

# Fostering inclusive education in schools

## – teaching staff's perceptions and contradictions

Birgit Paju, special education teacher, PhD student, [birgit.paju@helsinki.fi](mailto:birgit.paju@helsinki.fi)

HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO  
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI  
KASVATUSTIETEELLINEN TIEDEKUNTA  
PEDAGOGISKA FAKULTETEN  
FACULTY OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES  
Learning, Culture and Intervention Expert Group

Supervisors:  
Elina Kontu, PhD, Adjunct professor  
Raija Pirttimaa, PhD, Professor  
Anu Kajamaa, PhD, Adjunct professor

## Introduction

The aim of the study is to examine the factors that identify school staffs' needs when improving inclusive process in Finland. Since the Change of Basic Education Act (CBEA 2010) the number of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) has diminished slightly (Statistic Finland 2014). The aim of CBEA (2010) to bring the support to the pupils' environment instead of transferring the SEN pupils in special schools or segregated special classes full time.

In the framework of **inclusive education** (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016; UNESCO 2009) **all pupils' participation** in constructive interplay in a classroom needs to be supported. Teachers with different professional specializations play a central role in the implementation of inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Liasidou, 2015).

A topic that is seldom addressed is the significance of contradictions in teachers' professional development (Yamagata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009) and in the enhancement of inclusive education (Cenci et al., 2016). Seeking to narrow this research gap, we analysed manifestations of contradictions in teaching practices with SEN pupils in mainstream schools in Finland aiming at achieving and developing inclusion. Inspired by Engeström and Sannino (2011), framework of four types of manifestations of contradictions is reported on in this study.

Manifestation	Features	Linguistic cues
<i>Conflict</i>	Neutral remarks or arguing	Impersonal expressions, naming the concern without explanation
<i>Critical conflict</i>	Facing contradictory motives in social interaction: feeling violated or guilty	Emotional expressions, the concern and reasons 'why' indicate hopelessness and denial for some reason
<i>Double bind</i>	Facing pressing and equally unacceptable alternatives in or between themes	Questions/comments, expressions of helplessness
<i>Dilemma</i>	Expression of exchange of incompatible evaluations	Expressing the need to do something, but facing some inner or outer barriers to overcome

**Types of manifestations of contradictions (modified from Engeström and Sannino, 2011: 375).**

## Research questions

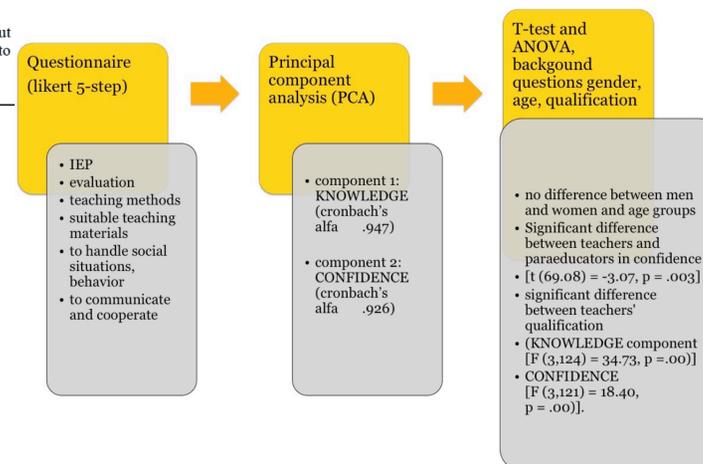
1. What are school workers' perceptions of the ability to meet the education needs of SEN pupils?
2. Considering the participants' genders, ages and groups with various certifications, what are the differences in how they rely on their ability to teach SEN pupils?
3. What are the differences between teachers' and teaching assistants' perceptions to teach SEN pupils?
4. What are the main manifestations of contradictions in classroom teachers, subject teachers, special education teachers and teaching assistants whose pupils include SEN learners?

## Methods and results

There were 186 responses from 14 primary, 3 secondary and 3 special education public schools. The participants consisted of **classroom teachers, subject teachers, special education teachers and teaching assistants.**

**Questionnaire** consisted of two parts

- 18 Likert-type items
- Two open-ended questions of concerns of teaching pupils with special needs in mainstream classes.



**Three step quantitative analysis of research questions 1.-3.**

Theme	Conflicts	Critical conflicts	Double binds	Dilemmas
<i>I Teaching activity</i>	6	10	17	17
<i>II Community</i>	8	7	18	23
<i>III Staff's ability</i>	14	15	5	7

**Distribution of manifestations of contradictions, research question 4.**

Special educators were more confident and they have more knowledge of teaching pupils with special needs than class teachers in primary level and subject teachers in secondary level.

Teaching assistants' perceptions were more positive than teachers in social situations, cooperation with family and other professionals and communication with SEN pupils.

Under the three themes -teaching activity, relationship among pupils and staff's perceived ability- participants felt there

were two options in their work: whether to serve the interests of the pupils with needs or of the other pupils.

Our findings indicate that the concept of inclusive education is strongly related to special education and integration of the pupil with needs into mainstream classroom. A common understanding of what is meant by inclusion and what it aims to do has not yet been achieved.

Based on our findings, we argue that all aspects of expertise and collaboration amongst staff members are particularly important for solving the pedagogical questions in daily practice. A network-based approach, in which different viewpoints of contradictions are considered, could expand the overall understanding and thus break down the potentially restrictive boundaries between the professionals.

## Reference

- Avramidis, E., & Norwich, B. (2002). Teachers' attitudes towards integration/inclusion: a review of the literature. *Journal of Special Education, 17*(2), 129-147.
- Cenci, A., Bôas, D. F., & Damiani M. F. (2016). The challenge of inclusive education in a Brazilian School: teachers' concerns regarding inclusion. *Research, Society and Development, 2*(2), 94-106.
- Engeström, Y. & Sannino, A. (2011). Discursive manifestations of contradictions in organizational change efforts: a methodological framework. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 24*(3), 368-387.
- Paju, B., Kajamaa, A., Pirttimaa, R. & Kontu, E. 2018. Contradiction as drivers for improving inclusion in teaching pupils with special needs. *Journal of Education and Learning 7, 3*.
- Liasidou, A. (2015). Inclusive Education and the Issue of Change. *Theory, Policy and Pedagogy*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan)
- Paju, B., Rätty, L., Pirttimaa, R. & Kontu, E. (2016). The school staff's perception of their ability to teach special educational pupils in inclusive settings in Finland. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 20*(8): 801-815.
- Yamagata-Lynch, L. & Haudenschild, M. (2009). Using activity systems analysis to identify inner contradictions in teacher professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 25*, 507-517.