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Ableist realism and inclusive education: theorising the cultural and atmospheric dimensions

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ABSTRACT
Invoking realism is one of the overlooked forms of ableism in the discussions of disability studies and inclusive education. By introducing the concept of ableist realism, the aim of the article is to show how such forms of ableism could be theorised. Authors understand ableist realism to be a mentality and an atmosphere, where understanding disability as a deficiency and considering disabled people's needs inappropriate to general societal settings are evoked as part of an inescapable reality. From the perspectives of cultural studies and by drawing on qualitative research authors re-examine their existing data from their earlier projects in various educational settings. The datasets include expert interviews and life-historical interviews with young people. The authors first explore how special education experts use the idea of realism when considering inclusive education. After that they turn to the accounts of young people who have received special education, explore their accounts about career guidance, and consider what perspectives the idea of atmosphere brings to the exploration of ableist realism.

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Introduction

Over several research projects on inclusive education in Finland since the early 2000s, we have observed an under-theorised cultural phenomenon: Realism often frames practices of special education and interpretations of disabled people's education, especially around inclusion discourses (Kauppila 2022; Mietola 2014; Niemi 2015). It is invoked by professionals who support inclusion as an ideal but see it as conflicting with practical possibilities. Inclusion becomes conditional on factors like disability severity, resources, or attitudes. A common refrain among politicians, parents, and educators is that inclusion is a beautiful idea but not realistic. While our observations stem from Finnish struggles with inclusive education, similar arguments appear internationally (Barton 1997; Done and Andrews 2020; Hardy and Woodcock 2024; Haug 2016; Moura and Fontes 2023).

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Some articles in this journal also frame inclusion as complex, with undefined 'practical realities' complicating it (Gidlund 2018; Materechera 2018).

We have critically observed the persistence of these discussions, which frequently rely on assumptions presented as self-evident. In this article, we thus connect our empirical observations from our past research projects to the theoretical interest in interrogating the emphasis on realism. This article is primarily a proposal on how to theorise the 'realism' that surrounds the inclusion discussion. We begin by introducing the concept of 'ableist realism'.

Ableist realism

Our conceptualisation of ableist realism is indebted to the late Mark Fisher (2014), whose concept of capitalist realism describes the atmosphere of a capitalist culture. With the concept of capitalist realism, Fisher (2014) paid attention to how capitalism can depoliticise itself and how the sense that 'there is no alternative' (the notorious words of Margaret Thatcher) is not only witnessed in different cultural (con)texts, but also lived and experienced. Fisher's capitalist realism is intriguing with respect to the ableist status quo. It resonates with our observations about inclusive education as it captures realism as a specific historical experience where the emphasis on reality makes it difficult to imagine other educational settings. We are thus linking Fisher's theorising to disability studies. This is not, however, an article about Fisher's work and its disability dimensions, even though his research has clearly a lot of disability dimensions that remain unexplored.[1] To name a few, he considered mental illnesses as a social phenomenon and interrogated their biomedical interpretations (Fisher 2014). He also analysed the ideal of economic self-sufficiency and considered bureaucracy, which is also very familiar to many disabled people (Fisher 2014). A thorough examination of these elements would be the subject of another article. Here, we are inspired by Fisher's ideas related to realism in our attempt to consider the debate on inclusive education.

The aim of our tentative concept of ableist realism is to connect Fisher's notion of capitalism as a life-narrowing atmosphere with historical materialist theorisation in disability studies, where the societal position of disabled people is linked to how disability has become a problem within capitalist societies and relations of production (Oliver 1990). Historical materialist perspectives emphasise the necessity of social transformation (ibid.), and the phenomenon we call ableist realism functions as an obstacle to such change. Our perspective also resonates with recent discussions on neoliberal ableism (Goodley and Lawthom 2019) and with the broader discussion in the field of cultural disability studies, where the economy is understood to be related to culture as ways of thinking and experiencing the world (Goodley 2014; McRuer 2018). Additionally, our aim is to deepen critical discussion on how capitalism is inscribed into the education system (e.g. Erevelles 2000). If we consider how disabled people are often positioned as a problematic surplus within the education system (e.g. Erevelles 2000; Kauppila, Kinnari, and Niemi 2020; Kauppila, Lappalainen, and Mietola 2021), our preliminary concept aims to serve as a means for closely examining the cultural logics and assumptions embedded in these societal arrangements. Dan Goodley and Lawthom (2019) show that neoliberal ableism brings to light how neoliberal assumptions reinforce ableism and aim to persuade people to understand themselves primarily through economic logics and

