

Chapter 26

Exclusively Included? Finland's Inclusion Success Story and Hidden Dual System of Mainstream and Special Needs Education



Anna-Maija Niemi and Reetta Mietola

Abstract This chapter focuses on the divide between special and mainstream education in the Finnish education system. We analyse how this divide runs through educational experiences, opportunities and pathways of students receiving special education. We first examine the different educational pathways opening up for different groups of students, and their experiences of educational choice-making. Then we move on to analyse pedagogical arrangements and practices across lower-secondary and upper-secondary levels; and to consider how different pedagogical practices expect and produce different kinds of students. Our analysis shows that distinct educational cultures make it challenging to move across the divide of special and mainstream education, and this divide contributes to students understanding of themselves as learners. The chapter draws on six studies conducted in recent decades in Finland, four different ethnographic studies, one life-history interview study and a longitudinal life-history study.

In December 2019, Finland's national public broadcasting company Yle published an article about educational inclusion on its webpage. In the article, Members of Parliament responded to the question, "Should the number of special education classes be increased in Finland?" (This is referring to special education classes within regular schools). We interpret this question directed to politicians as a logical continuation of recent public discussion around special education and inclusion, and it goes to the heart of how the issues are being framed. Put simply, the discussion has emphasised the question of whether inclusion is a good or a bad thing. At the same time, there has been considerably less discussion about what inclusion actually means. As a school-related reform, inclusion has also been caught up in debates about the 2014

A.-M. Niemi (✉)

Department of Education, University of Turku, Assistentinkatu 5, 20014 Turku, Finland
e-mail: anna-maija.niemi@utu.fi

R. Mietola

Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki, PL 4, 00014 Helsinki, Finland
e-mail: reetta.mietola@helsinki.fi

© The Author(s) 2023

M. Thrupp et al. (eds.), *Finland's Famous Education System*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-8241-5_26

417

reform of the national core curriculum in Finland, which has caused similar public criticisms. The harshest remarks have even described inclusion as a fad.¹

The above examples are only part of the public inclusion discussion, and a key worry amongst individuals seems to be that students in need of special support are not receiving it. We argue that from an education system perspective, this discussion also reflects concern over the future of Finland's strong special education system: is inclusion destabilising this bedrock that educational equality and high standard education for all has been built on, as some would argue? In both public and professional discussions, inclusion is not considered a process or target that the Finnish education system has firmly committed to but rather as conditional and the notion that inclusion can be cancelled if "it is not successful" underpins these perspectives.² It seems that inclusion is "on trial" and the option of returning to the "good old days" is constantly present. For many commentators, any failure of inclusion—such as children with special educational needs struggling in or dropping out of education, or feeling socially excluded—just proves the superiority of the previous approach of having children with special educational needs segregated away from mainstream classes.

This chapter aims to provide a counter-narrative about special education in Finland, one that challenges the image of an equal education system eroded by inclusion policy. Our starting point is a critical reading of historic and present-day developments in the special education system, considering especially the impact of inclusion policy on structures and practices. We acknowledge that ever since the comprehensive school reform of the 1960s that aimed to build a common school for all, special needs education in Finland has been approached progressively. Whether successive reforms have actually achieved their aim, an equal and unsegregated school system for students with special needs, is what needs to be investigated.

In general, the developments during the past fifty years could be seen as an inclusion success story.³ At system level, legislative and structural changes have followed from Finnish policies committed to integration during the 1980s and inclusion since the 1990s. These developments have shaped the outer boundaries of the mainstream education system and institutions by integrating special education classes (SE-classes) into mainstream schools (1980s) and moving the education of students with intellectual disability from social services into the education system (1985 and 1997). Additionally, new pedagogical solutions and teaching arrangements have somewhat shifted traditional boundaries between mainstream and special education. Nevertheless, these changes have not taken place without some counter developments. For instance, the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a rapid increase in the numbers of pupils transferred to special education, which has been explained by the development of new diagnostic methods and categories.⁴ Sociological analyses have connected this rise to wider neoliberal tendencies in education policy that have emphasised competition and selection,⁵ thus counteracting inclusion policy and narrowing down the boundaries of normality.⁶ As the standard learning requirements set by the national curriculum have become more specific and demanding, students struggling to achieve these were increasingly identified as having special needs and thus received either part- or full-time support in special education.

At the same time, the history of special needs provision over the course of the past century is still felt in the current system. For instance, the most segregated forms of special education, namely special schools and SE-classes, still exist and the changes in the proportion of students in each age group studying full time in segregated settings have been small. Even the steering group formulating the long-term strategy for special education has stated that Finland has enforced inclusion calmly.⁷ Being more direct, we would argue that inclusion policy has failed—but not in the way suggested by public discussion. Rather it has failed to challenge the persistent divide between special needs and mainstream education.

Our concern in this chapter is this divide between special and mainstream education, and how it runs through educational experiences, opportunities and pathways of students receiving special education. We first examine: (1) the different educational pathways opening up for different groups of students from basic education to post-compulsory education; and (2) experiences of educational choice-making at this phase of the education system. We then move on to analyse: (3) pedagogical arrangements and practices across lower-secondary and upper-secondary levels; and consider (4) how different pedagogical practices expect and produce different kinds of students. We show how distinct educational cultures make it challenging for students to move across the divide of special and mainstream education, and how this divide contributes to students understanding of themselves as learners.

