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Article

The 21st Century Reforms (Re)Shaping the Education Policy of Inclusive and Special Education in Finland

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Abstract: In recent decades, an essential global aim of the reforms of special education has been the promotion of inclusive education. This article discusses the implementation of reforms with a focus on tiered support systems in the context of Finnish comprehensive school education. Based on earlier literature, legislation, and administrative documents, we provide a background for Finnish education policy and special education reforms. The focus of this article is on the description of parallel reforms targeting the re-structuring of the systems around support for students and funding of education in the 2010s. We discuss the processes leading to these reforms and the reforms themselves. In addition, we discuss their implications for the organization of the tiered support system. Finally, we highlight some challenges of reform implementation and the current education policy's movements towards inclusive education.



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1. Introduction

The context of this article is Finland's comprehensive school education (also often referred to as basic education) and the position, meaning, and development of policies and practices that have paid attention to meeting special educational needs (SEN) within it during the past two decades. In this piece, we lean on official translations and, if these are not available, direct translations of concepts stemming from this educational context, in which the use of term of support—instead of special education—has been gaining ground since the 2010s. Consequently, some of the concepts may entail unconventional connotations if seen from today's perspective, and therefore they should be seen in their historical context.

As Finland celebrates one hundred years of compulsory education in 2021, it would be helpful to take a brief glance back to the 20th century. Along with developments in education in general, there are certain identifiable milestones that have gradually directed attention towards SEN, with the intention of increasing inclusiveness. Based on previous studies on the history of special education [1–4] in Finnish schools, the early development of special education services has progressed rather slowly, and was predominantly based on a special type of school provision until the 1970s (Figure 1). It is also noteworthy that although the SEN policy's development has proceeded step by step since the late 1960s—first towards the integration and mainstreaming of students with SEN, and more recently (since the 1990s) towards inclusive education [3]—the concepts of integration and inclusion have never been outspoken in Finnish education legislation. Even though the difference between these concepts is clear for academics in the field, they may still be used interchangeably in everyday language [3,5].

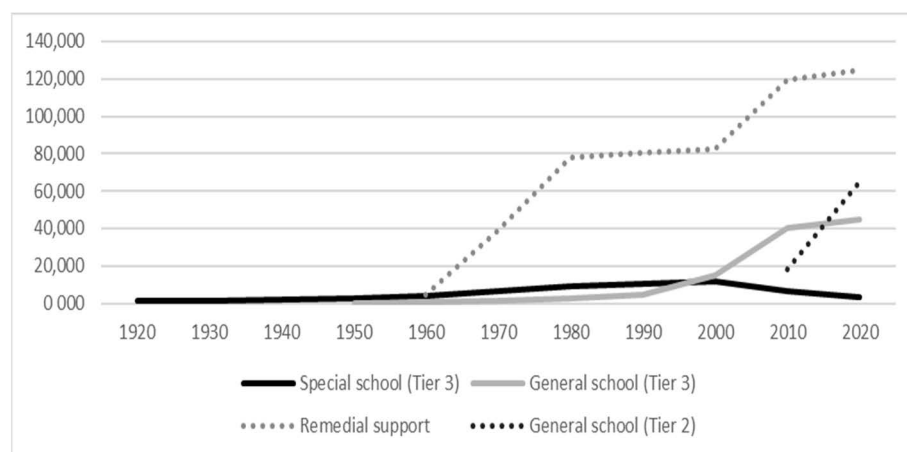


Figure 1. The number of students served in different forms of educational support in Finland 1921–2021, adapted from [4]. Other sources [2,5].

The current comprehensive school education was preceded by a system that guided children either to a civic school or a grammar school at the age of 11 or 12. These two tracks made different educational and professional paths available to the students [6], as the former track was aimed at making students more “practically-oriented”, and the latter more “theoretical” [7]. As a response to that, comprehensive school education, founded in the 1970s, is based on an ideal of a unified education system and equal educational opportunities for every child and adolescent [6,8]. Such an aim set new demands for schools regarding the establishment of structures that support and help all students in their learning, irrespective of their individual differences (e.g., background, capabilities as learners), and resulted in the rapid expansion of low-threshold remedial support, called part-time special education (see Figure 1) [9]. Part-time special education refers to a form of short-term targeted support available to all students struggling with their schooling, and it can be provided without an official decision through co-teaching or in the form of individual or small-group instruction [10]. The increase in part-time special education has led to a growing need for professionals, which was met by expanding the training for teachers specializing in that area [9].

