

## Towards inclusive education: the case of Finland

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Published online: 23 September 2008  
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**Abstract** The article examines the Finnish system of basic education and the means it employs to support good learning and healthy growth and development for all students. The excellent learning outcomes of the Finnish comprehensive school indicate that it is possible to develop a system with both quality teaching and learning, and equity and equality for students. Throughout the article, special needs education is seen as an important, but not dominant, aspect of Finland's inclusive policies. The article concludes with five theses central to a working model of inclusive education.

**Keywords** Inclusive education · Comprehensive school · School culture

### Connecting equality with high-quality learning

In this article we examine how Finnish education supports good learning, coupled with healthy growth and development for all students. We focus on basic education (comprehensive school)—which, in the Finnish education system, includes primary and lower secondary education—and look at the main features of early childhood education and preschool from an inclusive perspective. By inclusion we mean not only equal educational opportunities for all but also the strategies, structures and operating procedures that guarantee successful learning for all students. We see special needs education as an important, but not dominant, part of the nation's policies for inclusion.

In three consecutive PISA assessments—in 2000, 2003 and 2006—Finnish comprehensive school students enjoyed excellent results. They have scored above students from other participating countries on reading, mathematics, science, and problem-solving skills. Arinen and Karjalainen (2007) describe the exceptional features of the Finnish

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success story: Finnish schools achieve very equitable outcomes, and their work is efficient, with moderate amounts of time spent on learning and very reasonable educational expenditures.

In the 2006 assessment of scientific literacy, the performance of Finnish youth was the best in the world, and no OECD country had smaller variations in the performance of its youth. In addition, more students had excellent records, and fewer were academically weak than in any other country. In Finland, 20.9% of students reached either level 6(top) or 5(excellent); the OECD average was 9%. Only in Finland was the number of very poorly performing students (under level 1) under 1% (0.5%); the OECD average was 5.2%. The differences between schools were also minimal compared to other participating countries. Even those Finnish schools that performed least well attained relatively high scores, as they had in previous assessments. In 2000, for instance, the Finnish schools scoring lowest (10th percentile) on reading scored almost 100 points above the overall OECD average. In the OECD, differences between schools accounted for an average of 36% of the variation in students' reading performances, compared to only 5% in Finland. Moreover, family background had less influence in Finland than elsewhere in the OECD (Väljjarvi 2003; Halinen 2006a). Thus, in Finland, an individual student's school is not a decisive factor, as all schools place a priority on high-quality education. The Finnish comprehensive school, which does not stream students, seems to succeed in achieving both high quality and equality at the same time, which in turn promotes social cohesion (Arinen and Karjalainen 2007, Väljjarvi et al. 2002; Väljjarvi 2003).

In addition to getting good results and reducing differences in achievement, the Finns use both human and economic resources effectively. All children attend school and the gender parity is good. In the Finnish basic education system, few students (only 2%) repeat grades. The average is 16% in the OECD, with a percentage of over 30% in countries such as France (42%), Luxembourg (40%), Portugal (34%), Spain (32%) and Netherlands (31%) (Kupari and Väljjarvi 2005). Also, in Finland, only 0.3% of students drop out of basic education, far below the percentage elsewhere, especially in developing countries (UNESCO 2008). On finishing basic education, 96% of the students continue immediately to upper secondary education.

The duration of the academic year (190 days) and the school day (4–7 hours, depending on student age) are quite reasonable. The amount of homework assigned in comprehensive schools is not particularly great, nor are students tutored privately to improve their grades. For instance, the average Finnish student spends 4.4 hours on mathematics per week, including instruction at school, homework, and other study (remedial or enrichment classes); the OECD average is nearly 7 hours and the Korean is over 10. Expenditures on education are at the OECD average, approximately 6% of GDP (Halinen 2006a).

How did Finland develop a system that allows all students to be successful learners? A possible explanation lies in the Finns' strong appreciation for education. Finland has worked with determination to create educational structures that prevent exclusion, while developing activities and pedagogies that facilitate inclusion. Arinen and Karjalainen (2007, p. 69) explain:

Even the weakest Finnish learners are top students when compared against other countries. Thus the good results in Finnish schools are based on the success of all students. The results have not been attained by teaching special needs learners and those learning at a slower pace in separate schools, but by bringing them into regular classes and schools, into comprehensive education. The underlying feature is the equitable comprehensive school that benefits all students alike.

## What is inclusion?

Traditionally, when educators discuss inclusion they emphasize that some students—especially those with learning disabilities and other disadvantages, who are often marginalized or even excluded from the education system—do have the right to learn. The concept of inclusion is undergoing change, however, and the focus is now increasingly on the question of how to support every child to learn successfully. UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994) set high expectations regarding inclusion for all 92 countries that had signed the statement, including Finland. The influence of this statement can be seen, for instance, in the Finnish Basic Education Act (1998) and in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2004). These documents start with the idea that every child has a right to study in the nearest mainstream school, and also to receive individual support; they emphasize cooperation among members of multiple professions and the need to develop the entire school community and the learning environment, rather than focus only on the problems of an individual student. They stress the importance of considering every learner's individual strengths and developmental and educational needs. The movement Education for All (EFA) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) have also influenced national policies and several recent development programmes in Finland.

As of 2008, all students in a Finnish age cohort, even those with the most severe developmental impairments, receive similar basic education. It is now stressed that pre-school and basic education involves everyone; inclusion means improving the situation for children who once had no opportunities to attend school with other children, as well as removing all possible obstacles to successful learning and development for every student (Kokkala and Savolainen 2002). This requires a wide array of measures of support, as over 99.7% of students complete the 9 years of comprehensive school.

