing inclusion: disability, expulsion, pupils not being able to attend school (for example, due to economic factors), mainstream education being for everyone, ethnic and minority movements and inclusive ideology. According to the definition by Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006), the inclusion used in the present study falls in the category mainstream education being for everyone.

In the Finnish context, kindergartens are seen as inclusive. There are no special education kindergartens as such, but there are special education classes within them or no special education classes at all. Schools, on the other hand, may be segregated and have only pupils with SE needs. The complexity of research on inclusive practices in kindergartens and schools in Finland derives from the differences in educational practices provided by each municipality (Pihlaja 2009). Studying both policy and experiences often gives a contrasting and diffuse picture of what inclusion is in practice (Haug 2010) and highlights the importance of conducting case studies from macro to micro levels of society, from laws to street level.

The aim of this study is to investigate the effect of the new laws on SE support practices by analysing interviews that consider the views of parents, teachers and assistants on the educational settings and practices of three children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). I also assess whether the new laws provide more inclusive schooling practices in the three municipalities where these children attended their first years of education and examine whether the changes in the laws match the participants’ views of educational practices and settings. This study contributes to the field of education by demonstrating how the laws translate from the municipal level to the classroom level; this can be considered unequal on the one hand and flexible on the other hand.

Methods

Three children with ADHD, aged 6–8 years, their parents, three teachers (one a special education teacher) and two assistants were interviewed around the period of transfer from kindergarten to school. Children started their education in the same small integrated group in a kindergarten in the city (A); this group had both 5- and 6-year-old preschoolers. After this small integrated group was closed, these children were allocated to regular kindergarten groups in the catchment area. Due to the parents’ work situation, two of the children moved to different municipalities (B and C) to start first grade.

In this multiple-case study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. As a qualitative research method, an interview seeks to portray the meaning of specific topics in the life of the subject (Kvale 1996). A trial interview was conducted to examine the validity of the interview questions. The approximate interview time was 45 minutes for the adults and 20 minutes for the
children, and the same interview protocol was used for both children and adults. The interviews with children were used as additional data rather than primary data.

All interviews were conducted in Finnish except for one, which was in English. One interview was conducted by a former personal assistant for comfort, and the rest were completed by the researcher. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for a more relaxed atmosphere. The questions for adults focused on the children's educational paths, the changes in those paths, characteristics of beneficial classrooms and future hopes and concerns in education. The children's questions were about what classrooms they attended. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The most relevant answers from the interviews are presented in this paper.

A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was chosen because it is a flexible way to code and theme a data set, especially to find similarities and differences in the data. This method was used from a constructionist standpoint to examine how meaning, realities and experiences are the effects of discourse in society. Furthermore, it allows assessing how inclusive discourse and practice have affected the experiences of the participants, meanings and realities of schooling. This method is used from an essentialist standpoint as the views are also strongly coloured by personal experiences. The transcribed interviews were read and re-read several times to identify themes.

Organizing SE support in each municipality was examined from the official websites. These official websites were used as a source of information, for example, for parents about applying to schools and classrooms.

The children's parents gave their consent for the interviews with their children, and the children were asked if they wished to participate. The names of the participants and the municipalities have been changed to pseudonyms for ethical reasons. The head of the city educational department in city A granted permission for this researcher to proceed with the study.

The cases

Joonas is an 8-year-old boy with an ADHD diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association 2013). This condition was formally known as Asperger syndrome and is now called Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Joonas always had a personal assistant. After his small integrated class was discontinued, he moved to another kindergarten where special arrangements were tailored for him; he was free to join the regular class when he could with an assistant. The teachers interviewed in his case were from his preschool year during which time he spent mostly with an assistant and a special education teacher. In the current situation, Joonas has moved to a smaller city (city C) and is attending the first grade in a special education classroom with an assistant. Joonas is not attending his catchment area school.