Although the first Compulsory Education Act (101/1921) [11] was committed to providing education to every student, this aim was not fulfilled until 1997, when students with severe intellectual disabilities were integrated into the comprehensive school system. This was preceded in 1985 by a similar administrative transition of students with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities from social welfare services to education. Related to this system-level integration, the personnel were also administratively transferred from the social and welfare sector into the educational sector. At the same time, based on the Comprehensive School Act (476/1983) [12], the possibility of exempting a student from compulsory education based on medical reasons was discontinued [3].

When the education system was finally administratively unified in 1997, the fine-tuning of special educational services continued. The current Basic Education Act (628/1998) [13] introduced Individual Education Plans that enabled the organization of the full-time education of students with SEN in mainstream classes [14]. Simultaneously, the governance of education went through momentous changes due to administrative reforms concerning the decentralization and deregulation of the public sector [15]. That is, the earlier centralized and norm-driven system of the 1970s and 1980s was removed, and the role of local-level administration (often at the level of a municipality) was strengthened, giving these administrators strong decisional power over the organization of education [16]. In addition, decentralization gave more freedom in terms of resource allocation to local-level administrators, yet at the same time it forced municipalities to take responsibility for cuts and savings in the economic recession of the 1990s [17].

While decentralization enables municipalities to take local conditions into consideration when they organize education, it creates variations between municipalities regarding the interpretation, application, and realization of educational norms (e.g., the national core curriculum) and legislation [18–20]. Variation can also show in the provision of education between municipalities due to the differences in financial situations of municipalities [21], and by differing practices in how municipalities allocate resources for education [22]. Further, local educational administrations may vary in the level of autonomy and decisional power they give to schools [23].

Consequently, in contexts such as these, the provision and funding of support targeted to students as well as their reforms are closely connected [24]. For an education system to function, strong local autonomy requires financial and human resources—the knowledge and capacity of educators working in the administration and schools [25]. In the process of reforming a system, professional freedom is essential, yet the local actors must also be guided and supported from the top as well as sides to help them to develop in the intended direction [25]. In the Finnish decentralized context, one of the cornerstones in reforms is a widespread trust in educators' capability and opportunities for development [26,27]. In large part, that trust can be explained by the teacher training programs developed in the universities since the early years of comprehensive school and the qualification requirement of master's degrees that apply to all teacher groups (e.g., classroom teachers, subject teachers, SEN teachers) [26].

As shown above, educational practices can be renewed in a number of ways. The factors pushing the change may stem from the re-organization of the national administration of public services, and the launch of an education act providing means for new educational arrangements or financial considerations. In this article we focus on two strands of reforms that affect the support available for students' learning and schooling in Finland in the 2010s. The parallel reforms in question were aimed at re-structuring the systems around support for students and the funding of education, of which the former also influenced the conceptualization of special education [28,29]. We are interested in both the processes leading to these reforms and the reforms themselves as tools for re-shaping the service provision for SEN within the Finnish comprehensive school system. Further, we will reflect their immediate and future implications for the organization of support for learning and schooling.

2. Pre-Reform Process as Steps towards Reforms in the 2000s

In retrospect, it is possible to depict a chain of events leading to a change. In earlier studies, we—and many of our colleagues—have discussed the way the groundwork for stronger emphasis on early intervention, need for teacher collaboration, and education policies that direct practices toward mainstreaming was laid in reforms at the end of the 1990s [23,30,31]. The publication of the evaluation report considering the state of service provision for SEN [32] gave birth to a series of national development projects funded and coordinated by the Finnish National Board of Education, and the Ministry of Education [23,33]. The projects provided a fruitful ground for interaction for educators representing several municipalities around the country, and in 2004 led to a profound discussion on the organization of education for students with SEN in comprehensive schools [23,34,35]. The municipal actors voiced a common need for opportunities to affect the state's reform policy regarding the development of the legislation and practices in the direction that would best serve the education of these students [23]. Consequently, representatives coming from large municipalities formulated a proposal to the Ministry of Education suggesting the renewal of administrative practices, the status of students with SEN, the development of teacher preparation and in-service training programs, and linking these concerns to the need for revision of the current funding and legislation accordingly [23,35]. Further, the municipalities saw that it would be crucial to involve local actors in national-level development processes.