Finland has come to this point through a long and multifaceted process, with continuous discussions about the importance of childhood, the value of individuals with disabilities, and the educability of every child. People can sometimes forget that a child with special needs is first and foremost a child, and only after that a child with special needs (Viittala 2005). Yet today we can see a fairly solid consensus in Finnish society about the goals of education and the importance of inclusion. It is widely accepted that the educational system must find the means to guarantee everyone a good education in an optimal learning environment and with adequate support. This inclusive policy resists exclusion, focusing on all students' successful learning and wellbeing.

However, heated debates have taken place in Finland around the terminology and the means of implementing inclusive education. In Finland, as in many other countries, the word "inclusion" has sometimes been connected only with the question of how to organize special needs education. It may have carried the connotation of full inclusion and suggested that there should be no special needs education groups, classes or schools. The concept and practice of integrative education may be more acceptable among teachers and parents because it involves a variety of teaching arrangements. In Finland, research and development have focused especially on inclusive arrangements and instruction, with an emphasis on cooperative learning, student and teacher participation, and school community. Advocates of inclusive education stress the aim of having all learners attend school together; instruction should respond to their individual requirements, and all should feel accepted and appreciated in the school community (Väyrynen 2001; Naukkarinen 2005).

Problems in defining special needs and organizing special needs education have been connected with the medicalization of the process; problems have often been regarded as

those of an individual student. They have not been seen as challenges for the learning environment or school community, nor as questions of the interaction between an individual student and the school surroundings. From this perspective, special needs pedagogy may even have strengthened the segregation processes in education (Kivirauma 1998; Naukkarinen 1998; Hakkarainen 2002). Interestingly enough, new research indicates that some support measures in Finland, especially a part-time special needs provision, have reduced the stigma associated with special needs education and instead promoted inclusion. In fact, such provision seems to have contributed to Finnish students' excellent scores on PISA (Grubb 2007; Moberg and Savolainen 2008; OECD 2005). This support is provided in regular classroom settings and offered to all who need it, such as those with difficulties in speech, reading and writing, and mathematics, but even including the most talented pupils. About 22% of Finnish comprehensive school students receive such support (Koivula 2008). Recently, more emphasis has been placed on the learning environment and on interaction processes in schools. For true inclusion to occur, the school community must develop practices respecting all students and encouraging their participation (Vehmas 2001).

In general, national policies and regulations support inclusion; at the same time, given Finland's strong tradition of municipal autonomy, the implementation of education policies ranges from very inclusive to more segregated (Ketovuori 2007). Because teachers' attitudes and skills are regarded as crucial in implementing inclusive policies, high-quality teacher education is crucial for developing education (Moberg 2001; Pinola 2008).

Those who hold strong opinions about full inclusion are also critical of national and local policies for special needs education (Saloviita 2006a; Pekkala 2006). They see Finland as having moved far too slowly towards inclusion, and say the present system of special needs education—which also allows study in separate settings—should be abolished. These critics claim, among other points, that teachers are not willing to teach all students in their classes. On the other hand, many researchers, administrators and teachers appreciate the flexibility of the present system: teachers can use their professional expertise to plan individual support. To them, inclusion means guaranteeing the right to meaningful learning, with the focus on the learners' individual needs; thus teachers should arrange a good learning environment and adequate support for these needs, no matter what the type of class or school. They also emphasize the municipality's role in providing the resources and means for inclusive instruction (Koivula 2008; Ketovuori 2007; Jahnukainen 2006).

Common to all these different opinions is the understanding that it is impossible to unify mainstream and special-needs education mechanically; instead we must reform the overall structures, the pedagogy and the working procedures in basic education (Saloviita et al. 2001). Teaching and learning should be regarded, and organized, as a meaningful continuum that responds to various student needs. It is also commonly accepted that the goal of the inclusive education system is to guarantee free access to education, to implement individual support so everyone can learn well, and to promote social integration (Moberg 2001). Thus, in Finland, as in any other country, inclusion is an ongoing process of removing obstacles, to attend and to learn, both at school and in society (MOE 2007).

### Steps toward inclusion

UNESCO (2008) emphasizes that inclusion is a process; it responds to the various needs of all learners by increasing participation in education, training, culture and community, while also preventing segregation and alienation in schools and in the larger society.

Defined this way, inclusion requires changes in educational structures, policies, objectives, subject matter, and operating procedures, so that all children can attend regular schools, because all children have equal rights to learn. In implementing these rights, nations seem to pass through various stages. Based on Cox's (2007) concepts, we can differentiate three major stages or steps in developing equitable educational opportunities. These stages are: (1) access to education; (2) access to quality education; and (3) access to success in learning.

The first step in moving towards equality is to guarantee everyone access to education; this generally means the obligation to attend school and complete at least basic studies. Here the most essential effort is material: create a sufficiently broad school network so all children can attend. Equally importantly, basic education should be free, making it economically possible for everyone to attend. At this stage the emphasis should be on effective support programmes to prevent children from repeating grades and dropping out.

During the second stage the emphasis is on improving the quality of instruction and extending the time spent in school, so learners can prepare for further studies and for adult life. This requires improvements in curriculum, teacher training, and learning materials.

Only when these basic structures are in place and an education system can consider students' individual needs, does the third stage become possible. Now the emphasis is on removing learning obstacles and adequately supporting all students to facilitate their learning, healthy growth, and development. Now the challenge is to develop versatile learning environments, cooperation among various professionals, supportive working procedures in schools, and the praxis of inclusive, collaborative pedagogies.

These three developmental stages of inclusion interlace in many ways, but each must be implemented before moving to the next. The inclusive pedagogies described for the third stage will never occur unless a society has provided equal access to school, developed good curricula and learning environments, and has teachers who can teach heterogeneous groups.

Bearing these definitions of inclusion and the stages of development in mind, we now examine the Finnish educational domain as an entity. In discussing inclusion we do not focus narrowly on providing education for learners with disabilities. In fact, from the perspective of inclusion we strive to promote solutions and functional models that are important in education, more generally. What elements are essential, so all children can have access to school, can complete school, and can succeed in their learning and develop as individuals and as members of the community? From the perspective of educational equality we argue that to implement true inclusion we must first delineate educational policies and structures, and consider curriculum, teacher training, and the practical implementation of instruction, with all the other practices those entail, particularly support for student learning, wellbeing, and evaluation. Table 1 outlines this process.