Kristiina is a 7-year-old girl who has just started first grade in the largest of the three cities (city B). Kristiina was diagnosed with ADHD and is currently on medication. During her time in the small integrated class in the kindergarten in city A, Kristiina was 5 years old and had learned how to settle down and play. When the small integrated class was discontinued, Kristiina transferred to a regular preschool class in a kindergarten on the other side of the city. The interview with her teacher is from this period. When the family moved to city B, Kristiina began first grade in a class that was aimed at children with special support needs. This class is called hyvää alku-luokka (good start class) and has around 25 children, 2 teachers and 2 assistants. Kristiina's school is in her catchment area.

Harri is an 8-year-old boy also diagnosed with ADHD and is on medication. During preschool in his small integrated class, Harri spent some time in the psychiatric children's hospital and attended preschool there. Harri was the first of the children in the preschool class who learned to read and write. After the small integrated classes, Harri attended first grade in his catchment area and attended a special education class in city A. The interviewed personnel are from this period.
Results

**Organizing SE support in the three municipalities**

There are three different municipalities in this study, referred to as A, B and C. The middle-sized (population under 100,000) municipality (A), where the children attended the small integrated preschool, is located in the western part of Finland. The largest (under 250,000) of these municipalities (B) is located in the urban southern part of Finland. The smallest (under 50,000) municipality (C) is located in the northern part of Finland where the municipal areas are large geographically but not by population.

In city A, the principle of the catchment area school is encouraged. Children are viewed on an individual basis to support their needs. There are special education classrooms in schools and kindergartens, and children have the possibility to attend part-time special education. However, the children who are allocated to different specified units of SE schooling are mostly not attending their catchment area school.

City B is the largest in the case study, and it seems to be most flexible in terms of support practices. In city B in general, children with intensified or SE support are integrated with other children in preschool, and children are guaranteed to attend a school in their own district. The schools have the option of reducing the number of children in the classroom (re-arranging classes), and there is a possibility for an assistant. There are small integrated classes and special education classes in city B’s kindergartens and schools.

The municipalities offer specialized classes for specific difficulties. In city C, children with SE support are located in kindergartens chosen by their parents, educational staff and the peripheral special education teacher. City C, the smallest of the cities, has adopted the three-tiered support framework but still has one school that provides special education. Thus, the likelihood of that school being the catchment area’s school is low. A pupil receiving SE support has the option to attend SE part time in those subjects that need attention or participate full time in SE.

The three different cities in this study all presented distinct ways of organizing SE practices. City B, the largest of the cities, presented the most alternative classroom types, reflecting the three-tiered framework for support. City C, the smallest of the three, used a full-time or part-time educational system but did not use settings, such as integrated classes or other types of settings, as used by cities A and B.

**Thematical analysis of the interviews**

As these children are individuals, their families have different demands and wishes for the children as the school staff also has different demands on the children. In the thematical analysis, the same themes arose and were intertwined but from different viewpoints in each case. The recurring themes were (1) smaller class sizes benefit children and (2) catchment area schools are important.

**Theme 1. Smaller class sizes benefit children**

In each of the children’s cases, fewer children in classrooms was an important element of supporting the child’s learning. In Joonas’ case, fewer children in classrooms was seen as beneficial as he could adapt flexibly to the group with an assistant. Joonas expressed that he would like to be in a class with fewer children. Along with ADHD, he has been diagnosed with an ASD. He seemed sensitive to his surroundings, and sometimes he left the classroom with an assistant to calm down. Joonas was slowly introduced to peers in order to learn and accept others (Figure 1).

Joonas’ parents explained the importance of having fewer children in the classroom:

> Worst situation would be that an SE child would be put – on their own – in a regular classroom and made to feel that he is very different from others. The best case scenario would be where the same number of children with and without SE support were in the classroom in order for them to realise the different working methods by
different people. The best kind of classrooms are those where Joonas can leave the group with an assistant when needed. All previous classrooms had their faults, but the current one, due to the small number of children, works best for him.