individual abilities. By developing Goodley and Lawthom's idea, we consider how a specific form of ableism takes fuel from the cultural idea of realism to shape how people can understand their own or others' life options and educational paths. Moreover, we consider ableist realism to be a more specific, collective, form of neoliberal ableism. It is an ideological cultural articulation (even when claiming to be only practical, c.f. Done and Andrews 2020) and an atmosphere, and addressing it helps in reflecting on cultural and affective dimensions of ableism. Further, exploration of ableist realism contributes to the theorisation of ableism, where ableism has been understood as an epistemology that limits our imagination about life (Campbell 2009). As an atmosphere, ableist realism feels like a restricting structure. Our aim is to challenge its grip on us.

In the current research on inclusive education, 'realism' is often connected to onto-epistemological approach of critical realism (e.g. Qu 2022). This tendency might hinder us from exploring the cultural and societal dimensions of the idea of realism. With the aim to shift the conversations around inclusion towards the cultural and social dimensions of realism, we turn to accounts of professionals working in vocational special needs education and training and of young people who have received special education by making visible how ableist realism presents itself in these accounts. Ableist realism can bring new theoretical perspectives on ableism to the conversations on inclusive education (for ableism and inclusive education, see Broderick and Lalvani 2017; Corcoran, Claiborne, and Whitburn 2019; Runswick-Cole 2011; Sverrisdóttir and Jóhannesson 2020).

Number of earlier studies on inclusion politics and policies have informed our work. We share their interest in understanding ideological struggles related to inclusion (e.g. Allan and Slee 2008) as well as implications of inclusion policies to subjectivities (e.g. Youdell 2006), policy actors (e.g. Conn and Davis 2024) and educational arrangements (Done & Andrews 2020). In addition, our conceptualisation comes close to Done & Andrews' (2020) idea of trope of common-sense realism in debates on special education. However, our focus somewhat diverts from these as we, by introducing and developing the novel concept of ableist realism, aim to shift the focus firstly on the specific kind of rationality related to capacity differences that is normalised by 'realism talk' – how inclusive education is argued to be possible for many students but not for some, for example students with severe or profound learning disabilities – and secondly, on the affective and political implications of the atmosphere of ableist realism as this sustains pessimism towards political and practical change towards inclusive education.

Data and methodological approaches

Our research process can be best described as development of theorisation in dialogue with data. This process began as part of our discussion on inclusive education, namely our exhaustion with 'realism talk' in the context of inclusive education. After the initial discussion we re-examined our existing data from earlier projects in various educational settings from the point of view of 'realism' and started to look for theoretical inspirations to conceptualise this phenomenon of 'realism'. In practice, we have synthesised qualitative findings from our earlier studies and examined them with theoretical literature, to generate and experiment new theoretical ideas (see Levitt et al. 2018). This process was carried out collaboratively and developed through iterative stages involving all authors. As an outcome of this work, we coined the term 'ableist realism'.

In the article, we utilise three interview datasets from our previous and on-going studies; thus, we re-read our previous research (see also Araneda and Infante 2022) and do interpretive aggregation of thematic findings (see also Levitt et al. 2018). The datasets[2] include expert interviews and two sets of life-historical interviews with young people who have received special education. The expert interview corpus[3] includes seven semi-structured thematic interviews with nine interviewees conducted in 2015. During the time interviews were conducted, the pre-vocational education and training programmes for students with learning disabilities were reformed. The reform changed the structure of vocational education and training for students with learning disabilities by introducing two preparatory programmes; Preparatory education for vocational training and Preparatory education for work and independent living. The programmes were targeted at students seen unable to cope with vocational education and training. The aim of the interviews was to explore how the purposes of distinct vocational education and training programmes for people with severe learning disabilities are reasoned. The thematic interview guide concerning the reform of vocational education and training for students with learning disabilities was utilised in the interviews. The recruitment of the interviewees was based on their professional role. All the interviewees were either responsible for planning the vocational education and training for students with learning disabilities or involved in designing the reform of pre-educational and training programmes. The experts were recruited through direct emails and a snowball sampling method.