The Ministry of Education reacted by inviting the municipal coordinators for SEN and education administrators to a meeting that was followed by an assignment to collect information and to compose a report on municipal arrangements for supporting students. In 2006, the results were presented at a seminar gathering representatives from the municipalities, the Ministry of Education, and the Finnish National Board of Education [23]. The seminar formed grounds for discussion and enabled the sharing of viewpoints for all involved. These interactions resulted in the naming of a steering group that prepared a proposal for a development strategy for special education [23,34,35]. The steering group was composed of experts from the Ministry of Education, the Finnish National Board of Education, the Trade Union of Education (OAJ), the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, the National Council on Disability (VANE), University of Jyväskylä (Continuing Education Centre), University of Tampere (Department for Teacher Education), and education departments from two large municipalities. Before finalizing the white paper, namely, the Special Education Strategy, the Ministry organized a hearing to learn from the viewpoints of various stakeholders (e.g., Statistics Finland, the Finnish Parents' League, the Finnish Association of the Deaf, special schools). Finally, in November 2007, the Ministry of Education launched the Special Education Strategy [36] providing a justification and a direction for the coming reforms.

The above-mentioned reforms of the 1990s resulted in the expansion of special education, and the first decade of the 2000s was a period characterized by a continuous growth of special education (see Figure 2). This phenomenon was mainly related to the increase in the share of students with high-incidence disabilities, and was followed by the increase in municipal differences as well [21]. Hence, as [23,35] pointed out earlier, the Strategy named two main reasons for the need to develop the system around special education provision, of which the first was drawn from the national statistics showing the rise in the number of students receiving special education. This was partly seen as a consequence of structural factors of the system, and the increasing knowledge concerning factors that affect student learning and schooling negatively, and the development of diagnostic practices and statistical methods [23]. Secondly, the Strategy referred to differences between local-level education organizers in practices around decision-making and support given to students. These elements were linked to concerns over how the students' right for support had been realized around the country, and whether students were treated equally regarding the means of and placements for support [23]. Alongside the Strategy, the Ministry introduced funding allocated for the development of the practices nationally.

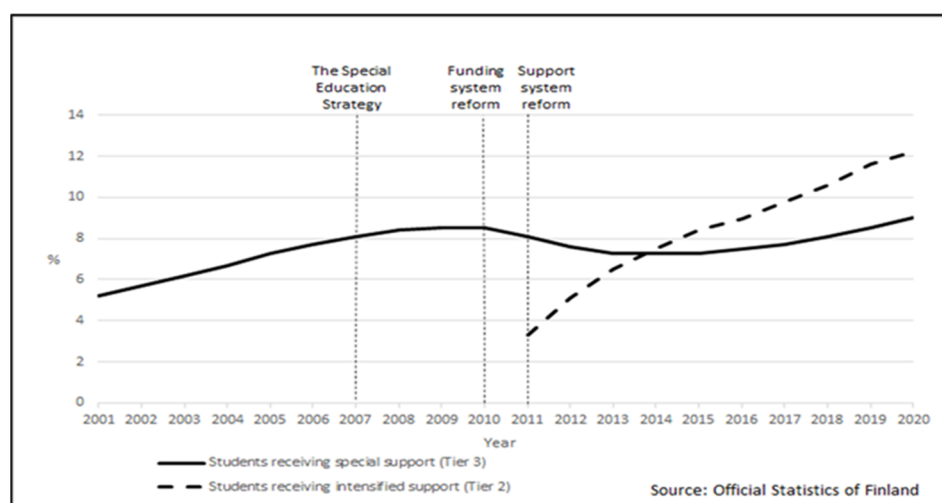


Figure 2. The share of students receiving educational support in 2001–2020 and the timing of key reform actions, adapted from [31] (©Jonna Pulkkinen and Finnish Institute for Educational Research).

3. Reforming Special Education in the 2010s

Even though reforms focusing on SEN have been triggered by things such as financial factors [37], in recent decades, an essential aim of the reforms has been the promotion of inclusive education [38]. That trend is also traceable as a backdrop of the Finnish Special Education Strategy [36] that placed the need for development into the wider framework of Finland's commitment to international declarations, programs, and agreements aiming to guarantee everyone's right to education, such as the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975) [39], and the UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994) [40]. Further, the Strategy discussed two practical elements linked to the ideology of inclusiveness. First, it pointed out a principle of securing every student's right to attend their neighborhood school. As a concept, neighborhood school was defined as "the school at which a student would be placed if one had not been given the status of SEN student" [23] (p. 104). Second, the Strategy stated how educational settings must be planned in a way that they enable the timely and sufficient support for the learning and growth of every student [23]. By putting these two aspects in the front, the Strategy referred to a need to strengthen every teacher's responsibility for education of a heterogeneous student population [23,41,42].