Joonas’ SE teacher, teacher and the assistant also felt that he should continue to have an assistant. The teacher and the assistant felt that he could not cope in a regular classroom, whereas the SE teacher felt he should be slowly introduced to a regular classroom:

He should be in a small regular classroom with a personal assistant who would slowly back away; this would work best for him. In this class, there should be a great teacher … an SE is unnecessary for him as he needs to have peers as role models.

His teacher disagreed:

He should attend small SE classrooms because being in regular classrooms did not make a difference in my eyes. He seemed to suffer when there were many people around him … Recently, there were two such classes that made me want to change professions. Are there any normal children left? It is up to these special educators to decide which classrooms the SE children go to.

In both of these comments, it is apparent that teachers need more SE skills if inclusion is to be fully adapted to schools. Joonas’ teacher’s comment is anti-inclusive but is still a generally represented view by teachers; furthermore, it is an example of teachers not having enough support in a classroom regardless of whether SE support is provided:

Regular children also are entitled to a certain amount of support; this can be overridden by an SE child in the class who may need even more support. A calm and structured setting, especially in the beginning, is important.

Figure 1. Theme 1. The participants felt that having fewer children in classrooms benefits children as it enables flexibility to organizing support, one-on-one interaction with the teacher, structure and calmness; furthermore, classes with both children with and without SE needs give pupils the chance to learn and support each other. There are improvements to be made as the medicalized language could be seen in some of the participants discourse, and there is a lack of support for teachers.
The general view of teachers was that mixed classes with fewer children were favourable for all pupils. The SE teacher described the ideal classroom for children would hold:

More staff and smaller classes is how it should be. All classes of 20 should be reduced to no more than 15 children. In this economical climate, classrooms are certainly not becoming less crowded. These kinds of classrooms should not be some kind of replacement for the small integrated classes (that were shut down), but there should be great staff with children who benefit from being in smaller classrooms.

Joonas’ SE teacher further defined that the setting should be ‘the kind of classroom setting that supports clarity, structured settings, daily rhythm, clear rules and a positive environment so that the day to day life works’.

In Kristiina’s case, fewer children in classrooms were considered to be beneficial because one-to-one interaction with adults, the quality of instruction and the structure would support her learning. Fewer children in classrooms allowed more flexible teaching and learning arrangements. Kristiina expressed in her interview that she would like to make many friends at school.

Kristiina had attended a variety of classrooms. The parents explained her early educational path and what they thought of the classrooms she attended. Here, the parents acknowledged that children having the same diagnosis as Kristiina could provide her with understanding and support in the classroom:

Kristiina was transferred from a larger (kindergarten) class to a small integrated class. In the larger class there were a lot of children, and after this transfer we saw a major change in her. Other ADHD kids in the small integrated classroom made her feel more comfortable and not feel alone.

… Kristiina did not develop much during this period (the move from one city to another) and even deteriorated in her play. However, this probably was due to the move and the new environment rather than the class. Still, there is a big difference if a classroom is 25 children or 12 children.

The parents felt fewer children in the group led to more one-on-one time for the children with positive reinforcements and flexible arrangements:

The thought of a teacher not having enough time to attend to her and give her extra work to keep her interest, her getting frustrated and then being told off at times would make her a troubled child. I think it is really important that these first two school years are successful and that Kristiina will get the so-called joy of learning as well as her self-esteem to a high level. This is why positive feedback is important – so that she would like going to school. It feels like we won the lottery with this class where she is now. The great thing about this class is that they are divided into groups depending on the ability of the children.

Here, Kristiina’s teacher explained what she thought was needed for a good learning environment. She explained that the children need direction and a role model in the classroom:

For Kristiina and other children, the role of adults is important as they set the tone and the mood. The interaction between an adult and the child is important. A suitably-sized class shouldn’t be more than 15. In this particular kindergarten, I feel lucky to have 14 children and three adults in the classroom. This ensures one-on-one time with the teacher or the adult, but in general less children and more adults as well as keeping in mind that disturbing factors are minimised in smaller classes.