The life-historical interview dataset was conducted in 2009 as part of the 'Special needs class in the course of life' project (Niemi 2015; Niemi, Mietola, and Helakorpi 2010). It consists of 27 life-historical interviews with young people and adults who volunteered to take part in the study. The interviewees were recruited by circulating the research invitation through NGOs, education institutions and by using snowball selection around Finland.[4] The selection and inclusion criteria were that at some point during compulsory education, an interviewee had studied in a segregated special needs education class. The interviews concerned educational paths, choice-making, transitions, support and the interviewees' plans for the future, focusing on the interviewees' experiences and consequences of segregated education in their life course. The interviewees had gone to compulsory education in various decades, from the 1980s to the early 2000s.

The longitudinal life-historical interview dataset consists of 28 interviews, conducted between 2017 and 2024 with six young adults[5],who had at some point during their compulsory education studied in a segregated special needs education class. They, at first, volunteered to take part in the ongoing longitudinal study while the researcher was doing ethnographic research at their upper secondary education institutes in Southern Finland. After that, the consent has been negotiated verbally at every interview meeting. The first interviews concerned the interviewees' educational paths, plans for the future and discussed their current experiences of studying at upper secondary school. The follow-up interviews were more open, thematic and concentrated on topics related to each interviewee's everyday life and what seemed important to them at the time of the interview.

We consider both the understandings of experts and people who have received special education first and foremost to show larger cultural meanings (see Foucault 1971), although experts and people who have received special education both have profound

– while different – experiences of special education. Our approach to datasets is theoretical; in other words we aim to theorise ‘realism’ as a collective understanding and an experience around the schooling of disabled people. Drawing on cultural studies, we understand theorising as having the potential to challenge the existent, powerful but unquestioned framings of specific phenomena by generating new framings (Grossberg 1986). In that sense, ‘ableist realism’ is a new framing to accounts about realism in the context of disabled people’s education. In the first results section, we explore how experts use the idea of realism when discussing educational segregation and inclusion. In practice, we first read the expert interviews, examining how the idea of realism appeared in the data. After this, we focused our analysis on how the experts used the idea of realism and what cultural assumptions were at stake in their understandings.

In the second results section, we read the life-historical and longitudinal interviews to examine how interviewees narrate their educational experiences, and how they particularly described their educational decision-making processes and negotiations with professionals. In practice, we collected expressions from the interviewees’ accounts concerning ‘realistic’ choices. We noticed that the interviewees rarely used the word ‘realism’, but it emerged as a circumstance in which interviewees found themselves. Thus, we began to consider not only the cultural but also the affective dimensions of realism. Drawing from the idea of atmosphere, we explore its contribution to understanding ableist realism. In affect studies, atmosphere is a societal and collective phenomenon, yet individually felt (Anderson 2009; Berlant 2011). We do not prioritise either the cultural or atmospheric dimensions of realism; both are powerful and warrant examination.

Rhetoric of realism

In this section, our focus is to scrutinise how the professionals appeal to ‘realism’ when they reason segregated educational aims, paths and programmes for students with learning disabilities in vocational education and training. We are particularly interested in the rhetorical use of ‘realism’, and the cultural assumptions rhetoric of realism contain in the context of inclusive education.

The interview with a leader in a special vocational education institution demonstrates how realism functions as the legitimising force for the segregated settings in vocational education and training. In the extract below they discussed the reasons why students with learning disabilities primarily study in segregated vocational special education institutions.

