



## Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in Public Schools in Finland

**Anna Korhonen<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>University of Helsinki, Finland

**Mika Salonen<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup>University of Helsinki, Finland

*Corresponding Author: [anna.korhonen@helsinki.fi](mailto:anna.korhonen@helsinki.fi)*

### ARTICLE INFO

Received February 23, 2024

Revised March 3, 2024

Accepted March 20, 2024

Published April 28, 2024

#### **Keywords:**

inclusive education,  
teachers' perceptions,  
disabilities, Finnish  
education

### ABSTRACT

This study investigates teachers' perceptions of inclusive education for students with disabilities in Finnish public schools, examining how educators view the challenges, benefits, and implementation of inclusive practices within one of the world's most acclaimed educational systems. Finland has gained international recognition for its commitment to educational equity and inclusive approaches, yet the practical realities of implementing inclusion remain complex and nuanced. Through a mixed-methods investigation involving 328 teachers across comprehensive schools in four Finnish municipalities, this research explores teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, their perceived competence in supporting diverse learners, the barriers they encounter, and the support systems they identify as critical for successful implementation. Findings reveal that while Finnish teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward inclusive education principles, they express significant concerns about resource adequacy, professional preparation, and the feasibility of meeting diverse needs within mainstream classrooms. Teachers identify differentiated instruction skills, collaborative teaching models, and specialized support services as essential elements for effective inclusion. The study contributes to understanding how even well-resourced educational

systems face challenges in translating inclusive education ideals into consistent classroom practice, offering insights relevant for policy development and teacher preparation programs internationally.

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## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a dominant paradigm in contemporary educational policy and practice worldwide, reflecting fundamental shifts in how societies conceptualize disability, educational rights, and social justice. The movement toward inclusion represents a departure from segregated special education models that historically isolated students with disabilities in separate facilities and classrooms (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). Instead, inclusive education emphasizes educating all students together in mainstream settings with appropriate supports and accommodations to address diverse learning needs. This philosophical and practical transformation reflects broader human rights frameworks articulated in international declarations and conventions, most notably the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. According to Ainscow and Miles (2008), inclusive education extends beyond disability to encompass broader commitments to equity, diversity, and ensuring all learners can participate meaningfully in educational communities regardless of differences in ability, background, or circumstances.

Finland presents a particularly compelling context for examining inclusive education implementation due to the country's international reputation for educational excellence and equity. Finnish education has consistently ranked highly in international assessments while maintaining strong commitments to comprehensive schooling and minimizing achievement gaps between different student groups. The Finnish education system emphasizes educational equality as a core value, with policies designed to ensure all children receive high-quality education regardless of geographic location, socioeconomic status, or learning differences. Legislation mandates that students with disabilities receive education in mainstream settings whenever possible, with segregated placement only when inclusive arrangements cannot adequately meet student needs even with comprehensive support. According to Halinen and Järvinen (2008), Finland's approach to special educational needs represents an integrated system where specialized support exists on a continuum rather than as a separate track, with most students receiving support within mainstream classrooms through three-tiered response frameworks.

Teachers occupy central positions in implementing inclusive education, serving as the primary facilitators of learning experiences for diverse student populations within classroom settings (Muhsyanur, 2024). Teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about inclusion significantly influence how inclusive policies translate into

daily classroom practices and student experiences. Research consistently demonstrates that teacher attitudes toward inclusion vary considerably, influenced by factors including professional preparation, previous experiences with diverse learners, perceived competence, available support systems, and classroom conditions. When teachers view inclusion positively and feel adequately prepared, they are more likely to implement effective inclusive practices, adapt instruction appropriately, and create welcoming classroom environments. Conversely, negative attitudes or feelings of inadequate preparation can result in resistance to inclusion, minimal accommodation efforts, or classroom climates that marginalize students with disabilities. De Boer et al. (2011) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis revealing that while teachers generally express support for inclusive education principles, they simultaneously voice concerns about practical implementation challenges, particularly regarding students with more significant support needs.