### Development of Finnish basic education and steps towards inclusion

As we review the development of Finnish basic education, en route to inclusion, the three stages become even more clear. In Finland, the first stage—access to education—received a boost in 1921, when a law was passed requiring general compulsory education. In the 1960s and 1970s, the second stage—access to quality education—gave rise to the current educational system. In the 1990s, the third stage—access to success in learning—was launched through legislative changes. In Finland today, the challenge is to strengthen all students' rights to good learning and individual support, and to develop working

**Table 1** Important elements in making progress towards inclusion

1. Educational policy		2. Provision of education	3. Curriculum	4. Instructional practices	
Development of Education	Lines and strategies of educational policy	Values	Principles	School's operating culture	
		Authority	Coverage		
Structure of education	Management system	Administrative leadership	Structure	Concept of learning Learning processes Student participation	Working methods Learning environment Differentiation Student assessment and feedback
			Goals Contents		
		<b>LEARNING AND GROWTH</b>			
7. Teacher education		6. Special support		5. General support of studies	
Initial teacher education (pre-service)		Special needs education Additional services		Early intervention and support	Remedial teaching Student guidance and counselling
Continuing education (in-service)		Interpreters and other support services		Student welfare services	Home-school cooperation

procedures and pedagogies that ensure meaningful learning, good academic results and healthy growth. Finland is now moving toward a fourth stage, which might be characterized as the era of life-long and life-wide learning.

The *first stage*, during which the Finns created the opportunity and finally the obligation to attend school, lasted for centuries. In Finland the roots of universal education go back to the 16th century, when the church taught people to read the Bible in their own language, creating an early basis for Finnish literature and popular literacy. The first elements of the present welfare society date back to the late 19th century. The national awakening and the struggles to gain independence from the Russian regime, along with democracy and economic security, were all interwoven. Each of these phenomena revealed the need to broaden education. After an 1866 decree, education organized by civil society began to separate itself from church-based activities, creating a basis for systematic education in municipal schools. During that era the teacher education system was created, along with a national school administration to monitor and manage schools (Sarjala 2001; Lindström 2001).

During the first stage, special needs education leaned toward instruction for children with sensory impairments. Early schools for the deaf were established in the 1840s, for the blind in the 1860s and for the physically disabled in the 1890s. In 1866, basic education was made the responsibility of the municipalities; it was later made compulsory, but excluded most children with disabilities. Private individuals and charitable organizations provided most of the education for these children (Tuunainen and Ihatsu 1996).

As the elementary school system developed, it paved the way for Finland's current high educational standards and technological knowhow, as well as for the welfare system. An 1898 decree established the number of schools for each municipality and set five kilometers as any child's maximum distance to school, except in sparsely populated areas. This guaranteed children a real opportunity to attend school. Finland gained independence

in 1917; in 1921—rather late by international standards—the Education Act establishing compulsory education was finally implemented. Now every Finnish citizen was to attend school—free of charge—for a minimum of 6 years starting at age seven. By the time World War II began, the entire age cohort was educated, with the exception of developmentally retarded children, who were still exempted from compulsory education (Tuunainen and Ihatsu 1996; Sarjala 2001; Lindström 2001).

*The second stage* was launched in the mid-1900s. With elementary education firmly established it became clear that children needed more years of basic education and better instruction. But while the entire age cohort now attended school, learners were quickly divided into two streams: some children went through elementary education with a practical orientation, moving straight into working life, while others transferred after 4 years of elementary education to an 8-year school with a theoretical, more academic emphasis. This latter school was also divided into two parts: middle school and gymnasium. Middle school opened the door to vocational school or to working life. Only after completing gymnasium could learners take the National Matriculation Examination and apply to attend university. In the 1960s, more and more parents wanted their children to attend at least middle school as the elementary school system no longer seemed to meet everyone's educational needs. Nevertheless, this more academic (middle school and gymnasium) education was not geographically or financially accessible to all—and its pedagogies failed to consider the growing diversity among students. Many therefore repeated grades and dropped out—increasing the pressure for school reform (Rinne 2001; Halinen and Pietilä 2005; Halinen 2007).

In 1968, after heated nationwide discussion, an Education Act created a 9-year comprehensive school system. Driving this reform was the idea that in an increasingly complex world, a nation needs both theoretical and practical knowledge (Uusikylä 2005). Comprehensive school was now divided into 6 years of primary school and 3 years of secondary. A detailed national curriculum for comprehensive schools was planned to provide guidance for municipalities and schools. It included a far-reaching pedagogical vision, by considering “the individual development of each learner's unique characteristics” (Committee on the Comprehensive School Curriculum 1970, p. 23).

While the comprehensive school was intended for everyone, many elements of segregation survived. Until 1985, the students in grades 7 through 9 were divided into streamed courses in mathematics and foreign languages. There were three study levels in these subjects, and those students who chose the lowest level were not allowed to continue their studies in the gymnasium. A great deal of potential was lost as boys, often slower to develop, opted for the lowest streams. Special needs learners mostly studied in their own groups or schools. Children with severe developmental impairments were not yet included in basic education. The approach to special needs education still medicalized all learning-related difficulties. The prevailing view held that expertise in assessing learning disabilities was found among specialists, especially medical doctors and psychologists: people outside the schools rather than within them (Tuunainen and Ihatsu 1996; Halinen and Pietilä 2005).