In Harri’s case, classrooms with fewer children were regarded as beneficial because careful planning of the group could ensure a structure that children could learn together and give each other peer support. One-on-one guidance from the teacher is important in order to provide necessary explanations and encouragement. In his interview, Harri recognized issues with some of his classmates and said he would like to be in a classroom with a better atmosphere.

Harri’s mother described the classrooms that Harri has attended and what happened during the transition from first to second grade. Harri’s mother described the classroom environment with a strong emphasis on diagnosis:

Harri was the only one with behavioural problems, and it seemed everyone else had mild learning difficulties and were sweet as pie. Harri’s problems in the classroom with his peers ended when the occupational therapist organised sessions during school time with all three boys and a psychiatric nurse one hour a week for 8–10 weeks. This
year there are 5 kids with behavioural problems and major problems, kids winding each other up and fighting. He needs a quiet, safe, structured and nice environment around him – ideally a small class or regular class with an assistant, but certainly not children with similar problems.

Having children with similar SE support can be reassuring, as in Joonas’ and Kristiina’s case; however, in Harri’s case, the group dynamics were disordered because of similar behaviour that caused the children to clash.

Harri’s teacher commented:

The children in this class need a calm environment and a small group around them, whereas now they are the ones who pay the bill so to speak. In a small group or when there are two of us, he is great … The composition of these groups should be re-thought very carefully. I believe that there can be only one child suffering from socio-emotional and conduct disorders per class. Then the rest of the group can support this child in his/her behaviour. There are also need to be enough adults to deal with the problems.

She then continued to explain about beneficial classrooms:

I think that children with SE support should be part of regular classes; I would say from three to five SE children per class, depending on the difficulty. There should be twice as much regular children as SE children. This would give them support and peer models. We have been thinking of integrating him into a regular classroom, but it has 26 children.

Harri’s assistant, however, commented on the rethinking of classrooms in city C:

Many classrooms are put together, and as a consequence many assistants are laid off. I appreciate the line of work that I am in, and therefore this is not a good idea. Even if there were two teachers in the classroom, it is still different when there is an assistant. All classes should be as small as possible. SE children deserve the extra help they need, and there should be enough people to cater to those needs.

**Theme 2. Catchment area school**

The general view of the participants was that the catchment area school rule is important. Two of the three parents felt that this factor was most important as it improves collaboration between schools and kindergartens, and the environment is familiar for the child. For some participants, however, support was more important than the catchment area (Figure 2).

Joonas’ parents placed the emphasis on classrooms with fewer children with specialized support rather than catchment area schools:

The village where we live is small but geographically large. I would rather have it this way, meaning that everything is planned there for SE, rather than having him thrown in a general education classroom where he would not receive the help that he needs. But of course I would certainly prefer having all this support in the nearest school to us, although it is not a priority.

Joonas’ teacher had some doubts about the catchment area school rule overall, but thought there were many positive aspects:

I don’t know how it is going to work as this whole thing is so new, but it makes the collaboration between the school and the kindergarten much easier. It is easier to talk about the children and also the children will get to know each other better; going from preschool to first grade will also be easier.

Joonas’ assistant had similar thoughts:

Collaboration between preschools and schools has become better, but I do not agree that SE children should be located to different places around the city (and not in the catchment area schools).

Kristiina’s parents thought that it was positive that she attended a catchment area school, to know the children from the area and to learn how to function in the area. Her teacher felt that catchment area schools improved collaboration between teachers in a transition stage:

Now many of the SE children also attend catchment area schools. In general, the changes happening are great … nevertheless, from the view of the child, a smaller group is always best.
For Harri’s parents, the most important factor was for him to attend a catchment area school:

The kindergarten group was the right place for him, but Kindergarten was too far; if it had been a catchment area kindergarten, the transfer would have been easier. Learning to read and write has a lower priority compared to whether he can walk from the shop without a fight.