The landscape of disabilities in educational contexts encompasses diverse conditions requiring varied types and levels of support. Students may experience physical disabilities affecting mobility or sensory functions, intellectual disabilities impacting cognitive processing and academic learning, learning disabilities affecting specific skill areas such as reading or mathematics, autism spectrum disorders influencing social communication and behavioral regulation, or emotional and behavioral disorders affecting classroom functioning and peer relationships. Each disability type presents unique considerations for instruction, classroom management, and support provision. Additionally, students with similar diagnostic labels often display considerable individual variation in strengths, challenges, and support needs. According to Florian (2012), effective inclusive education requires moving beyond categorical thinking about disabilities to focus on responsive teaching that addresses individual learner characteristics and removes barriers to participation and learning. This shift from deficit-focused to capability-focused approaches represents a fundamental reconceptualization of special educational needs.

Finnish teacher education has received international attention for its rigorous standards, research-based curriculum, and emphasis on pedagogical expertise. All Finnish teachers complete master's-level university programs combining subject knowledge with extensive pedagogical preparation and supervised teaching practice. Special education teachers undergo additional specialized training in assessment, intervention strategies, and working with diverse learners. However, the extent to which general education teachers receive preparation specifically focused on inclusive education and supporting students with disabilities varies across programs and has evolved over time as inclusion policies have developed. Recent reforms have emphasized strengthening inclusive education content in teacher preparation, including differentiated instruction, collaborative teaching methods, and understanding diverse learning needs. Nonetheless, questions remain about whether current teacher education adequately prepares educators for the complex realities of inclusive classrooms. Saloviita (2020) noted that Finnish teachers

often express feeling insufficiently prepared for inclusion despite their otherwise strong professional formation, suggesting gaps between general pedagogical preparation and specific inclusive education competencies.

The implementation of inclusive education involves navigating multiple challenges that can impact teachers' perceptions and practices. Resource constraints including limited classroom assistance, inadequate specialized materials, and insufficient time for individualized instruction frequently emerge as concerns in research on inclusion. Large class sizes can complicate efforts to provide differentiated instruction and individualized attention to students with diverse needs. Teachers may lack confidence in their ability to address certain disabilities, particularly those involving behavioral challenges or requiring specialized intervention techniques. Collaboration with special education professionals, while recognized as essential, often faces barriers including scheduling difficulties, unclear role definitions, and insufficient common planning time. Additionally, teachers may experience tension between inclusive education mandates and pressures to maintain academic standards and prepare students for standardized assessments. According to Monsen et al. (2014), understanding teachers' perceptions requires examining not only individual attitudes but also the systemic and contextual factors that enable or constrain inclusive practice, recognizing that teacher perspectives reflect responses to broader organizational and policy environments.

Research on teachers' perceptions of inclusion has proliferated internationally, yet relatively limited investigation has focused specifically on Finnish contexts despite the system's prominence in international education discourse. Existing Finnish studies have documented generally positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion alongside concerns about implementation challenges, but comprehensive examinations of how perceptions vary across teacher characteristics, disability types, and school contexts remain limited. Understanding Finnish teachers' perspectives offers valuable insights both for continuing development of Finnish inclusive education and for international audiences seeking to learn from highly regarded educational systems. Questions persist about how Finland's distinctive educational culture, teacher professionalism, and support structures influence teachers' experiences with and perceptions of inclusion compared to other national contexts. As Takala et al. (2009) observed, while Finnish education embodies many qualities associated with effective inclusion, the system continues to navigate tensions between inclusive ideals and practical realities that mirror challenges faced internationally, suggesting that even exemplary systems must continuously evolve to realize inclusive education aspirations fully.

This study addresses several important gaps in understanding teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in Finnish contexts. The research examines how general education and special education teachers view inclusion across diverse disability types and educational levels within the comprehensive school system. It investigates the relationships between teacher characteristics such as experience, training, and school context with their attitudes toward and confidence in

implementing inclusive practices. The study explores specific challenges teachers identify and the types of support they consider most valuable for successful inclusion. By employing mixed methods combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interview insights, the research provides both breadth and depth in understanding the multifaceted nature of teachers' perspectives. The findings contribute to ongoing policy development, teacher preparation program design, and professional development planning while offering comparative insights relevant for international audiences examining inclusive education implementation in diverse contexts.