> So if we would end all this [segregated training programmes] and everyone would be included just like that, those with particular kinds of impairments would not have realistic possibilities to cope in the present environment provided by the normal school. (Expert interview, spring 2015)

Here, when they appeal that there is no alternative to the present segregated system, the interviewee uses the idea of ‘realism’ in two interrelated ways. The interviewee draws from the individualised understanding of disability, and the idea that educational settings are unalterable. Even though disability scholars have criticised the medical, individualised understanding of disability for several decades (Brisenden 1986; Kafer 2013; Shakespeare 2006), it has not vanished from culture, as the quotation shows. For instance, Katherine Runswick-Cole (2011) remarks that societal understandings of inclusive

education often draw on individualised notions of disability. The individualised understanding is present when the interviewee talks about students who have 'particular kinds of impairments' that define those students' 'realistic possibilities'. The medical perspective serves here as validated knowledge of what is possible. Since the medical individualised view remains the hegemonic way of understanding disability, the knowledge derived from it can appear realistic. In addition, this appeal to realism illustrates that beneath the abstract and, sometimes, well-meaning discussion on educational inclusion exists fixed cultural ideas of educable and includable individuals (see Conn and Davis 2024).

Appeals to realism commonly emerge as a reaction when prevailing segregated educational settings are questioned. In these appeals, current 'normal school' settings are presented as unalterable; it is not possible for every disabled student to 'cope in the present environment by the normal school', as the interviewee noted in the previous excerpt. This 'realism' is tied to individualised understandings of disability and aims to convince us that structures limiting disabled people's educational opportunities cannot be changed. Framing change as impossible legitimises existing arrangements. Here, 'realism' functions as a rhetorical tool that shuts down discussion about alternative ways to organise schooling. Notably, the interviewee does not entirely reject inclusion as 'school for all', but suggests that for some bodies and minds, inclusion is unrealistic and unattainable for everyone. This suggests that some issues are seen as modifiable in education, but some changes are not even discussed. This resonates with Conn and Davis (2024) insights from the Welsh context, where the persistent and widespread belief that segregated arrangements are the best solution for some students functions as an inevitable boundary to change – one that educators and parents are likely to defend in order to maintain current support structures.

These 'inevitable boundaries' delineate the aims of the education offered for students with learning disabilities. The interview with a high-level government official in education demonstrates how appealing to realism operates in this discourse. The official discussed the aims of study programmes designed for students with learning disabilities.

> You shouldn't predestine anyone's development, but you also need to have some realism that not everyone who comes to this [preparatory programme for students with learning disabilities] is necessarily placed in the paid labour market. To the extent I have been there [in vocational special education institutions] to visit, there are such levels of autism there, that they will not be able to work in the paid labour market. (Expert interview, spring 2015)

To make the above excerpt understandable, it must be noted that these training programmes for students with learning disabilities differ from general vocational education and training programmes in Finland in two ways. Firstly, the students attend segregated institutions and follow adjusted curricula. The study programme can either not lead to a vocational qualification or it leads to vocational qualification that is rarely recognised in the paid labour market (Kauppila 2022). Secondly, students in these programmes are almost always excluded from the open labour market. Instead, they participate in different kinds of daily activities or supported employment within social services (Nevala et al. 2019). In this context, the government official's appeal to 'realism' extends ableist realism from educational settings to the paid labour market. Since inclusion in education and the paid labour market seems to require certain abilities,

the inclusion of students who allegedly lack such abilities is questioned. This is so, although recent disability policy documents define paid work as a key measure to increase societal inclusion (e.g. European Commission 2021). It has also been observed that in supranational education policy, the aim of inclusion does not apply to all people with (dis)abilities (Kauppila, Kinnari, and Niemi 2020; Walker 2009). Thus, the exclusion of those unable to cope in education or working life becomes naturalised, as does the legitimacy of segregated educational environments, which are perceived merely as responses to the needs of those deemed unfit. Moura and Fontes (2023) have arrived to similar conclusions in their examination of the position of disabled students in the Portuguese inclusive education system.