Harri’s teacher’s frustration can be read here; the described situation could be called locational integration, where location becomes more important than the insight of learning (Warnock Report 1978):

When the children go to catchment area schools in a way the groups have become much more difficult. Now, children who have socio-emotional problems are put in with all the other children, whereas before our classroom was focused on children who have neurological problems. This group of children could not be in a regular classroom. I would have located these children completely differently when it comes to classes. The difficult part was that, unexpectedly, two extra children were located here. One of them moved to this neighbourhood, and it was suggested that the other one wait a year, but the mother did not want that.

It seems that in Harri’s and Kristiina’s cases, in the two larger cities (A and B), a clear effect of the laws could be seen in terms of them attending their catchment area schools. This effect was particularly noticeable in Kristiina’s case, with the classroom in the catchment area being specially tailored to fit the three-tiered framework for support and to meet the needs of the children. However, this class was not fully inclusive as it had only children with SE support. In Harri’s case, although he attended the
catchment area school, the children in the class had similar problems and ended up fighting and not learning. In Joonas’ case, the SE classroom he attended was more similar to the old system, where the line between special and regular education is more clearly defined; there was either segregated SE or regular education. This, however, was not a problem for Joonas or the parents, who felt that support was more important than the catchment area.

**Discussion**

The cases were formed from the stories of early educational paths of three children with SE needs, influenced by the municipalities organizing special education that is set by law. The effect of the new laws varied depending on the municipality. The larger municipality had a more flexible SE organization and hence was more inclusive. This is an indication of the power held by municipalities (Juusenaho 2004). The interviews of the participants indicated that classrooms with fewer children were beneficial for children with SE support because these classrooms enabled a flexibility to organize support, ensuring one-on-one interaction with the teacher in a catchment area school.

A significant effect of smaller groups being beneficial learning environments (8–15 pupils) has been reported in studies with smaller children and students with SE support (Bussing et al. 2002; Klonsky 2002; Nye, Hedges, and Konstantopoulos 2000; Stasz and Stecher 2000). Bussing et al. (2002) noted that especially children with an ADHD diagnosis benefit from personal instruction, which an assistant and a fewer children can provide. Furthermore, carefully planned groups ensure structure and calmness to the learning environment; classes with children with and without SE support give pupils the chance to learn and support one another. Although there is evidence that, student engagement improves when the class size is reduced (Finn, Pannozzo, and Achilles 2003) and there are fewer behavioural problems in smaller classrooms (Wheeler 1993), in Harri’s case, well thought-out group dynamics were considered more important than class size or attending the catchment area school. According to Finn, Pannozzo, and Achilles (2003), engagement consists of such elements as ‘learning behaviour’ and pro- and antisocial behaviour.

The use of the catchment area rule is municipality-dependent as is the organization of SE practices. One of the main principles of inclusive education is attending a catchment area school. Although some regarded attending a catchment area school as the most important factor, others considered support in classrooms to be more important. Kivirauma, Klemelä, and Rinne (2006) found that parents of children with severe disabilities preferred their children to be in SE classrooms, whereas parents of children with milder disabilities preferred regular education classrooms. Parents of children with severe disabilities wanted their children in an SE setting because the teachers and such classrooms were better prepared for support compared to general classrooms. This finding is also supported by Dockrell, Shield, and Rigby (2003). Joonas’ parents placed the emphasis on a classroom with fewer children with specialized support rather than catchment area schools. Of the three children in this study, he was given the most support.