## **METHODE**

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to comprehensively examine Finnish teachers' perceptions of inclusive education for students with disabilities. The quantitative component utilized a cross-sectional online survey distributed to teachers in comprehensive schools across four municipalities representing diverse geographic regions of Finland, including urban, suburban, and rural contexts. A total of 328 teachers completed the survey, comprising 246 general education teachers and 82 special education teachers from grades 1-9. The survey instrument measured multiple dimensions including general attitudes toward inclusion, perceived self-efficacy for inclusive teaching, attitudes toward including specific disability types, perceived barriers to inclusion, and support needs. Attitude items employed Likert-scale formats allowing statistical analysis of patterns and relationships. According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010), convergent designs enable researchers to collect different but complementary data on the same phenomenon, validating findings through triangulation while gaining more complete understanding than either method alone could provide. Descriptive statistics characterized teacher perceptions across measured dimensions, while inferential analyses examined relationships between teacher characteristics and perceptions using regression models and analysis of variance.

The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews with 24 purposively selected teachers representing diversity in teaching experience, grade levels, and school contexts. Interview protocols explored teachers' experiences implementing inclusion, specific examples of challenges and successes, their perspectives on what enables effective inclusion, and their views on how inclusive education could be strengthened. Interviews averaged 45-60 minutes and were conducted in Finnish by trained research assistants, then transcribed verbatim for analysis. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) recommendations for thematic analysis, transcripts were coded iteratively to identify recurring themes, patterns of meaning, and conceptual categories emerging from teachers' accounts. Multiple coders independently analyzed subsets of interviews to establish reliability, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during interpretation, with qualitative themes illuminating and contextualizing quantitative patterns while survey results

suggested areas for deeper qualitative exploration. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), such integration strengthens research by leveraging the complementary strengths of quantitative breadth and qualitative depth. The study received ethical approval from the University of Helsinki ethical review board, and all participants provided informed consent with assurances of confidentiality.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Teachers' General Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education**

Quantitative survey results revealed that Finnish teachers generally expressed positive attitudes toward inclusive education principles, with mean scores of 3.8 on a five-point scale (SD = 0.71) for items measuring agreement with inclusive education philosophy. Substantial majorities agreed that students with disabilities benefit from inclusion in mainstream classrooms (82%), that inclusion promotes social development and peer acceptance (87%), and that schools have a responsibility to educate all students together whenever possible (79%). These findings align with Finland's policy emphasis on inclusive education and suggest that most teachers endorse inclusion as a value and goal. However, attitudes toward inclusion's feasibility and current implementation were notably less positive, with mean feasibility scores of 3.1 (SD = 0.84). Only 54% of teachers agreed that inclusion can be effectively implemented given current resources and conditions, while 38% expressed uncertainty and 8% disagreed. This gap between philosophical support and practical confidence reflects a pattern documented internationally where teachers endorse inclusion in principle while questioning its realistic implementation.

Qualitative interviews provided nuanced insights into the complexity underlying teachers' attitudes. Many teachers articulated strong commitments to inclusive values while simultaneously expressing frustration with implementation challenges that they felt compromised their ability to realize these values effectively. One experienced general education teacher explained, "I absolutely believe every child deserves to learn together with peers, but I also see daily how some students don't get what they really need because I simply cannot provide sufficient individual support with 24 other students in the room." Such comments revealed that apparent skepticism about inclusion often reflected not rejection of inclusive principles but rather concerns about inadequate resources and support structures. Teachers emphasized wanting inclusion to succeed while feeling systems were not sufficiently developed to enable consistent success. According to Avramidis and Norwich (2002), teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are not simply positive or negative but rather conditional, depending on factors including disability severity, resource availability, and their own preparation and confidence. The Finnish data strongly support this nuanced perspective on teacher attitudes.