In the mid-1980s, the laws on basic education and the curriculum were revised. The first national core curriculum was created and municipalities were obligated to draw up their own local curricula. The streamed courses were abandoned; at last, all students received similar preparation for further studies. In a major step toward inclusion, the 1983 Act on basic education stated that no child was to be exempted from compulsory education. The 1985 National Core Curriculum stressed the importance of differentiation in teaching and, when needed, personal learning programmes in accordance with children's ages and ability to learn. Special needs education moved towards both integration and normalization, by

promoting the idea that all children with disabilities should study like other children. Municipalities were now given more responsibility to plan instruction in response to the needs of all children, and several national projects were implemented to improve teaching quality (Tuunainen and Ihatsu 1996; Halinen and Pietilä 2005; Halinen 2006a, 2007).

The *third stage*, striving for a universal focus on learner needs and quality instruction in all schools, started in the 1980s and gained a full head of steam in the 1990s. In 1994 the National Core Curriculum for basic education was renewed. A new cooperative system was created to set out and implement the reform's objectives. In 1995 the nation assessed its special needs education. Elements of the previous, more segregated, models of operation were still visible in the practices used by municipalities and schools alike, as well as in teacher knowledge and attitudes. Special needs classrooms were still common, but now were generally located in or near the regular schools; whenever possible, the students were integrated with regular groups. Many teachers, however, felt their skills were inadequate to teach special needs students; sometimes they were also unwilling to do so. Over the next few years the measures of development were based on the conclusions from this assessment. The goals were set so that the system of educational management would support the integration of municipal service systems and the operating culture of schools could move in the direction of inclusion (Tuunainen and Ihatsu 1996; Halinen and Pietilä 2005; Kartovaara 2007).

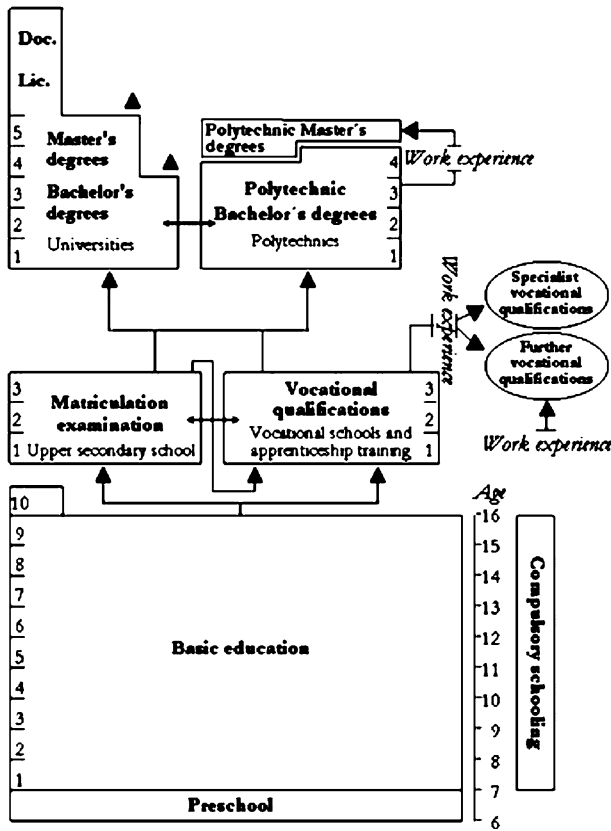
In 1998 the Act and Decree on basic education were once again renewed. In 2001 the common goals of basic education were defined in more detail, and lesson hours were reallocated. These changes brought all students, even those with the greatest developmental impairments, into the same sphere of basic education. The new regulations emphasized that schools and municipalities were required to support all learners' instruction and welfare. In basic education the division into primary and secondary grades was removed. In 2000 the first National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education was drawn up, followed in 2004 by one for basic education, with 9 years of unified compulsory, comprehensive basic education for all children (Halinen and Pietilä 2005; Halinen 2006a). On the general level, these new core curricula still represent the values upon which inclusive education rests (Saloviita 2006b). Yet the number of special needs students was growing, leading to active debates about the inclusiveness of the education system. Since 2004 Finland has seen extensive national development programmes and remarkable investments in school welfare, student guidance and counselling, and special needs education.

Many challenges still remain. Early intervention is crucial, along with high-quality early childhood education and care, and preschool education. Among the greatest challenges within basic education are reducing the amount of special needs education provided in separate settings and strengthening and improving the quality of multi-professional support in regular, mainstream settings. Resources are also needed for mainstream education and for teacher development to help them respond to student needs within the framework of heterogeneous teaching groups. Upper secondary education offers even greater challenges from the viewpoint of inclusion. In the following sections we discuss the school policies, structures and procedures that can develop Finnish basic education so it can become even more inclusive.

### **A flexible education system accessible to all**

The key objective of Finnish educational policy today is to provide all citizens with equal access to education—regardless of age, place of residence, economic circumstances, gender, or mother tongue. The Basic Education Act guarantees everyone residing in Finland—





**Fig. 1** The Finnish education system

citizen or not—the right to free preschool and basic education. The aim is to guarantee a rich and supportive learning environment for everyone, starting from an early age (Fig. 1).

The Finnish education system includes three elements:

- 9 years of basic education (comprehensive school) preceded by a year of non-compulsory preschool;
- post-comprehensive education with an option of vocational training or general upper secondary education; and
- tertiary education at polytechnics and universities.

From the learner’s perspective, the system is flexible: each student has the opportunity to proceed all the way to university. Streaming and tracking do not exist in basic education, and individuals are supported within the context of the comprehensive school available to all. Within the various phases of their schooling learners can make some individual choices, without throwing up obstacles to their next level of studies. There are no educational dead ends: one can always proceed to the next level. Adult education is also multifaceted, offering lifelong opportunities to return to basic studies.

Tuition-based early childhood education and care are considered social services, not part of the educational system. The government is considering making early learning an integral part of the educational system.