Our analysis draws on six qualitative studies previously conducted with our colleagues. We will be referring to four ethnographic studies, one life-history interview study and one continuing longitudinal life-history study, all conducted in recent decades. Table 26.1 provides a brief description of these studies.⁸

Drawing on all of these different projects and datasets, our work provides the possibility of recognising and analysing key points in the education system where segregation and various inequalities in the form of separate educational contexts, pathways or limited educational options are reproduced. Additionally, our data allows us to focus our analysis on educational practices that challenge or widen this division. The ethnographic fieldnotes recording our observations are descriptions of everyday practices and experiences in different educational contexts. The life-history interviews enable us to look back with our research participants to their past schooling experiences and their current interpretations of what followed. To us, it opens up another way of analysing how former special education students make sense of their educational pathways and themselves as learners.

Suitable Pathways and Educational Choice-Making for Students with Special Educational Needs

A key expectation linked to the image of the Finnish education system is that everyone has equal educational opportunities and students are able to follow their aspirations and train themselves in a profession of their choice. While in some ways the Finnish

Table 26.1 Studies referred to in this chapter

Name of the study	Data	Focus of the study
Niemi, Mietola & Helakorpi (2010) ⁹ : Special needs class in the course of life-interview study ¹⁰	27 interviews with young people	The educational and working life experiences of young people with disabilities, Roma or migrant backgrounds who had studied in special needs education classes during basic education
Mietola (2014) ¹¹ : ‘Troubling special’ Ethnographic study	Fieldwork during 2002–03 in one lower secondary school in the Helsinki metropolitan area	The boundary between mainstream and special education; who or what kind of behaviour or needs is considered as “special” in the school
Niemi (2015) ¹² : Special educational paths? Multi-sited ethnographic study	Fieldwork of six months each in two institutes of VET in Southern Finland, 2008–09	Definitions of the concept of special educational needs in relation to students’ positioning, educational choice making and the pedagogical practices in which they participated
Vehmas & Mietola (2021) ¹³ : People with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities (PIMD) and good life research project ¹⁴	Fieldwork over 2015–16 with six adults living their lives in learning disability services	(In relation to schooling) What kinds of educational opportunities are there for young persons with PIMD after compulsory schooling
Niemi & Jahnukainen (2020) ¹⁵ ; Niemi & Laaksonen (2020) ¹⁶ : Employability, education and diversities research project (EMED) ¹⁷	Fieldwork 2016–17 in one vocational and one general upper secondary school institute in the Helsinki metropolitan area	Support practices and students’ participation and sense of belonging during their studies
Niemi (continuing): Diverse paths to adulthood life-history study (DILE)	Annual interviews with 10 young adults since 2019	How do young adults build an understanding of themselves and their possibilities and obstacles in educational and employment pathways? What kinds of resources do they draw on?

system does comply with this image, research has repeatedly pointed out how societal inequalities are reproduced, how educational pathways differ according to students’ backgrounds,¹⁸ and how educational choices of young people are, in fact, strongly constrained.¹⁹ This is also the case when we look at educational pathways of students receiving special educational support.²⁰ Such students are primarily guided towards educational pathways that are considered as “suitable and safe”²¹ rather than the programmes they have dreamt about.

In this section, we focus on the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education in Finland, as this is considered crucial from the viewpoint of educational and societal equality. Students are moving from the unitary comprehensive school to

the post-compulsory education system with differing curricula and targets, but they also complete their compulsory education, which in principle opens up the choice of not continuing their studies.²² This transition phase has also been recognised as a critical drop-out point, where many Finnish young people leave the education system either permanently or periodically. In order to prevent drop-out, the transition has been a target of many policy measures, most recently the extension of compulsory education to 18 years of age.²³ We have argued elsewhere that concern over students dropping out of education is intensified in the case of students with special educational needs, and that this reinforces the need to secure a safe choice and transition for them.²⁴

Our discussion in this section follows the structure of the Finnish post-compulsory education system and the options that it offers to students. We start with the primary choice between general (academic) upper secondary school (GUS, *lukio* in Finnish) and vocational education and training (VET, *ammattillinen koulutus* in Finnish). We then dig further into the VET system and the different options that students with special educational needs have within this field. We argue that there are very clear pre-determined educational pathways for students with special educational needs that differ according to different student categories. Students with specific kinds of needs or diagnoses are considered as suitable for particular pathways and vocational positions that await at the end of the pathways. For some students with special educational needs the horizon of choices is wider, with the key choice being between general or vocational stream. For others the horizon of possibilities is very narrow, with only specific training programmes considered as viable options. We aim to make visible this differentiation of pathways and the guidance practices that steer specific students to specific pathways. These practices carry and reproduce dominant conceptions of students with special educational needs and make visible the process through which such students' educational opportunities are determined.

Towards General or Vocational Pathways?

The majority of students with special educational needs in Finland seek admission to and start their studies in vocational or preparatory education and training, where special support has been organised for many decades.²⁵ Until legislative reform in 2019, which obliged GUSs to offer special support for the students who need it, legislation did not require special needs education to be organised in GUS.²⁶ Even though there are currently special needs education teachers working in the majority of GUSs in Finland, we have suggested elsewhere that special needs education does not necessarily belong in the school culture of GUSs.²⁷ The ideal of an academic student as a student who is not in need of support is still produced and reproduced in the practices of schools and wider Finnish society.²⁸

For many young people, seeking admission to VET has been a matter of not choosing a GUS path, even though the chosen vocational programme might not particularly interest them. GUS is often not raised in guidance practices as a possible

option.²⁹ Rather teachers referred to GUS being not meant for students in SE-classes because they were not up to the academic workload or did not have high enough grades. It is hardly unsurprising then that the academic stream rarely came up in students' talk either. Only one of thirty students studying in the SE-classes that Reetta followed chose GUS as their primary option. It seems that a background in special needs education is seen to rule out the option of GUS:

- Anna-Maija So how come, that it is not worth applying for admission to GUS, was it some kind of an idea that you had thought yourself or did it come (from somewhere else)?
 Vivian Yes. So, it came as a statement and then my parents agreed that, it is not worth applying for. It was decided, that there is no reason to apply to it. If I will apply for admission, then to somewhere where there is not much reading of books.³⁰

Like Vivian, many of our interviewees thought that VET was emphasised in guidance because of either their background in SE-class or the diagnosed difficulties with learning they had. Bea had pondered a choice between VET and GUS, but because of special educational needs, GUS was always side lined in discussions with guidance counsellors and teachers:

- Bea I feel that maybe the teachers would have wanted that we seek admission to VET. They probably thought that we won't get along in GUS. They just always emphasised vocational [...].
 Anna-Maija Okay. That's very interesting.
 Bea I've had that kind of a feeling that, maybe I could have tried GUS or that, would I have succeeded there or no. [...].
 Anna-Maija Did you by the way bring out the idea of GUS?
 Bea No, I didn't, because I had that kind of feeling. You were so overridden, that 'do not apply for admission'. It is so hard there. I didn't even dare to say it, that should I apply.³¹

Most of our interviewees had not been encouraged to seek admission to GUS, which has in relation to VET, generally been seen as a more valued, and demanding study pathway after basic education in Finland.³² In all of the studies referred to in this chapter show similarities in the gap between GUS and VET, even though students went to school in different decades. In her interview, Bea (quoted above) emphasised the need to allow students to try different study fields before making decisions. Ironically, young people in GUS are allowed more time to find their educational aspirations than in VET, because VET programmes are divided according to professions and trades, whereas in GUS students study a variety of different general school subjects. It contradicts the general message that young adults gave in the interviews: "Now at the age of 20 I can say what I want, but when you are 15-years-old, you are certainly too young to choose".

Differentiation Within Vocational Education

Whereas mainstream study guidance focuses on making sense of the division between GUS and VET, in SE-classes the focus is on different kinds of options within VET,

as Reetta noticed while observing guidance processes. These options included vocational SE-institutions, SE-classes in mainstream vocational institutions and preparatory programmes. It raises the question whether special needs education actually has its own distinctive post-compulsory education markets.³³ This notion of differentiation is supported by our life-history interviews, as many interviewees noted that SE-classes and vocational SE-institutions had been emphasised in the guidance practices and introduced to them and their classmates as interesting and realistic options. Some interviewees had not only been encouraged to apply to certain type of education but to a specific institution or programme. We have both observed teachers guiding some students to specific training programmes and institutions that were already familiar to them and where they were confident that the students would receive support. Additionally, it was a common practice to recommend vocational programmes with low admission criteria.

When we inquired about the reasoning behind the guidance practices, educators explained that while one should be critical towards “the special education path”, the teacher’s ethical responsibility is to guide students to programmes from which they are unlikely to drop out. While this is understandable, teachers’ preconceptions in the guidance process can limit students’ agency and shape their understanding of their capacities and educational opportunities. In the life-history study, we interviewed Patrick who described how insecure he was about his educational ambitions at the time of choosing post-compulsory education. This made him rely on adults’ advice and eventually he ended up in a gardening programme which he was uninterested in:

[M]aybe I should have said at that point that it is not my field. Maybe they just didn’t realise it. If you think that I was only 17-years-old and couldn’t hold my own against three adults with strong, expert opinions.³⁴

Whilst teachers’ actions may strongly recommend some choices over others, it is not necessary to be explicit that “you won’t be up to that” in order for students to conceive that some choices are out of their reach. Our analysis indicates that in the context of special needs education, expert views are strongly emphasised in guidance practices whilst students’ hopes often get disregarded.³⁵

Another aspect that narrows down the students’ educational opportunities is that SE-groups are not provided in all VET programmes and vocational SE-institutions often provide only specific training programmes, such as catering and caretaker training. Additionally, these programmes are not available in all localities. We have noticed that young people with specific support needs are often experiencing difficulties finding their own field or have to adjust their vocational targets in educational transitions. For deaf students, only some programmes are organised in sign language and these can be geographically unattainable for many. Youth with intellectual disabilities are a group whose educational paths tend to lead to specific vocational institutions with more than a century of specialising in post-compulsory education of persons with intellectual disabilities.³⁶ There is also another significant divide for students with severe disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities: some of them are considered capable to study in VET programmes that lead to professional qualifications and some only in preparatory programmes. The capability evaluation is

based on professional assessment of the capacity of the applicant and their suitability to the programme.

It is not only specific diagnoses that push students out of paths or fields, but also some are inaccessible due to the content of the programmes or specific admission criteria. One such field is social and health care, where in Finland the basic requirement to work in this field in nurseries or care homes is a practical nurse qualification attained through 180 competence points in vocational training. Doing care work came up repeatedly in our interviews with young women as their dream job, but many had realised that they would not be able to apply for training. The typical reason provided was that the skills they had acquired during basic education—especially in mathematics—would not suffice:

- Hanna (Sighs) Somehow, the idea of child care was turned down. That one was faced with—is difficult to, to get there.
- Anna-Maija How was it turned down?
- Hanna (Long pause). Some medicine calculations, like, when you are studying to become a practical nurse. Or do they have them, I don't know. Do you necessarily have to have them? Well, I don't want to discuss this further.³⁷