Comparison between general education and special education teachers revealed some significant differences in perspectives. Special education teachers expressed somewhat more positive attitudes toward inclusion overall (M = 4.0 vs.

3.7,  $t = 2.84$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and greater confidence in their ability to support diverse learners effectively ( $M = 4.1$  vs.  $3.4$ ,  $t = 5.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This pattern likely reflects special educators' specialized training and daily experience working with students with disabilities. However, special education teachers also voiced concerns about general educators' preparation and the sustainability of their own workloads as inclusion expands. Several special education teachers interviewed described feeling stretched across too many students and classrooms, limiting the depth of support they could provide. They emphasized that effective inclusion requires not just their expertise but general educators developing stronger inclusive teaching competencies. As Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) noted, successful inclusion depends on reconceptualizing teaching and learning rather than simply adding special educators to support students with disabilities in mainstream settings. The Finnish teachers' comments reflect awareness that inclusion requires systemic transformation, not just service delivery adjustments.

Teacher experience and training backgrounds showed complex relationships with attitudes. Contrary to some research suggesting newer teachers hold more positive attitudes toward inclusion, Finnish data showed no significant relationship between years of experience and general attitude scores. However, teachers who reported receiving substantial inclusive education content in their initial teacher preparation expressed significantly more positive attitudes ( $M = 3.9$  vs.  $3.6$ ,  $t = 3.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and greater self-efficacy ( $M = 3.7$  vs.  $3.3$ ,  $t = 4.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) compared to those with minimal such preparation. Similarly, teachers who had participated in inclusive education professional development within the past three years showed more positive attitudes than those without recent training ( $M = 4.0$  vs.  $3.7$ ,  $t = 2.96$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These findings underscore the importance of both pre-service and in-service education focused specifically on inclusive practices. According to Sharma et al. (2012), teacher education significantly influences attitudes toward inclusion, with training that includes practical skill development and positive contact with individuals with disabilities proving particularly effective. The Finnish results support prioritizing inclusive education within teacher preparation while recognizing that current levels of preparation remain insufficient for many educators.

### **Perceived Competence and Self-Efficacy for Inclusive Teaching**

Teachers' perceived competence for implementing inclusive practices varied considerably across different skill domains and student needs. Survey results indicated relatively high confidence for basic differentiation practices, with 76% of teachers reporting feeling competent to modify instruction for different learning levels and 71% confident in their ability to use varied teaching methods to address diverse learning styles. However, confidence dropped substantially for more specialized inclusive education competencies. Only 43% felt adequately prepared to support students with behavioral disorders, 38% for students with autism spectrum disorders, and 31% for students with intellectual disabilities. Confidence was

somewhat higher for supporting students with learning disabilities (64%) and physical disabilities (58%). These patterns suggest that while Finnish teachers possess general pedagogical skills supporting some dimensions of differentiation, many feel inadequately prepared for the specialized knowledge and strategies required for certain disabilities.

**Table. Teachers' Self-Reported Competence for Supporting Different Disability Types**

Disability Type	Feel Well Prepared (%)	Feel Somewhat Prepared (%)	Feel Inadequately Prepared (%)
Learning Disabilities	64	29	7
Physical Disabilities	58	31	11
Speech/Language Impairments	52	36	12
ADHD	47	38	15
Behavioral Disorders	43	35	22
Autism Spectrum Disorders	38	41	21
Intellectual Disabilities	31	43	26
Multiple Disabilities	28	39	33

Qualitative interviews illuminated factors contributing to teachers' confidence or lack thereof across different areas. Teachers described feeling most confident when they had direct experience successfully supporting students with particular needs, access to specialist consultation, and concrete strategies they had learned through training or collaboration. One teacher explained her evolving confidence with autism: "Initially I felt quite lost, but working closely with our special education teacher and attending a training course gave me specific strategies for visual supports, structured routines, and understanding sensory needs. Now I feel much more capable, though I still consult regularly." Conversely, teachers expressed low confidence when facing disabilities they had limited experience with, when specialist support was unavailable, or when they lacked specific knowledge about appropriate accommodations and interventions. Several teachers described anxiety about potentially harming students through inappropriate approaches or missing important signs of distress due to insufficient understanding of particular conditions.