The education system itself is based on publicly funded municipal schools. Private schools are rare, accommodating only 2% of students. Preschool and basic education are totally free of charge: children receive study materials, a daily warm meal, health and dental care, other welfare and support services, and, if necessary, free transportation and accommodation. Municipalities may also provide optional before- and after-school activities for students in basic education. By securing all these services, Finnish society ensures that everyone has a chance to participate fully in schooling. Students in upper secondary schools receive free tuition and meals as well, but must buy their own textbooks and other learning materials. Even at universities and polytechnics, instruction is entirely free. Furthermore, government study grants are available to students in upper secondary and tertiary education.

Early childhood education and care, preschool and basic education and usually also upper secondary education are provided by municipalities, which have broad autonomy in organizing education. The network of preschools and comprehensive schools covers the entire country well. Finland's big challenge, also from the viewpoint of inclusion, is how to maintain the extensive school network so all students can attend school close to home, while upholding the high quality of teaching and learning in all schools throughout the country.

### **The system of educational management: a culture of interaction and trust**

The Finnish Parliament renders decisions on educational legislation and the general principles of education policy. The government, the Ministry of Education, and the Finnish National Board of Education are responsible for implementing this policy at the central administration level. The municipalities are responsible for providing education—and are granted great autonomy to do so.

Preschool and basic education are governed by the Basic Education Act (628/1998) and Basic Education Decree (852/1998) and by the Government Decree on the General National Objectives and Distribution of Lesson Hours in Basic Education (1435/2001). These Acts set down the principles according to which education must be provided, and such matters as the core subjects taught to all students, and the allocation of teaching hours to subjects. The National Core Curriculum 2004 is the pedagogical basis for the work of the municipalities and private education providers. They are responsible for designing the local curriculum, which can be tailored either to involve the entire municipality or each school, or a combination of the two. The national laws and the Core Curriculum, directing municipal educational arrangements and instruction, serve as common guidelines for all schools and build a solid foundation for all parties to plan their work. The entire system aims to support the process of teaching and learning.

The educational administration is flexible and supportive. The national administration interacts naturally and vigorously with municipalities and schools. Instead of control the Finnish system emphasizes trust, support and development (Väljijärvi 2003). Instead of nationwide examinations or lists ranking schools it focuses on self-evaluation. Based on national and municipal goals, the task is to find areas for improvement (Halinen et al. 2006). At the national level, educational authorities evaluate the success of educational policy. At the municipal level, they evaluate their own activities and take responsibility for continuing to develop education. The self-evaluation also aims to make activities transparent to parents and other interest groups, to facilitate a common, integrated understanding of the system's aims, procedures and outcomes. This self-evaluation is supported by

national, sample-based evaluations of student achievement and of students' health and welfare, and by thematic evaluations, one of which looks at special needs education.

### **The curriculum and inclusion**

The National Board of Education (NBE) creates the core curricula, in cooperation with broad networks of teacher education departments, publishers of learning materials, researchers, municipal education authorities, principals and teachers, and representatives of the social services and national healthcare systems. This cooperation helps ensure that teachers are supported by other actors in society (Merimaa 2004; Halinen 2007).

The core curriculum (CC) defines the common guidelines for all municipalities and schools to arrange their work. Covering the entire realm of school operations, it includes education for all students, even those with the most severe impairments. The CC also requires municipalities and schools to cooperate with parents and with municipal social and health authorities, especially on matters of student development and welfare (Halinen 2006a, 2007).

As it represents the values upon which inclusive education rests, the CC defines a common conception of learning, criteria for choosing teaching methods and developing the learning environment and the school's working culture. Because it envisages the student as an active learner, support for the individual learning process is essential, as are communal learning and interaction. The CC emphasizes a friendly, supportive environment and an open, encouraging operational culture based on interaction and participation (Halinen 2006b, 2007).

Each municipality draws up a municipal curriculum based on the CC, giving consideration to the needs of local children and families. Every school has its own curriculum, which it uses to develop annual work plans for the school and for each teacher, and individual study plans for students when needed (Halinen 2006a, 2007). Teachers and other school staff are closely involved in planning the curriculum. As teachers discuss curricular issues they must think through the influences on their teaching and on students' learning: how will they organize special needs education, support for those with learning difficulties, and student guidance and counselling? How will they ensure students' wellbeing? Schools also draw up plans to ensure a safe learning environment, to monitor students' absences and to protect students from bullying, violence and harassment (Mäensivu 2004; Halinen 2006a).

Through this process, teachers learn to view the operations of their school as a whole and also commit to taking responsibility for more than their own class or subject. This develops their overall expertise, creating a better basis for inclusive practices. Students and their parents are also increasingly involved in school curriculum processes, and their needs and opinions do influence school practices.

### **From early years to upper secondary: inclusive structures and school culture**

Early childhood education and care, preschool education, and basic education form an integrated entity, ensuring a consistent and flexible environment, where children can develop their individual characteristics.

Most early childhood education and care services are provided in municipal day care centres or in family daycare. Though tuition is charged for, some children receive day care free of charge, depending on family size and income level. Parents of small children have other societal supports, including 43 weeks of parental leave and allowance after the child's birth. Once that leave ends, they can receive a child home care allowance, until the

youngest child turns three or enters municipal day care. This welfare policy is an important factor in the success of inclusion.

According to the National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (2003), these services aim to promote children's healthy growth, development and learning. By emphasizing early intervention and support, they even out the differences between children created by differences in living conditions, thus offering all children equal opportunities to develop. Whenever possible, special support is provided in regular day care settings, taking into consideration each child's possible learning or developmental disabilities, different languages and cultural backgrounds, or other needs.

Before beginning compulsory school, as a part of either early childhood education or basic education, each child may attend 1 year of preschool; more than 96% of all 6-year-olds do so. Free preschool education is provided by municipal, social, or educational authorities, in accordance with the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education (NBE 2000). This can be offered in day care centres or schools. The national minimum for preschool studies is 700 h per year: about four hours a day. Children also have a right to day care after these hours, if needed.