The government official interviewed seems to perceive realism in relation to what might be called threshold abilities. The idea of threshold abilities follows the same logic as what Stacy Clifford Simplican (2015, 40) calls 'a threshold level of cognitive capacity' in the context of political membership where some disabled people are excluded from political citizenship by presuming that they lack the required historically and culturally specific capacities. In a similar manner, when asked about the rationalities of the paid labour market, the official turns the conversation to students' 'bodies and minds' without challenging the societal logics behind these rationalities. In this way, the problem stays with bodies and minds – and the conversation about possible changes in the practices of education are pushed aside. Knight and Crick (2022) have recognised a similar individualising argumentative logic in the definition of Additional Learning Needs in the Welsh education policy documents where the definition ends up providing a normative capacity requirement, irrespective of the inclusive undertone of the policy reform.

The interviewees appealed also to attitudinal barriers as a major obstacle to societal inclusion and paid employment of students with learning disabilities. For example, when a head of department in one vocational special education institution explained how vocational education and training can foster disability policy objectives, they reasoned that the opportunity to participate in education is an inclusive act itself. Yet, they argued that vocational education alone has limited impact on improving employability for people with learning disabilities.

> If we think about employability and so on, it might be some kind of equality when everyone has similar aims or education. However, improvements to our clients' employability perhaps require more profound attitudinal changes than changes in qualification requirements in vocational education and training can provide (Expert interview, Spring 2015)

Although the interviewee does not use term realism, this excerpt captures the cultural atmosphere where it is difficult to challenge ableist structures. Their appeal that the main reason students with learning disabilities are excluded from paid employment is attitudinal barriers can be understood as a way of defending segregated educational settings by pointing out other reasons for the students' marginalised societal status.

At the same time, the interviewee's point about attitudinal barriers can be understood pointing at a societal atmosphere in which inclusion is threatened. The interviewee seems to think that attitudinal barriers hinder inclusion, also hinting a need for attitudinal change to create an inclusive society. This view takes us to the idea of atmosphere and capitalist/ableist realism as a sensed culture. As Ben Anderson (2009) notes, while atmospheres are powerful, they are also mutable. Hence, appealing to attitudinal barriers can

also be understood as a critique towards the prevailing labour market. According to historical materialist theories of disability, understandings of the position of disabled people in the labour market are linked to the capitalist economy (Bengtsson 2017). Indeed, if we follow that approach, we can claim that people's thoughts and attitudes do not only reflect the individual but have an economic basis (*base*). Fisher's (2014) research on cultural dimensions of capitalist realism follows this approach with a cultural studies nuance, where it is highlighted that the economic base does not deterministically dictate what people can think (Hall 1996). In that sense Fisher (2015a) emphasises that the possibility of change is inherent in different ways of feeling and thinking. Thus, 'more profound attitudinal changes' described by the interviewee can challenge how ableist realism frames educational segregation.

Special education experts' focus on realism reinforces individualised views of disability, countering the social model. However, ableist realism can emerge from the experts' views in ways that highlight presence of ableism in general societal atmosphere and expanding inclusion to concern society more broadly, thus coming close to the assumptions of the social model of disability. In the next section, we will delve into the idea of atmosphere and its possibilities.

Realistic choices: ableist realism as an atmosphere

This part examines interviews with young individuals, discussing how assumptions about abilities influence career guidance, directing students to specific areas of study while discouraging others, viewed through the lens of atmosphere (Anderson 2009). In Fisher's (2014; 2015a) formulation of capitalist realism, neoliberalism as a way of life appears as an inescapable reality to which one must adapt. Atmosphere of ableist realism also includes this inevitability. In this section, we focus on how ableist realism limits people's life options within the educational system as they are guided to adapt to this inevitability. However, by taking the perspective of the atmosphere, we are also able to highlight fractures in ableist realism.