Hanna's account shows how different structural barriers and guidance practices affected her choice-making. For Hanna, as for many other interviewees, the narrowing down of educational options due to their background in special education came as a surprise and was difficult to process. Suddenly her first preference was turned down with arguments that she seemed unsure were true (“Do you necessarily have to have them?”). Hanna's story makes visible the way that doors are not open for everyone as the needed support is not equally distributed and available in all programmes. The narrative of individualised pathways actually hides a system where students sometimes just get placed in training programmes and institutions that are considered suitable for them.³⁸

The group with the narrowest educational options is persons with severe or profound intellectual disabilities. They gained equal educational rights as late as 1997 when basic education of this group was finally included in the education system: that moment has been considered a major turning point, where the whole age group was included in the same school system. Whilst it was indeed a major step towards more equal educational opportunities in conjunction with achieving an important disability policy target, the narrowness of educational opportunities of disabled persons is amplified when considering those at the far end of the disabilities spectrum. Young people with severe or profound intellectual disabilities have in practice only one post-compulsory option, namely TELMA-training,³⁹ which is organised exclusively by special education colleges situated around Finland.

Even though the existence of TELMA-training is the starting point of realising educational rights for this disability group, access to the training is unequally distributed around the country and supply of the training is inadequate. For example, in the case of Hugo, a young person with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities, admission to the programme was considered a lottery win. People close to Hugo were referring both to the scarcity of opportunities available for him and how becoming a student opened up totally new resources and opportunities for Hugo,

whose life had been restricted to the intellectual disability service system.⁴⁰ While having an essential role in the education system as a guarantee of educational opportunities, the position of the TELMA-programme can be considered vulnerable in the context of the neoliberal education policy climate emphasising productivity and excellence. As part of VET, the TELMA-programme submits to the policy rhetoric binding targets and justification of provision to the needs of employment: the goal is to produce employable professionals for labour markets. Given this, it is difficult to justify training students who will never participate in the open labour market:

Reetta Do you think post-compulsory education has started to become an established path for persons with profound intellectual disabilities, or is it still very selective?
 Hugo's teacher It really has not become established (...). This is not in any sense self-evident (...). There is the possibility that society decides that vocational colleges are only for persons that are employable. This is the horror scenario. [In this scenario, one can ask] what is the profit this training produces, if you think about this group of students that will never take part in the labour market. That there are so many value questions to consider here, I suppose.⁴¹

The teacher's response makes visible a perspective from which people with profound intellectual disabilities are seen as uneducable as they are unable to become employable. Ultimately, this is a question whether an education that does not aim at training productive citizens can be considered as valuable and justified—as a necessity.⁴² Acknowledgement of the educational rights of all does not suffice if realisation of these rights is questioned by a political climate that challenges the value base these rights are standing on.

Identification and Belonging Within Distinctive Educational Cultures and Practices

One of our interviewees, Verna, asked why it is that in the Finnish comprehensive school where all pupils are supposed to go to the same school, some people are wheeled off to special schools “just because they are disabled or they learn differently. They are kind of segregated from the rest of age group”. Other interviewees raised similar criticisms concerning segregation. In particular those who had completed their basic education many years ago were able to look back at their experiences critically and realise how their experiences did not suit the image of an equal education system and society.

Although many were critical of special schools, this did not lead to them challenging their own position in segregated settings in any straightforward way. Many considered mainstream education too academically challenging and thus special education as better meeting their needs. Not even doubts about the quality of teaching they had received were able to unsettle the idea that “special needs students” belonged in special education. Mary, who studied in GUS after basic education in SE-school, was one of the few who challenged with confidence the idea that as a disabled student she belonged in special needs education. Instead, the transition from SE-school to

GUS made her realise that “there was nothing wrong with me, but I had just received poor teaching [in comprehensive school]”.

In this section, we discuss the distinct pedagogical cultures of special and mainstream education. We consider how students build understanding about these differences and themselves as learners whilst moving between the two cultures. This movement can provide new perspectives for students to reflect critically on the divide and their position in a school but also emphasise feelings of otherness.

Moving Across the Divide: Failing Students or Failing Practices?

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the key measure to put inclusive education policy to practice was integration: students from segregated SE-classes were studying in mainstream groups during the lessons of specific school subjects. In Reetta’s research school, all students in SE-classes were integrated to mainstream classes at least in one subject, typically in PE or Arts, but like Peter, some students were seen as more suitable for integration and were integrated in academic subjects too. Peter’s class teacher described him as “a borderline student”—one who may manage in mainstream entirely, but benefitted from the support of the SE-class. The SE-teachers repeatedly mentioned how difficult it was to arrange integration, and that the students often returned to their SE-class because integration did not work. The SE-teachers explained the difficulties by referring to both the subject teachers’ attitudes and lack of relevant skills and to characteristics of the students.

While the teachers attached the problems of integration to individuals, after observing classroom practices in both SE- and mainstream classes, Reetta noticed the differences between these contexts. In the SE-classes, learning was teacher led, whereas in the mainstream classes the students were expected to take control of their learning. These two contexts expected different skills from the students, and the teaching opened up different positions for the students to take.⁴³ In the following excerpt, Peter is in a mainstream Finnish language class. At the end of the lesson, other students are leaving but the teacher continues talking with Peter:

- Peter Ok then, I’ll go and borrow that book again [a book he had read for book review] from the library.
- Teacher Yes, you really should do that.
- Peter When does that [review] need to be ready for, by the end of this course?
- Teacher Yes, by the end of the course. (The teacher adds that once Peter has written the first draft, he can bring it for the teacher to check, if he wants comments).
- Peter How about Friday, would you have time to have a look at that work application, if there’s any errors?