As mentioned earlier, the share of students receiving special education increased continuously in the early 2000s, which was a reason for the reforms of the support and funding systems in Finland. Both reforms were justified through this increase, albeit differently. A fiscal incentive to identify students with SEN was abolished by reforming the funding of service provision for students with SEN, whereas the support system reform emphasized students' rights to early and timely support. Next, we describe the reforms in more detail.

3.1. Funding Reform

In Finland, municipal autonomy is also concerned with the financing of education. The government allocates funding, but local authorities in municipalities determine the use of funds. Before the reform of the 2010s concerning the funding of special education, the funding was weighted [5]. Thus, a municipality was granted funding according to the number of students receiving special education (i.e., students in Tier 3, see Figure 2). For most of the students with SEN, the funding was 1.5 times more than the sum provided for basic funding. For students in extended compulsory education (i.e., education provided for students with severe disabilities), the funding was 2.5 or 4 times more than the basic funding, depending on the severity of a student's disability [43]. Despite the funding being based on the number of students with SEN, the municipality was free to allocate funds independently for different purposes.

In 2009, the Government of Finland set up a proposal for the Act on government transfers for local basic services and for the Act on financing of education and culture. Hence, special education funding reform was a part of the larger reform of the government transfer system for basic services. The aim of this reform was to simplify the government transfer system [43]. With respect to the funding of special education, the legislative proposal also highlighted a problem of the weighted funding system—this was an incentive to identify students as students with SEN [31,43]. Actually, research by [21] found that the weak financial situation of the municipality seemed to increase the share of students receiving special education between 2001 and 2010, which might indicate that the weighted system had some kind of incentive effect.

Therefore, the aim of the reform was to stop the increase in the share of students with SEN and, by extension, the growth of costs of service provision for students with SEN. It changed the funding into being mainly census-based. After the reform, the funding was based on the number of compulsory school-aged residents (i.e., 6 to 15 years old). The only exception was students with severe disabilities in extended compulsory education for which education providers continued to receive weighted funding after the reform.

3.2. Support System Reform

At the time when the Strategy was formulated, comprehensive schools had two tiers of support available: general and special. The first tier, general support, was composed of guidance for studies, remedial instruction, the cooperation between home and school, and student welfare services. That is, it was a set of practices that could be applied for short-term support for every student, whereas special support covered instruction for students entitled to special education due to their challenges in schooling caused by a disability, illness, or other functional deficit, or individual needs of mental or social support [23,35]. In addition, part-time special education as a form of early support was regarded as being available in both of these forms of support [23,29].

To this two-tiered model, the Strategy suggested the addition of a middle-tier, intensified support, that would enable more flexibility in the system. Intensified support would consist of part-time special education, remedial instruction, differentiation, and co-teaching. Within this three-tiered model, the means of support would intensify when moving from one tier to another [23,29]. As the Strategy stressed the importance of the further development of preventive strategies and early intervention, it gave a primary role to general (Tier 1) and intensified support (Tier 2), and noted that special support (Tier 3) should be considered only if these two preceding steps were insufficient [23,30,35].

In addition to the structural change, change in the conceptualization of students' needs was on the agenda. The Strategy stated how the planning and realization of support should mainly be based on evaluation grounded in a pedagogical approach and language, and if the situation necessitates, supplemented with psychological or medical statements [23,29]. Consequently, as [23,29] explain in their analysis of the reform, the requirement for more systematic planning, evaluation of provided support, and further planning, along with a shift from medical conceptualizations to pedagogical ones, were the core messages.