In our previous studies drawing on these life-historical and longitudinal interviews with young people who have received special needs education, we have identified a few common ways how realism presents itself in students' accounts concerning career guidance and counselling. First, for these interviewees, 'realism' included evaluation of their characteristics and abilities as students: did they seem 'suitable' for a certain study path and profession, and would they handle academic study in general upper secondary school?[6] Secondly, 'realism' included evaluating whether each student could possibly survive in a certain field; are there any 'more realistic' choices for this student? Thirdly, guidance seems to be based heavily on expert views which consider the assumed 'realism' of the post-16 education options: how much support is available in which school and/or field of study (Mietola 2010; Niemi and Mietola 2017; 2023; Niemi, Mietola, and Helakorpi 2010).

We have collected expressions from the interviewees' accounts describing their educational decision-making processes and negotiations with professionals concerning 'realistic' choices. The cases where they had been guided against their own original wishes are described somewhat startlingly. The expressions that the interviewees have used included: *You were overridden; It was decided; It's not worth applying for; There is no*

reason to apply for it; It would be very hard for me; It's ruled out. We consider these accounts in terms of atmosphere.

Ben Anderson (2009) considers an atmosphere to be vague and formless, yet effective, though heterogeneously experienced. Further, atmospheres can be generated and reinforced culturally and societally even though they cannot be exhaustively returned to specific societal practices (ibid.). An atmosphere may push a person to ignore more rational or politically more 'meaningful' understandings. While an atmosphere can contagiously enter, or take over, it can also fade away when another atmosphere takes up space. Fisher (2014, 16) also describes capitalist realism in a sense as an atmosphere that restricts ways of thinking and living, but for him, the atmosphere of capitalist realism is also not all-encompassing (e.g. Fisher 2015a; 2015b).

We propose, that in these interviews, ableist realism also appears as such an atmosphere. A life-narrowing atmosphere emerges from the interviewees' accounts. We call it the atmosphere of ableist realism because our interviewees specifically describe ability assumptions as framing their lives. Professionals' ability assumptions impact their lives, and they perceive this as a restrictive structure.

In an interview conducted in 2017, it is intriguing how the interviewee narrates having been taught that the academic path continuing from general upper secondary school was out of their reach.

> Ria: When I was given the diagnosis of dyslexia, I was immediately told that it's not reasonable to seek admission to general upper secondary school in the future.
>
> Anna-Maija: Already when you were a kid?
>
> Ria: I was told so, because I have moderate dyslexia, so because of that. That's so, so-called bad or so, my dyslexia and for that reason, it was said that it's not worth seeking admission.

This is just one out of many cases that have come up in our interviews where people are told at an early stage that they do not have the potential to enter some sectors (c.f. Moura and Fontes 2023). Although the short excerpt above does not explicitly describe atmospheric dimensions, it depicts how educational requirements are experienced on an individual level as an unquestionable reality. Furthermore, the education and workplace requirements reflected in such guidance seem non-negotiable and non-inclusive. They seem to provide wider horizons of choices only to some young people – those with assumed capacities that meet the expectations of the ableist culture.

Based on our previous research, it is not uncommon that professionals consider some fields in post-compulsory education as 'unrealistic' for students with special needs (Niemi and Mietola 2023; Niemi, Mietola, and Helakorpi 2010, 62). In the guidance practices, these professional opinions start shaping the life paths of individual students, who are guided towards 'realistic' options and away from the 'unrealistic' ones. The realistic options are also implicitly expressed in the National core curriculum of basic education (FNAE 2014, 1247). In the curriculum, the emphasis of study guidance for the students who need more intensive guidance is in developing student's preparedness for post-compulsory education and for studying at *a suitable* place for each student.

Ableist realism generates segregating educational paths, which rely on simplified cultural hierarchies of abilities and rigid notions of what kind of support is available in different educational levels. In other words, students are guided towards differentiated

educational paths based on professional understandings concerning a match between their (future) abilities and requirements of a particular school or sector. In such evaluations, professionals' own assumptions about education and working life are usually not questioned. This produces a segregation which while not institutionally legitimised, draws its legitimacy from the ableist culture that dictates threshold abilities and shapes professionals' understandings about educational systems. Since according to realism, society, labour market and accordingly the education system cannot be changed, the education system and professionals are left with a task of making sure that the students match the existing paths and positions.