The teacher says that she can try to find time, but cannot promise.⁴⁴

The teacher later told Reetta that Peter was doing well, but needed lots of support. Reetta wondered whether the teacher’s description of Peter was possibly based on

Peter's actions of seeking support as in the conversation above. However, it can also be interpreted that by seeking confirmation from the teacher in each step in the learning process Peter was performing as a student in SE-class is expected to. SE-classes' practices contrast with those of mainstream classes in which each students' responsibility in developing self-governing is emphasised.

Following up Reetta's analysis, we have paid attention to how the definitions of students with special needs and practices in SE-classes end up producing the student that these practices anticipate. We suggest that segregated SE-classes socialise the students to the practices of these classes.⁴⁵ However, when the students then perform like "special education students", their behaviour can be interpreted as natural to them, as symptomatic, confirming their specialness. This also underlines the difference between the educational cultures of mainstream and special education as Eva concluded below when summarising her experiences in a lower secondary school's SE-class and then later dropping out of VET:

Eva At first, I studied in laboratory assistant programme (in VET). Then it was, too difficult, because I've been in rehabilitative class in lower secondary, and I haven't studied there a lot of mathematics and so forth. We studied maybe a half of the book when the other classes had studied a whole book. The teacher always said that let's keep a one-hour break that let's play cards or so. It's just such an easy-going class that you can't go far from there. I got good grades, averaged more than seven (in scale 4–10). Many of the numbers were nine, though we didn't study a lot. In a sense, it was just a false report.⁴⁶

It can be difficult to turn the analytic gaze from the students to pedagogical practices and to ask what kind of student positions and subjectivities these allow students to take. Examples of how students recognise differences between the educational cultures, pedagogical and—as in Eva's example above—assessment practices are repeated across the different data sets. For some, these notions are based more on a hunch, while for students who end up moving between the two cultures—like Mary or Eva—their experiences confirm the different expectations and pedagogical practices. Many interviewees described a sense of distance: mainstream education appears as foreign and demanding to the students in segregated SE-classes, even when the classes were located in the same building.

A sense of distance appeared during Anna-Maija's fieldwork in GUS, when she noticed that SE-teachers participated rarely in regular lessons, but they generally withdrew the students to teach them individually at their own office. This is certainly a question of resource allocation as the major part of SE-teachers' workload was devoted to testing students and writing statements on students' support needs concerning difficulties in learning. It was also, however, a question of how educational equality was seen to be reached. Some of the SE-teachers argued that their participation in the lessons as a co-teacher might even further stigmatise the students who need support in learning as it would point the finger at their difficulties. Others argued that through strengthening co-teaching and SE-teacher's visible role and participation in a school community it is possible to fight stigmatisation.⁴⁷

Stigmatising or Normalising Support Needs

The mainstream is not distant only academically, but also socially. There was very little interaction between the pupils in SE-classes and in mainstream classes in Reetta's research school. In spite of integration practices, many students in SE-classes found themselves socially excluded, even stigmatised, in the wider student culture. They talked about how they did not enjoy being in the mainstream groups because of not knowing anyone and because of the negative conceptions or comments that one might be subjected to. As Peter told us, "people [in mainstream groups] think that they [those studying in SE-classes] are dumb (...). Like that people still have really bad conceptions." Although these moments where social exclusion became manifested were described as hurtful, the students did not seem to wallow in the feeling of being excluded. Rather, the SE-classes were their primary social field within which they formed important peer-relations, felt safer and more accepted. In the life-history study, many interviewees recounted similar experiences by emphasising the positive atmosphere of the SE-classes. They had experienced segregated classes being more approving of difference, as spaces where one could ask for help without having to feel ashamed, and some recounted forming long-lasting friendships with their classmates over the years. These experiences of belonging and being accepted were contrasted with feelings of exclusion from the wider student culture where many had experiences of name-calling.

As in lower-secondary school, we have encountered experiences of stigmatisation in relation to how young people conceptualised their support needs in GUS context too.⁴⁸ The analysis of student interviews in GUS indicated that to receive support at school leans on students' and their families' willingness and ability to take responsibility for making contact with teachers. For some of the students, it was not straightforward to ask for help, because it reminded them of their marginalised position as a student with special needs—the opposite of the ideal of academically competent skilful learner.⁴⁹ As Leo put it: "Usually if you want to get support, you have to go and ask yourself. In my opinion, the teachers should be more active. Sometimes I'm like, I don't want to ask for help 'cause it's embarrassing". Our argument here is that Leo tried to avoid being stigmatised as a student with special needs. In interviews after graduating from GUS, he criticised the school culture being selective so that certain students were positioned lowest down in hierarchy. The interpretation of his position was that he was "down there" because of his support needs, and because of the low position, he did not want to highlight himself as a special need student more by visibly asking for help from the teachers. These notions echo the results of Reetta's study where she concluded that the status of the students from SE-classes was the lowest in the school's student culture. We argue that hierarchies in the student cultures and students' differing positions may lead to situations in which students positioned in the margins and having experienced stigmatisation, may not dare to ask for the help they would need. This may also have an effect on how the practices of support and SE-teacher's work is seen in the school—as regular and organic part of a school's pedagogical practices or as something deviant and remote.⁵⁰