The special goals for preschool, set out in a Decree (1435/2001), are "to improve children's developmental and learning readiness as well as to strengthen their social skills and healthy self-esteem through play and positive learning experiences." During this year, children do not start systematic subject studies. Preschool smoothes the transition from day care to basic education, as it supports and monitors children's physical, psychological, social, cognitive and emotional development and helps prevent difficulties from arising. During the preschool year, early intervention helps detect problems in development and learning. If children need help, the support is defined and organized in cooperation with their parents and the social and health authorities. Again, the aim is to even out the differences in learning conditions due to a child's social or cultural background, disability or other difficulty.

In this continuum, basic education is the core opportunity for inclusion. All children residing permanently in Finland are required to complete compulsory education, either by attending a comprehensive school or through other means like studying at home. Compulsory education starts when a child turns seven and usually ends 9 years later, when she/he has completed the basic education curriculum. Parents are responsible for ensuring that their children complete basic education, and, indeed, over 99.5% do so. Basic education gives everyone who completes it the same right to further education. Immediately after basic education, approximately 52% of students enter general upper secondary studies and 40% enter vocational studies (Halinen 2006b).

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (NBE 2004, p. 12) emphasizes the importance of basic education in reaching equality, and stresses the diversity of learners as a starting point for providing basic education:

The basis of instruction is Finnish culture, which has developed in interaction with indigenous, Nordic, and European cultures. In the instruction, special national and local attributes, the national languages, the two national churches, the Sami as an indigenous people and national minorities must be taken into consideration. The instruction must also take into account the diversification of Finnish culture through the arrival of people from other cultures. Instruction helps to support the formation of students' own cultural identities, and their part in Finnish society and a globalising world. Instruction also helps to promote tolerance and intercultural understanding.

Basic education helps to increase both regional equality and equality among individuals. Instruction must consider the diversity of learners, and gender equality is promoted by giving girls and boys the ability to act on the basis of equal rights and responsibilities in society, working life, and family life. Basic education must provide an opportunity for diversified growth, learning, and the development of a healthy sense of self-esteem, so that students may gain the knowledge and skills they need in life, prepare for further study, and, as involved citizens, develop a democratic society. Basic education must also support all students' linguistic and cultural identities and the development of their mother tongues. A further objective is to awaken a desire for lifelong learning.

In comprehensive schools, instruction is mainly subject-based, but also includes seven cross-curricular themes. Legislation sets the national minimum number of weekly lessons, varying from 19 in the 1st and 2nd grades to 30 in the 7th through 9th grades. The objectives and core contents of subjects and themes are usually given as general competences, emphasizing knowledge acquisition, communication and cooperation, active participation, problem solving and learning to learn skills.

Student assessment is viewed as a valuable tool for both teachers and students. As teachers offer feedback on students' self-assessments, they are able to consider students' individual needs; they can help students identify challenges to their own development and set goals for themselves. Teachers and students are not burdened with national testing. Once every 5 years, each school is included in a national sample of learning outcomes in one subject. Teachers receive information on their own school's results, but those results are not published, and schools are not compared with each other (NBE 2004; Halinen 2006b).

During basic education students are not streamed in any way, and they usually study in heterogeneous groups. The same goals are set for all students, but the Basic Education Act and the core curriculum require schools to consider students' individual needs and learning styles using pedagogical means such as diverse teaching methods, and by adapting the study contents to support all students' learning processes. To make that possible, teachers need to manage their study groups well and direct and support students individually. They are also expected to identify all students' strengths and needs so they can provide personal study plans. In recent years great emphasis has been placed on creating diverse learning environments and an encouraging and interactive atmosphere. Teachers have more flexibility to form study groups and to develop cooperation between them, increasing their teamwork both in planning instruction and in teaching situations (Halinen 2006b).

Early intervention in basic education means that teachers can tackle problems in learning and development as soon as they detect them. Thus students rarely repeat grades, beyond the roughly 2% who repeat either first or second grade, and the dropout rate is below 0.5%. Any student who needs support is entitled to it, and a wide array of support measures, used systematically, help everyone complete basic education.

If a child seems unable to complete compulsory education within the standard 9 years, for such reasons as disability or illness, they can begin it a year earlier than other students, taking 2 years of pre-primary education. Or they can begin this extended compulsory education at age five (NBE 2004).

Students with the most severe disabilities do not learn specific subjects; instead, their instruction is divided into functional domains, including motor skills, language and communication, social skills, activities of daily living and cognitive skills. Their progress is evaluated within these domains. Children with profound mental retardation study mostly

in their own groups, guided by teachers and personal aides. Increasingly, these classes are connected with the general schools (NBE 2004).

After the 9 years, students may attend one more year of additional, non-compulsory, basic education (VABE), designed to support those with problems in learning or development; about 4% do so. VABE teaching aims to be as flexible, personal, and positive as possible; sometimes it can be combined with a job. During this year, students may improve their earlier grades, learning skills, self-esteem and motivation; they may also acquire knowledge they need for further studies, improving their options for upper-secondary education. This additional year promotes inclusion, as the goal is for the entire age cohort to transfer from basic education to upper secondary education (NBE 2004).

In addition to the regular school day, extra-curricular clubs and after-school activities are available for first and second graders and children with special needs. The NBE curriculum framework for these activities contains goals and core contents that municipalities use to decide what activities to arrange (NBE 2007). Children can engage in a wide range of interesting activities, or do homework, or rest in a safe and peaceful environment under the eyes of professional staff (Rajala 2007). These activities aim to help the family with child-rearing, and to support children's emotional and ethical development; they also promote involvement and equality.

### Structures for eradicating exclusion

In scrutinising the current Finnish educational system from the perspective of inclusion, we must remember that this system has evolved over time (Naukkarinen 2005; Saloviita 2006a) and the efforts to develop full inclusion have proceeded with moderation.