While not recognisable as an overtly exclusive or oppressive system that reproduces educational inequalities, the well-meaning and protective guidance practices succeed in convincing young people that the ability criteria of the educational system cannot be challenged. In the interviews with young people, we have been able to sense this atmosphere of inevitability. When considering the idea of atmosphere and how Anderson (2009) understands it to take over persons, a sense of inevitability can dominate how people understand their life options. Indeed, ableist realism as an atmosphere engenders a field of vague impossibilities.

Professionals who provide career guidance are in a position of power based on their authority over young people. Thus, the young people can be told what is 'reasonable' with respect to their future and what options are closed from them. Young people are not seen as experts in education systems or their 'special educational needs', so for them it is not easy to challenge expert views. However, some interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with guidance and made choices that contradicted it (Niemi 2022; Niemi and Mietola 2023), showing gatekeeping doesn't fully control educational decisions. Yet, challenging educational authorities and the pessimistic atmosphere requires an ability to defend one's position and to be supported by different affective atmospheres. Indeed, atmospheres are not permanent or unrelated to societal ideas (Anderson 2009).

Still, what makes an atmosphere an intriguing approach is its capacity to link people to a particular collective understanding of the world in a way that may temporarily bypass other collective understandings – also such understandings we consider politically important. While writing this particular article, we are sometimes taken over by the collective understanding, or atmosphere, of ableist realism. In some circumstances (as in conversations with people who subscribe to medical understandings of disability) the atmosphere of ableist realism feels more intense. Then it starts to fade away, giving room to atmospheres that are more affirming of disability when we are in touch with disability activists or with each other as we draft this article. Thus, ableist realism as an atmosphere is not all-embracing.

When considering the experiences of those who have received special education along their educational paths, it becomes evident that professionals struggle to nurture the future of special education students as open-endedly as that of other students. Disability studies scholar Alison Kafer (2013) also identifies a cultural problem related to the relationship between disability and the future. According to Kafer, in cultural imaginaries, disabled people are not included in the envisioned future, and the concrete future of disabled people has often been under the control of others. Against this cultural tendency, Kafer (2013) proposes 'crip futurity', which challenges these tendencies by creating space for rethinking the 'future' in ways that are not framed by developmental and ableist norms.

When we think about the people who received special education and challenged the options offered to them, it appears that they position themselves differently with respect to the future that they are offered. When they make choices other than what their counsellors have suggested, they do not position themselves according to the structures of ableist futures.

Crip futurity (Kafer 2013) envisions futures open to diverse ways of living, beyond efficiency-driven norms. In contrast, ableist futures prioritise economic productivity for the 'more able', while marginalising others. Yet, this atmosphere of neoliberal ableism fuelled by realism – where inevitability reinforces hierarchies – is not fixed. Even within such contexts, crip futurity can emerge.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Our findings align with previous research, highlighting that even in environments dedicated to inclusive education at the policy level, rigid perceptions of student abilities and associated limitations continue to prevail (Conn and Davis 2024; Done and Andrews 2020; Moura and Fontes 2023). To analyze this phenomenon in greater depth, we put forward 'ableist realism'. It is a mentality and atmosphere, where disability as a deficiency and disabled people's needs as inappropriate to general societal settings are understood as part of an inescapable reality.

Our perspective also entails limitations. First, regarding the interview data, in line with the tradition of qualitative research our aim has not been to pursue generalizability, but rather to offer a conceptual tool. Second, considering that this article has been motivated by our shared critical observation of the persistence of 'realism talk' in inclusive education – and that this observation led us to revisit data collected in our previous projects – it is important to acknowledge that a different kind of dataset would show the forms of ableist realism in other ways. Therefore, future research could, for instance, focus on examining education policy and the ways in which education policy is understood and enacted. Indeed, 'ableist realism' can provide a useful starting point for analysing the tension between policy level commitment to educational inclusion and the (public) professional discussion. While depoliticisation of inclusion is by no means a new notion (e.g. Connor and Ferri 2007), by drawing on the analysis of capitalist atmosphere (Fisher 2014) 'ableist realism' links this phenomenon to the wider debates concerning neoliberalist politics and depoliticisation of decision-making (Eskelinen 2019; Morsy, Gulson, and Clarke 2014) without overlooking the power of affective dimensions.