In Anna-Maija's analysis from two different studies of VET, in turn, there are various examples of pedagogical practices, which seem to lower the barriers between mainstream and special education and thus advance students' belonging in school community. When analysing observations of metalwork and machinery classes, Anna-Maija noticed how co-teaching as a pedagogical practice reduced students' responsibility in seeking support and they did not have to choose whether to go and meet a SE-teacher in a separate room, but the teachers participated in the classes as co-teachers. Co-teaching was used especially in mathematics lessons.⁵¹ As Leo reflected above, in a school culture where organising educational support as a part of mainstream studying is rare, even asking for help can lead to stigmatisation. On the contrary, when SE-teachers, resource teachers or other staff members support the students during the lessons, it is not up to the students to leave the study group to get the help one needs. During a recent ethnographic study in VET, Anna-Maija noticed that the SE-teacher's work as a co-teacher in mathematics lessons was experienced as important. Students who needed more support in their learning knew that they could also go to the SE-teacher's office every now and then—the door was always open for them—and the role of special education was not similarly stigmatising as during basic education—it was considered ordinary practice in the school.⁵² Reetta made similar observations in her research school where at the same time as SE-classes were considered highly stigmatising, support that was provided in part-time special education—in a resource room—was not affecting students' social positioning similarly.

Conclusion: The Misplaced Focus of the Finnish Special Education Success Story

We started our examination here by challenging both the ongoing public discussion concerning failure of the inclusion policy and the dominant success story of the efficient special education system ensuring educational equality. We have aimed to produce a counter-narrative that makes visible how the longing for the “good old days” present in the current discussion is founded on a partial view of the Finnish special education system and its recent history. While it is possible to narrate a success story of Finnish education system introducing new concepts and pedagogical solutions of (inclusive) special support, our closer look has made it clear that the divide of special needs and mainstream education has always existed and stills runs through educational experiences and opportunities of students.

Based on the reading of the multi-sited ethnographic and life-historical data, we argue that the inclusion narrative in Finnish education system—seen either as a success story or as a story of failure—hides the dual system of mainstream and special needs education. This means that despite the commitment to development of inclusive education in national policy discourses, disability and children's rights alignments and in the key national steering documents, deeply rooted system level

divides still exist along with pedagogical, spatial and school culture-related practices and attitudes that reproduce the division. From our point of view, the recent discussion around inclusive education has a misplaced focus. The “good or bad inclusion” framing systematically passes over the perspective where inclusion is examined in its wider policy and historical circumstances. Most often inclusive education is reduced to a school level pedagogical or spatial question, thus avoiding recognition that it is a question of human rights—not something that is up to national or municipal education officials or teachers to decide about.

However, even if inclusion is framed as a pedagogical question, a notable absence has been a constructive pedagogical discussion on *how* to put inclusion into practice compared to discussion around whether or not we should have inclusion. In many occasions, current resources of special needs education shape support to be a separate addition for general teaching, even though education policy alignments lead support to be communal and multi-professional.⁵³ This is obviously a question of resources—but also of what is done with resources. We propose that the often-repeated question of whether all kinds of students should be taught separately or together has to be reformulated to the question of how belonging can be achieved in various school contexts. During our studies, we have also fortunately come across practices which seem to enhance inclusion by producing participation and belonging for students. However, what seems rather surprising is that certain experiences of feeling different or other in the school culture—which contributes to students’ understanding of themselves as learners—are repeated from one decade to the next.

We have suggested elsewhere that the pedagogical, spatial and social distances at school turn into symbolic distance: the distancing practices reinforce interpretations that special education and mainstream students are profoundly different.⁵⁴ The symbolic distance also means that the position of a mainstream student became inaccessible to our interviewees, as it was difficult to relate their abilities as a learner to abilities expected from students in mainstream education. This way mainstream may become something of a mythical context, seen as having extremely high expectations. The distance also makes it difficult to challenge the dominant practices and conceptions that sort people into categories of special and normal student. In addition to this discussion on symbolic distance, critical examination of educational equality requires moving beyond the abstract “students with special needs”—category and focusing on diverse and differing educational experiences, pathways and opportunities of different groups positioned under the category. It challenges us to think what educational equality or inclusion actually can be, and how different groups are currently positioned in relation to the policy goals. It would also force us to pay attention to margins and silences in the inclusion discussion, as there has been, for instance, a notable exclusion of children and youth with intellectual disabilities in the inclusion debate. At the same time, both research and policy documents provide only a very fragmented picture about how inclusion policy has affected this group’s school progress, especially in the compulsory education. These are the questions that should be asked when assessing the success or failure of the Finnish special education system—and inclusion policy.

In order to build fruitful discussion around inclusion, there is a need to take a step back and examine the Finnish special education system from a wider perspective that can make sense of the historical developments of the system and the effects of other policy developments on the enactment of inclusion policy. This involves not only looking back but also helps to recognise current and future challenges faced by inclusive education. As an example, we could mention Hugo's teacher's concern about realising educational rights of students with profound and multiple disabilities within a neoliberal policy context centred on paid employment. In addition, as we have discussed, the school culture of GUS already leans on the idea of the academically competent student who does not need support in their learning. Therefore, it is important to follow and evaluate the reform of GUS from the perspective of students with special educational needs, when the simultaneous reform of higher education entrance examinations has transferred competition related pressure and self-responsibility towards even younger students and earlier school levels.