The strength of the Finnish education system lies within the structures and functional models, the primary function of which is to eradicate exclusion—that is, segregation and alienation—from education and from society. They form a strong basis for inclusion. Also crucial are teachers' attitudes and skills, so certain types of learners can receive optimal attention. Municipal authorities and social services are important, too, in providing the support students and their families need.

The starting point for education is always the nearest mainstream school—which must take all children from its catchment area. If students require more assistance with learning and development, various measures are accessible. Comprehensive schools are implementing a range of such measures, both general and special.

The following general support measures apply to all students:

- Teachers differentiate their instruction in response to student needs;
- They cooperate closely with parents or guardians;
- Guidance and counselling are available for all students;
- All students can receive services to support their physical health and psychosocial wellbeing;
- Students temporarily lagging behind in their studies can receive remedial teaching.

Special support measures are designed for students with special needs:

- Part-time special needs education is available for students with minor difficulties in learning or adjustment;
- Full-time special needs education is available for students with major learning difficulties, disabilities, illness, retarded development, emotional disturbances, etc.;

- Interpreters are available, along with supplementary equipment, devices and materials (NBE 2004; Koivula 2008).

In the area of general support, pedagogical differentiation allows teachers to meet the diverse needs of students by arranging lesson topics, teaching methods, working techniques and learning materials, student assessment and feedback, and flexible grouping, as well as physical and psychological learning environments. All students are entitled to guidance and counselling to develop their study skills, and to make good choices in their studies and careers. Psychosocial and health support is provided by school psychologists, social workers, and school nurses, to strengthen students' learning capacity and empower them to take responsibility for their own studies.

Students who need specific support can generally receive remedial teaching from their own class teachers or subject teachers, either individually or in a small group immediately after class. Students who have minor difficulties or mild disabilities in learning or adjustment have the right to receive part-time special needs education from special needs teachers, who may work together with class teachers or subject teachers during lessons, or teach one or a few students individually during the school day. Such services are generally granted for a certain period of time, perhaps a month or two, and can be extended if necessary. Such part-time special education has proved to be very important in achieving good learning results (Koivula 2008; Moberg and Savolainen 2008).

Should students need even more support, decisions can be made about special needs education; based on these decisions, individual education plans (IEPs) will be designed and implemented. These IEPs present students' strengths and challenges, and define the individual objectives of learning and the criteria for evaluation; they also describe how to develop the learning environment and offer instruction. Such students may be taught in mainstream settings, either in their previous groups or in smaller study groups—which may be flexible groups or more permanent special needs groups in the same schools. Students who need considerably more support may be placed in a special needs school, but this happens less often as special needs education is offered more frequently in mainstream schools (Koivula 2008).

Every comprehensive school has its own *student welfare group*, consisting of teachers and health care staff. Usually chaired by the headmaster, this group responds to concerns expressed by teachers and discusses the optimal supportive measures for students' learning and development—always in cooperation with parents. This group also monitors the impact of the measures chosen, and students' development (Peltonen 2005).

Sometimes, however, students face such enormous difficulties, due to illness, disability or social problems, that they cannot study successfully in regular local schools or special needs schools, even with strong support. A dense educational safety network has been developed in Finland to ensure that opportunities for learning are available to everyone. These aims are served in hospital education, in “reform schools”, and in state-owned special needs schools for students with severe disabilities.

When students involved in preschool, comprehensive school or VABE become patients in hospital, they are entitled to instruction there, provided by the municipality responsible for that hospital, regardless of the student's place of residence. Instruction is based on the core curriculum, and may be individual or small-group, tailored to meet the special demands of their health situation. The right to instruction does not depend on the length of hospitalization; they may receive support for schoolwork for just a few days or for years (MOE 2004).

Since 2005 the government has earmarked additional resources for hospital education in a national project aimed to develop this area of education. A total of 32 hospital school units, operating in Finland, have participated this project. To support regular schools in assisting children before they are hospitalized and again when they return to school, the project is designing a functional model that allows children to learn in the most flexible way possible and to feel secure, despite multiple transfers. A key assumption is that, when students are severely ill, it is especially important to hold on to regular life and to the joy of learning (Tilus 2007, 2008).

“Reform schools” are national boarding schools, where children live if their home life and regular school attendance become impossible due to problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, behavioural disorders, and child-parent crises. From the perspective of child services and education, these placements are radical solutions, usually the last option when no other supportive measures have helped. Finland has six government-owned reform schools and two private ones; each houses about 20 students, averaging 15 years of age. Students generally study in small groups in a clearly prescribed and secure environment.

Currently, Finland has seven state-owned special needs schools that serve students with severely impaired vision, hearing and mobility, neurological disorders, dysphasia and autism and other severe disabilities; they provide instruction as well as guidance, rehabilitation and supportive services to facilitate learning. The state schools have a special role as support and counselling units for municipal administrators, regular schools and parents. State schools arrange training, and construct and loan out suitable materials and equipment to other schools; they also develop educational and rehabilitative techniques and are actively developing guidance and service programmes to be offered via the internet. Students from regular schools who have one of the above diagnoses may attend special needs schools for a supportive period, during which all of the student’s educational arrangements and support services are monitored. An educational plan is then drafted in cooperation with the student’s regular school. Some students continue studying in these state schools for a longer period, or even for their entire school career, especially those with severe multiple disabilities who require many special venues, unusual support equipment and materials, and/or especially knowledgeable teachers. The majority of students with disabilities, however, study in their local schools (NBE 2002).

## The future

Every 4 years the Finnish government redefines the policy on educational development and the MOE prepares a plan for education and research. The latest plan, designed for 2007–2011, emphasizes several changes in the operating environment that will have an impact on schools. First, as the age cohort shrinks, a challenge arises: how can one secure equitable accessibility to education while maintaining high quality education? Second, extra-curricular learning environments and communities are becoming increasingly versatile as media, especially the internet, are gaining significant influence. Third, parents find their authority undermined by their hectic and uncertain working lives, and by changed family structures. Finally, due to societal changes, schools are changing too: apart from setting high expectations for learning, schools are increasingly expected to support students’ general wellbeing, emotional development, and social, ethical, and aesthetic skills (MOE 2008).