The relationship between perceived competence and attitudes toward inclusion emerged as highly significant in the quantitative data. Teachers reporting higher self-efficacy for inclusive teaching held substantially more positive attitudes toward inclusion overall ( $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and expressed greater willingness to include students with various disabilities in their classrooms. Regression analysis indicated

that self-efficacy predicted attitudes even when controlling for teacher experience, training, and school context, explaining approximately 34% of variance in attitude scores. This finding aligns with self-efficacy theory, which posits that individuals' beliefs about their capabilities strongly influence their attitudes toward tasks and their persistence when facing difficulties. According to Malinen et al. (2013), teacher self-efficacy for inclusive practices represents a critical factor distinguishing teachers who embrace inclusion from those who resist it, with efficacy beliefs influencing not only attitudes but also the quality of inclusive teaching practices. The Finnish data underscore that strengthening teachers' actual competencies and their confidence in those competencies should constitute central priorities for inclusive education development.

Professional development needs identified by teachers centered primarily on practical skill development rather than theoretical knowledge about disabilities. While teachers valued understanding different disabilities, they emphasized wanting concrete instructional strategies, behavior management techniques, and tools for differentiation and assessment. Specific areas where teachers requested more training included implementing positive behavior support, creating effective visual supports and structured teaching approaches for students with autism, differentiating instruction efficiently in large classes, conducting functional behavioral assessments, collaborating effectively with specialists and families, and using assistive technology. Teachers expressed preference for professional development formats including collaborative problem-solving around real cases, opportunities to observe skilled practitioners, and ongoing coaching rather than one-time workshops. Several teachers criticized previous professional development as too theoretical or generic, not addressing the specific challenges they faced. As Desimone (2009) documented, effective professional development in education requires sustained engagement, active learning opportunities, coherence with teachers' goals and contexts, and collective participation enabling ongoing peer learning. Finnish teachers' expressed preferences align with these research-based principles for meaningful professional learning.

### **Implementation Challenges and Barriers to Inclusion**

Teachers identified multiple significant challenges impeding effective inclusive education implementation despite policy mandates and their general philosophical support for inclusion. Resource limitations emerged as the most frequently and intensely voiced concern, mentioned by 89% of survey respondents and discussed extensively in every qualitative interview. Teachers described inadequate classroom assistance, with many general education classrooms receiving no aide support even when including multiple students with significant needs. Special education teachers' caseloads were cited as too high to provide sufficient individualized attention, with specialists spread across numerous students and classrooms. Insufficient specialized materials, adaptive equipment, and assistive technology further constrained teachers' ability to address diverse needs effectively. Time limitations for planning,

collaboration, and individualized instruction compounded resource challenges. According to Webster and Blatchford (2013), adequate support staff represents a critical factor enabling successful inclusion, yet many educational systems struggle to fund sufficient personnel, creating substantial implementation gaps between policy intentions and classroom realities.

Class size emerged as a particularly salient concern affecting teachers' capacity to implement inclusive practices effectively. Finnish comprehensive school classes typically range from 20-28 students, with some classes larger particularly in urban schools. Teachers consistently emphasized that managing diverse needs becomes increasingly difficult as class size increases, with their attention necessarily divided across more students. Several teachers described feeling forced to prioritize basic classroom management and whole-group instruction over differentiation when classes were large, despite recognizing that students with disabilities suffered from this compromise. One teacher articulated a common sentiment: "With 26 students including three with significant special needs, I simply cannot provide the individualized attention and instruction these students require while also meeting the needs of all the others. Something always gets shortchanged." Research on class size effects has produced mixed findings, but studies focusing specifically on inclusion contexts consistently document that smaller classes facilitate more effective differentiation and individualized support. Blatchford et al. (2011) found that class size particularly impacts students with special educational needs, who benefit disproportionately from small classes where teachers can provide more individualized attention. Finnish teachers' concerns about class size reflect evidence-based understanding of this challenge.