Notes

1. Kotro, A. 2019. *Avoin kirje uudelle opetusministerille*. <https://arnokotro.fi/category/koulu/>. Accessed 5 May 2021.
2. See for example, OAJ 2019. *Oppimisen ja koulunkäynnin tuki uudistettava pikaisesti*. <https://www.oaj.fi/ajankohtaista/uutiset-ja-tiedotteet/2019/oppimisen-ja-koulunkaynnin-tuki-uudistettava-pikaisesti/>. Accessed 6 Dec 2021.
3. Kivirauma, J. 1999. Oppivelvollisuuskoulun vammaispolitiikka. In *Pyörätuolitango. Näkökulmia vammaisuuteen*, ed. S. Nouko-Juvonen, 49–76. Helsinki: Edita.
4. Ministry of Education. 2007. *Erytisyopetuksen strategia*. Reports of the Ministry of Education, Finland. p. 47.
5. E.g., Kivirauma, J., K. Klemelä, and R. Rinne. 2006. Segregation, integration, inclusion—the ideology and reality in Finland. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 21(2): 117–133.
- Arnesen, A.-L., R. Mietola, and E. Lahelma. 2007. Language of inclusion and diversity: Policy discourses and social practices in Finnish and Norwegian schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 11(1): 97–110.
6. Teittinen, A. 2008. Normaliteetin rajat ja rakenteet. In *Muuttuvat marginaalit: Näkökulmia vammaistutkimukseen*, ed. J. Kivirauma, 126–148. Kehitysvammaliiton tutkimuksia 1/2008.
7. Ministry of Education, op. cit. p. 54.
8. Reetta Mietola has co-authored this chapter as part of research projects funded by Kone Foundation Strategic Research Council (Academy of Finland), decision numbers 336548, 336,551.
9. Niemi, A.-M., R. Mietola, and J. Helakorpi. 2010. *Erytisyliopisto elämänselityksessä. Selvitys peruskoulussa erityisluokalla opiskelevien vammaisten, romaniväestöön kuuluvien ja maahanmuuttajataustaisten nuorten aikuisten koulutus- ja työelämäkokemuksista*. Publications of Finnish Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1/2010. <http://www.intermin.fi/julkaisu/012010?docID=24878>. Accessed 6 Dec 2021.
10. The study was a part of the Equality is Priority 2 (YES2) Project funded by EU's Progress-programme.
11. Mietola, R. 2014. *Hankala erityisyys. Etnografinen tutkimus erityisopetuksen käytännöistä ja erityisyyden muotoutumisesta yläkoulun arjessa*. University of Helsinki, Institute of Behavioural Sciences, Studies in Educational Sciences. p. 256.

12. Niemi, A.-M. 2015. *Erityisiä koulutuspolkuja? Tutkimus erityisopetuksen käytännöistä peruskoulun jälkeen*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Institute of Behavioural Sciences, Studies in Educational Sciences. p. 264.
13. Vehmas, S., and R. Mietola. 2021. *Narrowed lives. Meaning, moral value, and profound intellectual disability*. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press.
14. This project was funded by Academy of Finland, grant number 275988.
15. Niemi, A.-M., and M. Jahnukainen. 2020. Educating self-governing learners and employees: Studying, learning and pedagogical practices in the context of vocational education and its reform. *Journal of Youth Studies* 23(9): 1143–1160.
16. Niemi, A.-M., and L.M. Laaksonen. 2020. Discourses on educational support in the context of general upper secondary education. *Disability & Society* 35(3): 460–478.
17. This project was funded by the Strategic Research Council (Academy of Finland), grant number 303691.
18. E.g., Kurki, T. 2019. *Immigrant-ness as (mis)fortune? Immigrantisation through integration policies and practices in education*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
Kirjavainen, T., J. Pulkkinen, and M. Jahnukainen. 2016. Special education students in transition to further education: A four-year register-based follow-up study in Finland. *Learning and Individual Differences* 45: 33–42.
Jahnukainen, M., M. Kalalahti, and J. Kivirauma. 2019. *Oma paikka haussa. Maahanmuuttotaustaiset nuoret ja koulutus*. Gaudeamus. Tallinn: Printon Trukikoda.
19. E.g., Lahelma, E. 2003. Koulutusteiden risteysasemilla: Pysyvyyksiä ja muutoksia nuorten suunnitelmissa. *Kasvatus* 34(3): 230–242.
20. Niemi 2015, op. cit.
Lappalainen, K., and V. Lievonon. 2005. Dysfaattisten nuorten jatko-opintojen suunnittelu ja jatko-opintoihin hakeutuminen. In *Siirtymät sujuviksi—ehyttä koulupolkua rakentamassa*, eds. P. Holopainen, T. Ojala, K. Miettinen, and T. Orellanae, 120–128. Helsinki: FNAE.
See also Lappalainen, K., and R. Hotulainen. 2007. “Jospa sitä joskus sais oikeita töitä”—Seurantatutkimus peruskoulussa arvioitujen tukitarpeiden yhteydestä nuorten koulutukseen ja työhön sijoittumiseen. *Kasvatus* 34(3): 242–256.
21. Mietola, R. 2010. Reippaasti itsekseen vai kädestä pitäen? Monenlaiset oppilaat, ammatinvalinnanohjaus ja koulutusmarkkinoiden asiakkuus. In *Yrittäjyyskasvatus hallintana*, eds. K. Komulainen, S. Keskitalo-Foley, M. Korhonen, and S. Lappalainen, 156–186. Tampere: Vastapaino.
22. In practice, choosing not to continue in education has been made extremely difficult for young people through restrictions concerning their access to forms of social security, such as unemployment benefits.
23. Ministry of Education and Culture. 2021. *Extension of compulsory education*. <https://minedu.fi/en/extension-of-compulsory-education>. Accessed 20 Aug 2021.
24. Mietola 2010, op. cit.
Niemi, A.-M., M. Kalalahti, J. Varjo, and M. Jahnukainen. 2019. Neuvotteluja ja sovittelua—kriittisiä havaintoja ohjaustyöstä. In *Oma paikka haussa—maahanmuuttotaustaiset nuoret ja koulutus*, eds. M. Jahnukainen, M. Kalalahti, and J. Kivirauma, 49–68. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
25. Kirjavainen, Pulkkinen, and Jahnukainen, op. cit.
26. *Act on General Upper Secondary Education (714/2018)*. <https://finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2018/en20180714>. Accessed 5 May 2021.
27. Niemi and Laaksonen, op. cit.
28. Langørgen, E., and E. Magnus. 2018. “We are just ordinary people working hard to reach our goals!” Disabled students’ participation in Norwegian higher education. *Disability & Society* 33(4): 598–617. p. 602.
29. Niemi 2015, op. cit.; Niemi, Mietola, and Helakorpi, 2010, op. cit.
30. DILE-study. All names are pseudonyms.
31. EMED-study.