Over the last few years the MOE has played an active role in developing strategies to enhance student wellbeing and strengthen inclusive practices in preschool and basic education. The MOE emphasizes that the everyday life of a school community includes



factors that can strengthen or weaken children's learning and welfare. At its best, school promotes student interaction, involvement and participation, which in turn increase well-being. This requires clear goals and working procedures, versatile working methods, and realistic and encouraging feedback for students (MOE 2005).

The new special education strategy (MOE 2007) emphasizes that all students, including those with special needs, have the right to preschool and to attend regular comprehensive schools close to their homes. It focuses on mainstream education and developing intensified preventive support. It also aims to remove the medicalization stigma from special needs education, and to emphasize pedagogical assessment as the starting point of all educational planning. As of early 2008, MOE has already allocated significant resources to teacher education and to the development work of municipalities. Recent research also clearly shows that Finnish comprehensive school teachers respect their students and are very willing to use a variety of methods to meet their individual needs so they can learn successfully (Atjonen et al. 2008).

Given the facts presented here, we feel confident that inclusive education is firmly established in Finland. We are moving forward with other Nordic countries with which we share a passion for democratic welfare society and equality in education. In the UNESCO/IBE International Workshop on Inclusive Education, Nordic Countries, held in March 2008 in Helsinki, these common goals and future challenges were solidified in a Nordic Roadmap towards inclusive education. Our strengths seem to be: coherence and flexibility of the education system; good pedagogical leadership; strong student participation; well-educated teachers, who are reflective practitioners and form warm relationships with their students; and a cooperative, multi-professional approach to inclusive education.

Our biggest challenges in Finland, as in other Nordic countries, revolve around learning to live with growing diversity and multiculturalism in both society and schools. To respond to this diversity we need to develop teachers' abilities and instructional practices, including heterogeneous study groups. We must improve early childhood education and make it a more integral part of the education system. We also need to find even better forms of early intervention, preventive and multi-professional support, and ways to reduce special needs education in separate settings—and improve what cannot be changed. Finally, we should find ways to transfer the inclusive ethos of basic education to post-basic education and encourage everyone to become an active learner.

Currently, equality in Finnish education is being strengthened, as it enters the fourth stage in the development of inclusion, where learning is seen as a life-long and life-wide process. Early childhood education and care, together with preschool and basic education, create a strong foundation for learning. Given Finland's small population, it needs its high standard of education and knowhow. We cannot afford to let one single person drop off the path of life-long learning. For individuals, education is always a channel to cultural involvement, both locally and in our ever-globalizing world. Learning opens up a highway to the common treasure house of humanity: to the acceptance and sharing of values and competencies in interaction with others. We should be able to equip all our children to enter into an uncertain future with good competences and with hope and anticipation (Halinen and Järvinen 2007).

### **Five theses on inclusion**

Based on the Finnish experience with inclusive education, we propose five areas of development for discussion on the path toward inclusion. We must decide on the values

and goals of education, on the next steps to take, on how to develop the spirit and operating culture throughout the education system, on how to develop and support teachers, and on the role and process of the curriculum.

First, the concept of inclusive education is based on the value choices a society makes. The Finns' underlying philosophy is that people have both rights and responsibilities in developing as human beings and contributing members of society. Securing a similar basic education for all requires making both mental and economic commitments to reaching that goal.

Second, for inclusion to work, all children must attend school; thus decisions about the distance to schools and about educational expenses must empower all families actually to send their children to school. Once these conditions are met, we must continue to ensure that all children complete at least basic education without dropping out. Only when children stay at school can they be helped to succeed in their studies. If children repeat grades, they represent an economic burden on society and may feel segregated. To keep the repetition rate low we must continue to develop teaching arrangements and methods that promote children's learning and wellbeing, so everyone can reach the goals set for learning.

Third, both locally and nationally, inclusion requires a joint will and a common operating culture, one that values participation by all members of society. This calls for collaborative working models and inclusive pedagogical processes, which enable everyone to contribute equitably. The starting point is found in students' needs and their own goals for their development; their realization also requires family backing. Each school's staff must have the expertise to meet students' needs for support and coordinate their students' individual goals to targets that are socially important. Moreover, the school culture must make all learners feel respected and included in the community, and must respect everyone's learning goals. When that happens, diversity is seen as a strength and resource. Every school day should include caring and encouraging interaction, with teachers listening to students, providing early intervention and support in the classroom.

Fourth, inclusion relies heavily on teachers' positive approaches and high professional skills. Every day teachers must meet students' needs and help them perform well; to do so, they need the support of the entire society. At both national and local levels, the authorities in charge of familial social support, and of healthcare, youth and cultural services, should support the work of teachers and schools. This process is interactive: as the educational system and the schools develop an inclusive approach to teachers, they can better contribute to and influence the development of their schools and of education overall. Teachers must be empowered to reach solutions based on both their expert estimation of students' needs and the local opportunities they see. Teachers must not be burdened with time- and resource-consuming tests, evaluations or inspections. Instead, they need high quality pre-service education and opportunities to continue their professional development through in-service training and networking with other teachers.

Finally, the curriculum must express the basic inclusive values of education and the consensual will to develop education. It should support the local design and implementation of inclusive instruction. Working on their own schools' curricula can enable teachers to commit to common goals and inclusive operating procedures.

Processes for evaluating and assessing curricula should be open, supportive, and interactive. These qualities should be implemented in the cooperative work between the national and local administrators, between municipal authorities, principals and teachers, and between teachers and students. When work is based on trust and confidence, with high

expectations and supportive structures and procedures, people respond by trying to do their best. That is the key to success in education—and certainly in inclusion.

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