To reach the aims set in the Strategy, the reform process regarding the support system proceeded in two ways. Firstly, between 2008 and 2012, the Ministry launched four rounds of funding for municipal-level projects and regional networks that were both focused on the development of practices to meet the structural and conceptual requirements of the new three-tiered support model [23,29]. Additionally, in-service training for teachers and principals was organized locally. There were several channels for disseminating the new ideas and opportunities for professional development at the levels of education organizers and schools, and consequently, the majority of municipalities got involved in the projects [23,29,35]. Secondly, along with the ongoing national development work, the parliamentary process around the modifications and changes in the Basic Education Act and the national core curriculum started in 2009. The reading lasted one year, and in 2010 the parliament decided on the changes suggested in the government bill in 2009. According to [23], these parallel processes of national development work and parliamentary action signal decisiveness in re-thinking and re-structuring the provision of education for students with SEN in Finland. Additionally, the situation reflects the interaction within and between the levels of the Finnish education system that led to the reform.

3.3. Aftermath of the Reforms

It is evident that progress may never be stalled. The recent research [20,31,44–49] has highlighted several issues related to the implementation of the Learning and Schooling Support schema (i.e., the three-tiered support scheme). The Finnish reforms that paid attention to SEN simultaneously emphasized preventive measures and pedagogical approaches in planning and arranging support, and aimed to decrease the number of students with SEN. Even though not all changes occurred as expected, it is possible to see change in the provision of educational support following these reforms. That is, right after the reforms, the share of students receiving special support (Tier 3) as well as being placed in special classes seemed to decrease, yet this was more evident in the case of the funding reform [44]. Although student placements in special classes decreased and practices around placements seemed to become more inclusive after the reforms, the support system reform

brought about separate groups of students receiving intensified support, which was not the idea [20,31,45].

One of the recent developments that cannot go unheeded is, since the slight drop that came right after the reforms, the growth in service provision for students with SEN has seemed to continue. In addition to the provision of the early form of support (i.e., intensified support, Tier 2), the provision of special support (Tier 3) has increased (see Figure 2). This is remarkable, as one of the prime drivers for the reforms of the 2010s was the increase in special education. The reforms were aimed at stopping this, yet ten years later, the share of students receiving special support (Tier 3) is even greater than before the reforms. Consequently, it seems that the emphasis on preventive measures channeled through the renewal of the support system has not succeeded in decreasing the need for special support.

Of the two reforms, the one targeted at the support system altered more pedagogical practices. For instance, in a joint study, ref. [22] discovered that local-level education administrators argued for prioritizing early forms of support when allocating resources of special education. According to [44], this resulted in a slight increase in the share of students in part-time special education after the support system reform. However, two of us [46] pointed out that principals viewed part-time special education as the support arrangement that has changed in the most negative way. Moreover, we [22] found that part-time special education was the support arrangement most in need of additional resources. In the organization of educational support services provision in Finland, part-time special education has been an essential form of early support [10], and its role has been even more emphasized after the reforms. Nevertheless, the funding system has not considered part-time special education either before or after the funding reform, and the reformed funding that is census-based may have incentives to reduce the provision of part-time special education [31].

In addition, the support system reform seemed to change teachers' work. The reform increased the need for documentation and paperwork [30], which is probably most apparent to SEN teachers working within part-time special education who not only draft pedagogical documents, but also have consultative tasks related to these documents [47]. Moreover, along with the introduction of a new three-tiered support system, the Special Education Strategy [36] brought up every teacher's responsibility to teach heterogeneous groups of students. The Strategy also emphasized teacher collaboration as one of the means for realizing versatile pedagogical methods (e.g., co-teaching) with students that needed short- or longer-term support for their schooling. Both the questions of responsibility for all learners and cooperation are related to the advancement of inclusiveness in education in the Strategy [23]. Actually, the work of special education teachers seems to be emphasized in Tiers 1 and 2 (i.e., early forms of support) after the support system reform, but their role in these tiers is not as clear as it is in Tier 3 [47]. Additionally, teachers in general seem to perceive that goals like those set in the Strategy would require more resources, such as adaptable learning environments, co-teaching, and more time for planning [20]. Teachers have brought out the need for change in pedagogical thinking and professional development around all these factors [19]. Moreover, teachers' experiences signal a struggle in forming mutual collaborative relations, and fixed roles as subject, class or special education teachers that hinder the flexibility in co-teaching situations in classrooms consisting of a diverse student population [48].