Behavioral challenges associated with certain disabilities represented another major area of difficulty for many teachers. Survey results indicated that 72% of teachers found behavioral disorders challenging to address in inclusive settings, with 65% identifying ADHD behaviors as difficult and 58% noting challenges with autism-related behaviors. Qualitative interviews revealed that behavioral challenges affected not only the individual student but classroom climate and other students' learning, creating ethical dilemmas for teachers about balancing inclusive commitments against responsibilities to all students. Teachers described situations where one student's behaviors consistently disrupted instruction or created unsafe conditions, leading to questions about whether mainstream placement genuinely served that student's or classmates' best interests. Several teachers expressed feeling inadequately prepared to implement evidence-based behavior interventions or manage crisis situations safely. As Emam and Farrell (2009) documented, behavioral challenges represent one of the most significant factors negatively affecting teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, with many educators feeling that students with severe behavioral needs exceed their training and that maintaining these students in mainstream settings can compromise educational quality for everyone. The Finnish teachers' struggles with behavioral challenges mirror these broader patterns.

Collaboration barriers complicated efforts to provide coordinated support for students with disabilities despite widespread recognition that effective inclusion requires teamwork. Teachers identified insufficient common planning time with special education colleagues as a major obstacle, with schedules rarely aligning to enable regular consultation and co-planning. Role ambiguity sometimes created confusion about responsibilities, with general and special educators uncertain about who should lead certain aspects of instruction or decision-making. Communication challenges between schools and families occurred when parents and teachers had different perspectives on student needs or appropriate accommodations. Some teachers described difficulty accessing expertise from external specialists such as therapists or psychologists due to limited availability or bureaucratic processes. Several special education teachers interviewed expressed frustration that their knowledge was not sufficiently utilized in planning and decision-making, despite their expertise being essential for effective inclusion. According to Friend and Cook (2017), collaboration in educational settings requires dedicated time, clear communication structures, defined roles, mutual respect, and shared commitment to common goals—conditions that formal organizational structures do not always facilitate despite collaboration's recognized importance. The barriers Finnish teachers described reflect systemic challenges in creating genuinely collaborative working arrangements.

### **Support Structures and Enabling Factors for Successful Inclusion**

Despite the challenges identified, teachers also described support structures and conditions that enabled more successful inclusive education implementation in some contexts. The three-tiered support framework mandated in Finnish education received mixed assessments from teachers. Many valued the framework's continuum approach allowing flexible support intensification without requiring formal disability categorization for initial interventions. Teachers appreciated that Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports could be provided relatively quickly without extensive evaluation processes. However, teachers also identified implementation inconsistencies across schools in how support tiers were resourced and operationalized. Some schools had well-developed systems with clear criteria for support intensification and sufficient personnel to provide interventions, while others struggled with resource limitations that rendered the three-tier framework more theoretical than functional. Several teachers emphasized that the framework's effectiveness depends critically on adequate staffing and resources, without which tier differentiation becomes meaningless.

Collaborative teaching models, particularly co-teaching arrangements pairing general and special education teachers, emerged as highly valued when available but inconsistently implemented across schools. Teachers who had experienced sustained co-teaching arrangements described substantial benefits including shared responsibility for all students, complementary expertise, more individualized instruction through small group work, and professional learning through observing

colleagues' practices. Students benefited from having two qualified teachers and reduced stigmatization since special educators worked with all students rather than pulling individuals out. However, successful co-teaching required compatible teaching partners, sufficient common planning time, clear communication about roles and responsibilities, and administrative support for scheduling. Many teachers wanted co-teaching opportunities but reported that scheduling constraints, resource limitations, or lack of established models prevented implementation in their schools. According to Strogilos and Stefanidis (2015), co-teaching represents a promising inclusive education approach but faces substantial implementation challenges in many contexts, with quality varying dramatically based on planning, training, and organizational support. Finnish teachers' experiences reflect both the model's potential and its implementation complexities.