In future research, the concept of 'ableist realism' could be applied to analyses of education policy and education systems across different countries. As we have highlighted in the section 'Rhetoric of Realism', the phenomenon we analyse is not confined to Finland. These more global manifestations could be examined through the lens of 'ableist realism', while also foregrounding specific local characteristics. An observed feature of inclusion is that, while education systems in many countries are prepared to implement inclusive practices at the elementary school level, there tends to be hesitation regarding inclusion at subsequent levels of education (see e.g. Stefánsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2019). In higher education, inclusion is seldom regarded as a realistic goal, as evidenced by the restricted range of inclusive practices currently in place (see e.g. Leonhardt et al. 2025).

Drawing on the historical materialist tradition in disability studies (Oliver 1990), resisting ableist realism requires concrete changes in society and in education systems. This includes, for example, transforming practices in post-compulsory education and higher education. Disability must not prevent individuals from pursuing studies in specific fields of their choice. Authorities responsible for education systems should provide clear guidance to those working in career guidance and counselling, emphasising that disability, chronic illness or diagnosis must not be the primary factor shaping the advice given to students. A system in which some individuals are directed to specific institutions solely because of disability contributes to a society where knowledge production is predominantly carried out by non-disabled people, resulting in a distorted understanding of what society is. Based on the analysis presented in this article, we also suggest that pedagogical practices in schools should be designed to foster belonging and counteract pessimistic, exclusionary atmospheres. In practice, this would mean that inclusion – when not reduced to an atmosphere shaped by ableist realism – would centre on transforming pedagogical practices (how teaching is conducted, what kinds of support are used) in ways that enable diverse individuals to study in the fields of their choice. Those responsible for education systems should ensure that there are sufficient resources for such pedagogical variation, and that a form of 'realism' grounded in economic austerity does not undermine these goals. Finally, we suggest that the concept of ableist realism can also be used to critically evaluate current inclusion policies. It offers a direct analytical tool for examining inclusion policies – enabling those analyzing policy to ask who is included or excluded, how these boundaries are justified, and how such justifications are anchored in inclusion discourse.

Notes

1. Stock (2023) has developed Fisher's ideas from the perspective of critical pedagogy, disability dimensions of these ideas have been overlooked in current research.
2. In terms of research ethics, all three projects followed the national ethical regulation and guidelines of the time in informing the participants of their rights and the researchers' responsibilities. Similarly, research data was handled and stored according to national regulation at the time of the project. The authors of the article translated the citations from the interviews quoted here from Finnish into English.
3. The participant selection was purposive, and the recruitment process was conducted by Aarno Kauppila, who was doctoral researcher at the time of the interviews. Kauppila and Anna-Maija Niemi conducted the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.
4. The recruitment process was conducted by Anna-Maija Niemi, Reetta Mietola (doctoral researchers at the time of the interviews) and Jenni Helakorpi (research assistant at the time of the interviews), and Niemi and Helakorpi conducted the interviews. The interview guide, following a person's life-course from childhood to the present and up to the imagined future was utilised in the interviews; they were recorded and transcribed verbatim.
5. The recruitment process was conducted by Anna-Maija Niemi during an ethnographic research project that she carried out in 2016–17 (Academy of Finland, 303691). Altogether 10 young people volunteered to take part in Niemi's longitudinal research, but six of them had studied in a segregated special needs education class, and in this article, our focus is only on the interviews of these six. In the first interviews, an interview guide, following a person's school path to the present and up to the imagined future was utilised in the interviews; they were recorded and transcribed verbatim. An interview guide has not been used in the

follow-up interviews, but they have been more open and started with a question 'what would you like to tell me about your life at the moment'.

6. In the Finnish educational system, after compulsory basic education, around the age of 16 young people have to choose between the academic and vocational stream for compulsory upper secondary education.

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