Municipal differences in the organization of service provision for students with SEN were highlighted in the Special Education Strategy, yet the reforms did not aim to reduce these differences in local-level educational arrangements [31]. It seems that the variation remained after the reforms, and the way in which municipalities have altered their support arrangements depends on many structural and financial factors [20,31]. Although the reforms seemed to reduce the differences in the share of students receiving special support, two of us [44] have demonstrated that there was also variation in the provision of special support and in the rate of change in that provision among municipalities after the

reforms. According to [22], municipalities seemed to have different strategies for allocating resources. In addition, municipalities had adopted the new concepts of the support system differently [29].

The evidence regarding the realization of the reforms has not gone unnoticed by the Finnish Government, which has taken the issue seriously and aims at clarifying the confusion emerging in the practices. Based on the current Government Programme [50], a program entitled “Right to Learn” (2020–2022) was launched in 2019 [51]. This endeavor aims to examine the effectiveness of the legislation on special needs teaching, the principle of inclusion, and the resources allocated. Further, the program has allocated funding for the fine-tuning of the three-tiered support system, and the accessibility of the support. The Ministry of Education and Culture [52] states: “The Right to Learn will strengthen quality and equality in—comprehensive school education by reducing and preventing learning differences and by strengthening support for learning.—[It] incorporates legislative and financial changes and promotes practices and methods that strengthen equality.” Hence, the present aims of the Finnish education policy are the same as they were ten years ago. The aim of achieving equity and quality—and inclusiveness—in education challenges policymakers and educators working at different levels of the system. At the more general level, the current education policy is moving towards reducing inequalities, meeting diversities, and establishing a society that is more child- and family-friendly [50].

4. Discussion

The Finnish reforms of educational support described in this article show that there is great variation in how the reforms have been implemented. This is typical in any decentralized education system where local authorities and schools have strong discretionary power over the organization of education and autonomy in reform implementation. The dissimilarities in interpretations of the legislation have led to a situation in which the available system is used differently at the local level around the country. For example, the varying ways to interpret the three-tiered support system at the school-level have led to new ways to group students based on the tier structures [45]. While this phenomenon has created unintended and hidden structures, it depicts well the variation in educational arrangements in the process of responding to students’ needs at the school level [19].

In principle, it is fair to argue that at the system level, the structural changes (i.e., support system, conceptualizations) have formed a good basis for further developments, and these reforms have carried on the slow process of developments in Finland [7,14]. Consequently, the comprehensive school system is characterized by its responsiveness and the opportunities it has established for rapidly implementing part-time, short-term means of support [26]. Therefore, the Finnish comprehensive education system may contain all elements that would enable a reduction in the position of and need for special education within comprehensive school education.

Finnish teachers have great autonomy, and the processes of educational reforms in the country have been described through trust in schools’ professionals and capacity-building [27]. However, excessive autonomy and trust can also lead to unexpected consequences and confusion about the reform and its implementation [42,53,54]. The research implies that the development at the level of the system may not yet have fully reached the actors who work with students on a daily basis. There appears to be a gap between the intended changes regarding smoothing the practices around the support for students and the experiences of teachers [19,30,47,48]. It is evident that few reforms are carried out as intended, and most are affected by many factors, such as their design, the implementers’ understanding and interpretation, as well as the organizational factors and institutional context [55]. This also seems to be the case in the Finnish reforms of funding and the support system [31].

It is apparent that the process of learning and the implementation of new (collaborative) practices in a school community takes time [54,56], and sets requirements for the organizers and leaders of education in supporting professional learning [57,58]. Neverthe-

less, with respect to the Finnish support system's reform, a justified question is whether the meaning of the reform was clear enough. Further, we may contemplate whether the means for professional development are wide-ranging enough to lead to changes in practices. The changes suggested in the Special Education Strategy related to the aspects of the shared responsibility of all learners and collaboration would require renewed professional roles for teachers, a re-thinking of the pedagogy, and a reflection on understandings and beliefs related to these, along with building up new practices in the school community.

Even though just a little more than ten years ago a major reform was launched related to the organization of special education in Finnish comprehensive schools, the development around it continues. Hence, the processes of reforming educational systems to be more inclusive and the fine-tuning of the education policy around inclusive education are continuous. However, the development is not always straightforward, and in Finland as in global education policy, future development might be increasingly related to the shared political will and economic constraints than the human rights ideology of Education for All [59]. To follow up these processes and to enhance evidence-informed education policy, we need rigorous research approaches that can detect the direction and various nuances of policy implementation. Consequently, future studies must pay attention to policy analysis, the processes that guide educators at the district and local levels, as well as practices taking place in schools.

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