The new three-tiered framework for support was introduced to give more flexibility in organizing support and moving away from practices of medicalization. This study demonstrates that some of the participants described children through a dualistic view of ability/disability or normal/abnormal, referring to diagnosis and individuals rather than being inclusive. This shows that the changes towards a more inclusive school environment as specified by the law will take more work and that change is a lengthy process. There is an ongoing debate on whether having SE children in regular classrooms burdens teachers or whether teachers just want fewer children in their classrooms. Studies conducted on teachers’ attitudes (Koay et al. 2006; Kuorelahti and Vehkakoski 2009) concerning inclusive education show that teachers are apprehensive of having children with SE support in their classrooms; they consider the workload to be overwhelming and they are unsure of their abilities to teach and support children with SE support (Sapon-Shevin 2007). This study shows that teachers also need support as inclusive practices become more common. Another issue is the reference to ‘normality’, which can be detected in many of the excerpts in the text. There is an increasing
amount of evidence that although inclusive education is more common, the notion of normality is narrowing, which then affects educational structures and policies (Brunila 2012; Kivirauma 1999; Mietola 2014; Teittinen 2008, 2011; Tomlinson 2012; Vehkakoski 2006). Normality versus abnormality could be linked with medicalization and how children are often seen through their diagnoses; this suggests a problem with the individual (Conrad and Schneider 1992) rather than the shortcomings of the environment.

As bureaucracies are further dismissed by the governments and municipalities are given more power, the organization of schooling changes. This power shift can create inequalities in municipalities in organizing SE support. The line between SE and regular education is blurred due to the three-tiered framework for support and more flexible ways to give support, although the number of pedagogical statements from experts and administrative decisions has increased. As the flexibility in giving support increases, more children can be given support without being labelled as special. Graham and Jahnukainen (2011) in their cross-cultural research argued that up to 30% of Finnish students from kindergarten to the third grade are in part-time SE. Graham and Jahnukainen argued that because the number of students receiving some form of SE is high, SE becomes less of an issue and a label. Early intervention and considerable support can therefore be described as a cornerstone of Finnish education; the idea is to catch academic problems early to prevent further difficulty. The children in this study had early intervention, which helps in receiving needed level of support. Receiving special support seemed easier with diagnosis, however, concurrently can lead to being labelled, which can be seen in some of the excerpts.

According to Lipsky (1980), policy is best made at the street level in offices rather than by legislatures. This multiple-case study demonstrates that these children were allocated to schools on an individual basis. This individual aspect needs to be maintained to tailor school paths in order to support children reaching their full potential. As can be seen in Harri’s case, this individual planning was obscured by the strict policy pursued. Kristiina’s case is an example of policy intention translating into practice. Kristiina was given support in her catchment area, and the support was tailored to the level needed. Joonas’ case shows how perceptions can differ about what is thought to be beneficial for a child. The people who are most familiar with the child should therefore choose what is best for the child collectively, and to do so they should have a wide range of supportive practices offered by the municipality to choose from.

Nonetheless, there are some limitations to this study. More teacher’s from the children’s school paths could have been interviewed to produce a more comprehensive picture, as now most of the information about the paths comes from parents. Originally, the plan was to obtain four cases instead of three; however, the fourth participant did not respond. Furthermore, the children’s interviews could have been structured better instead of merely talking about topics; for example, picture drawing could have been used to obtain more information. It is important to include the small amount of data from the children’s interviews as there have been few studies that have included pupils’ own opinions about inclusive settings (Dyson, Howes, and Roberts 2002).

Conclusions

There is evidence of a transition stage in the Finnish educational system where new policies are translating into practice. The strong municipal power and differences in organizational support could be detected in this study. The policy to practice is being translated by the stakeholder, the parents, the teacher and the schools, and to make it more inclusive much work is needed regarding attitudes and values. What is beneficial for the child in terms of schooling depends on the stakeholders. As this study shows, the flexibility of organizing support at the right level for each child in classrooms with fewer children is one of the key elements.

It is important that future studies examine the differences in support practices among municipalities for all children in Finland to ensure equality in the basic educational system.
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Notes on contributor

Sonia Lempinen is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Education with a concentration in school choice and special educational support. More specifically her work examines social justice, policy and practice of the school choice phenomenon concerning children with intensified and special educational support.

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