Access to multidisciplinary support teams including psychologists, social workers, speech therapists, and other specialists substantially influenced teachers' confidence and effectiveness in supporting students with diverse needs. Teachers described how specialist input informed more accurate understanding of student needs, more appropriate intervention selection, and more effective problem-solving when difficulties arose. Regular case consultations enabled specialists' expertise to inform classroom practice without requiring specialists to provide all direct services. However, access to multidisciplinary support varied considerably across municipalities and schools based on local funding priorities and specialist availability. Urban schools generally reported better access than rural schools, creating equity concerns. Teachers in schools with limited specialist access described feeling isolated in addressing complex needs beyond their expertise. Some teachers noted that even when specialists were nominally available, high caseloads and bureaucratic processes could delay consultations or limit their frequency. As Leko and Brownell (2009) emphasized, teachers require ongoing access to specialized expertise to support students with disabilities effectively, with consultation models offering efficient means of extending specialists' impact beyond direct service delivery. The Finnish data highlight the importance of adequate specialist staffing and accessible consultation structures.

Supportive school leadership emerged as a critical enabling factor for inclusive education across both survey and interview data. Teachers in schools where principals actively prioritized inclusion, allocated resources strategically, and cultivated inclusive school cultures reported more positive experiences and outcomes. Specific leadership practices teachers valued included providing professional development opportunities focused on inclusive teaching, creating schedules facilitating collaboration, ensuring equitable resource distribution, addressing concerns promptly when inclusion challenges arose, and communicating clear expectations that all teachers shared responsibility for all students. Principals who remained visible and involved in supporting inclusive practices rather than delegating entirely to special educators helped normalize inclusion as a whole-school commitment. Conversely, teachers described struggling more in schools

where principals provided minimal inclusion leadership, focused primarily on academic performance to the exclusion of equity concerns, or allowed inclusive education to remain primarily special educators' domain. According to Hoppey and McLeskey (2013), principal leadership represents one of the most influential factors affecting inclusive education implementation quality, with effective inclusive school leaders creating conditions enabling teachers to develop and sustain inclusive practices. The Finnish teachers' accounts strongly support the centrality of leadership in creating inclusive schools.

## CONCLUSION

This comprehensive examination of Finnish teachers' perceptions of inclusive education reveals a complex landscape where philosophical commitments to inclusion coexist with significant implementation challenges and concerns about resource adequacy and professional preparation. Teachers generally endorse inclusive education principles and value the social and developmental benefits students with disabilities derive from mainstream placement. However, they simultaneously express substantial concerns about their capacity to meet diverse needs effectively given current conditions including large class sizes, limited support personnel, insufficient specialized training, and inadequate time for collaboration and differentiation. These findings underscore that even in highly regarded educational systems with strong equity commitments, translating inclusive education ideals into consistent, high-quality practice remains challenging and requires sustained attention to the conditions enabling teachers to implement inclusion successfully.

The study's findings carry important implications for policy and practice both within Finland and internationally. Policymakers must recognize that mandating inclusion without providing adequate resources, support structures, and teacher preparation will generate teacher frustration and compromise implementation quality. Investment priorities should include reducing class sizes in inclusive settings, increasing special education staffing to sustainable levels, expanding multidisciplinary support services, and creating schedules enabling meaningful collaboration. Teacher preparation programs should strengthen inclusive education content with emphasis on practical skill development across diverse disability types, particularly behavioral challenges that teachers find most difficult. Professional development should employ formats enabling sustained learning through coaching, collaborative problem solving, and peer observation rather than one-time workshops. Schools should prioritize collaborative teaching models and accessible specialist consultation while ensuring principals provide active inclusive education leadership. Future research should employ longitudinal designs examining how teachers' perceptions and practices evolve over time and investigating relationships between different support models and student outcomes. Despite challenges identified, Finnish teachers' fundamental commitment to inclusive values provides

an important foundation for continuing development of more effective inclusive education systems serving all students well.

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