32. See Niemi, Mietola, and Helakorpi, op. cit.
Niemi, A.-M., and R. Mietola. 2017. Between hopes and possibilities. (Special) educational paths, agency and subjectivities. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 19(3): 218–229. cf. Niemi & Laaksonen 2020.
33. Mietola 2010, op. cit.
Hakala, K., R. Mietola and A. Teittinen. 2013. Valinta ja valikointi ammatillisessa erityisopetuksessa. In *Ammatillinen koulutus ja yhteiskunnalliset eronteot*, eds. K. Brunila, H. Katariina, E. Lahelma, and A. Teittinen, 173–200. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
34. See more detailed analysis in Niemi and Mietola 2017, op. cit.
35. Niemi 2015, op. cit.
Vehkakoski, T. 2006. *Leimattu lapsuus? Vammaisuuden rakentuminen ammatti-ihmistien puheessa ja teksteissä*, University of Jyväskylä. <https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/13305>. Accessed 7 Dec 2021. p. 297.
36. See Hakala, Mietola, and Teittinen 2013, op. cit.
37. 'Special needs class in the course of life' study.
38. Hakala, Mietola, and Teittinen, op. cit.
39. TELMA is training for work and independent living.
Kauppila, A., S. Lappalainen, and R. Mietola. 2020. Governing citizenship for students with learning disabilities in everyday vocational education and training. *Disability & Society* 36(7): 1148–1168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2020.1788512>
40. Vehmas and Mietola, op. cit.
41. PIMD and the good life-study. See Kauppila, A., R. Mietola, and A.-M. Niemi. 2018. Koulutususkon rajoilla: Koulutuksen julma lupaus kehitys- ja vaikeavammaisille opiskelijoille. In *Koulutuksen lupaukset ja koulutususkko. Kasvatustieteellisen vuosikirja 2*, eds. H. Silvennoinen, M. Kalalahti, and J. Varjo, 209–240. Jyväskylä: FERA Suomen kasvatustieteellinen seura.
Kauppila, Lappalainen, and Mietola, op. cit.
42. See Kauppila Mietola, and Niemi, op. cit.
43. Ellsworth, E. 1997. *Teaching positions: Difference, pedagogy and power of address*. New York: Teachers College Press.
44. Fieldnotes, Troubling special-study.
45. Niemi, Mietola, and Helakorpi. 2010, op. cit.
See also Ljusberg, A.-L. 2011. The structured classroom. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 15(2): 195–210.
46. Special educational paths study.
47. Niemi and Laaksonen 2020, op. cit.
48. See Niemi and Laaksonen, op. cit.
Mietola 2014, op. cit.
Niemi, Mietola, and Helakorpi, op. cit.
49. See also Niemi, A.-M., and T. Kurki. 2014. Getting on the right track? Educational choice-making of students with special educational needs in pre-vocational education and training. *Disability & Society* 29(10): 1631–1644.
Youldell, D. 2006. *Impossible bodies, impossible selves: Exclusions and student subjectivities*. The Netherlands: Springer.
Benjamin, S. 2002. *The micropolitics of inclusive education. An ethnography*. Suffolk: St Edmundsbury Press.
50. Niemi and Laaksonen 2020, op. cit.
51. Niemi, A.-M., and P.-Å. Rosvall, 2013. Framing and classifying the theoretical and practical divide: How young men's positions in vocational education are produced and reproduced. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 65(4): 445–460.
52. Niemi and Jahnukainen 2020, op. cit.
53. see Niemi and Laaksonen 2020, op. cit. p. 460.

54. Mietola 2014, op. cit.

Helakorpi, J., R. Mietola, & A-M. Niemi, 2014. Tasa-arvoisten mahdollisuuksien vuoksi erillään? Erityisluokkien oppilaat koulun sosiaalisissa ja institutionaalisissa järjestyksissä. In *Nuoruus toisin sanoen: Nuorten elinolot -vuosikirja 2014*, eds. M. Gissler, M. Kekkonen, P. Muranen, P. Känkäinen, & M. Wrede-Jäntti, 161–17. Helsinki: Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos.

Anna-Maija Niemi is Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Education, University of Turku. Her research areas include educational inclusion, both in education policy and in school's everyday practices as well as youth studies and disability studies. Niemi's previous research focused on educational paths in special needs education. Currently she is leading a longitudinal life-historical study focusing on young adults and their hopes, possibilities and obstacles in educational and employment paths.

Reetta Mietola is Senior Research Fellow in the Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki. Her research areas include disability studies, youth research and inclusive education. Mietola's previous research has focused on everyday practices in special needs education, educational experiences and paths of students studying in special needs education, development of housing for persons with intellectual disabilities and lives of adults with profound intellectual disabilities. Currently she is undertaking research projects focusing on political participation of young people and the past and present of disability activism in Finland.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

