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## Narratives of Inclusion: Story-Based Reflections on Special Education Practices in Finnish Primary Schools

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### ABSTRACT

**Background.** Inclusive education in Finland has long been recognized as a global model for equity and student-centered practices. However, less is known about the lived experiences of teachers, students, and families within these systems.

**Purpose.** This study aims to explore the dynamics of inclusion in Finnish primary schools through narrative inquiry, focusing on story-based reflections that illuminate the practical realities of special education implementation.

**Method.** Using a qualitative approach, we conducted in-depth interviews and collected reflective journals from 12 educators and 5 special education coordinators across three municipalities in Finland. The narratives were analyzed thematically to uncover both enabling conditions and challenges in daily inclusive practices.

**Results.** Findings reveal a strong commitment to inclusion supported by multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), yet tensions remain in workload management, inter-professional collaboration, and cultural diversity responsiveness. Participants' stories underscore the importance of empathy, flexibility, and sustained professional development in cultivating inclusive classrooms.

**Conclusion.** This study contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive education by emphasizing the role of personal and professional storytelling as a medium for reflective practice and policy insight. The research highlights the significance of listening to practitioners' voices in shaping meaningful, context-sensitive inclusive education strategies.

### KEYWORDS

Inclusive Education, Finnish Schools, Special Education

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### INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a cornerstone of progressive schooling systems worldwide, signifying a commitment to equity, diversity, and equal opportunity for all learners, regardless of their abilities or needs (Gråstén & Kokkonen, 2022; Nikander dkk., 2021). Finland, consistently ranked among the top performers in global education evaluations, is often highlighted as a model of inclusive education. Finnish policies promote student well-being, individualized learning, and early intervention—principles that underpin inclusive approaches. Despite the global admiration of the Finnish model, a deeper



understanding of how inclusion is practiced on a daily basis within Finnish classrooms remains underexplored, especially through the personal and experiential lens of educators and other key stakeholders.

The practical realities of inclusive education often diverge from policy ideals. While macro-level analyses and comparative international reports shed light on structural strengths, they may inadvertently obscure the nuanced, story-driven experiences of those who implement and live inclusive practices (Jolma dkk., 2023; Vetoniemi & Kärnä, 2021). Teachers, special education professionals, and school leaders in Finnish primary schools navigate complex challenges, including the accommodation of diverse learning needs, collaboration across multidisciplinary teams, and culturally responsive pedagogy. These realities demand closer inspection, not only through formal evaluations but also through reflective, human-centered inquiry.

By employing narrative inquiry and story-based reflection, this study seeks to access the lived realities and interpretive experiences of educators involved in special education (Bergroth, 2022; Kantasalmi & Kupiainen, 2021). Personal narratives not only enrich empirical understanding but also offer intimate insights into the emotions, judgments, and values that shape inclusive practices (Palmgren dkk., 2021; Yildirim dkk., 2024). Situating these stories within the Finnish primary school context provides an opportunity to move beyond metrics and into meaning-making—how inclusion is felt, enacted, and sustained.

Inclusive education, though widely endorsed, is far from uniformly implemented, and its meaning can differ significantly across contexts. In Finland, the formal structures supporting inclusion—such as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), early intervention policies, and special education training—are well established (Palmgren dkk., 2021; Sivola dkk., 2024). However, discrepancies between policy formulation and classroom realities persist, particularly when it comes to accommodating increasingly diverse student populations, including immigrant and neurodivergent learners. These tensions raise critical questions about the capacity of existing frameworks to be sufficiently adaptive and culturally responsive.

The problem addressed in this study centers on the limited qualitative understanding of how Finnish educators perceive and enact inclusive practices in their daily professional lives. Much of the existing literature on inclusion in Finland adopts a macro or policy-level perspective, offering limited attention to personal experiences and local challenges (Barrault-Stella & Douniès, 2021; Sääntti dkk., 2021). As Finnish classrooms become more heterogeneous, and as inclusive mandates grow more complex, the absence of practitioner voices in the discourse becomes increasingly problematic.

In this regard, there is a lack of research that captures the narrative depth of inclusion as understood and practiced by those directly involved. Educators' voices, which often reflect the tensions between ideals and implementation, have not been sufficiently highlighted as data sources (Londen dkk., 2023; Ström & Sundqvist, 2021). Without such perspective, inclusion risks becoming a theoretical abstraction rather than a tangible pedagogical process shaped by relational, emotional, and cultural dynamics. This study responds to that gap by placing narrative and reflection at the center of inquiry.

This study aims to explore how inclusion is conceptualized, practiced, and reflected upon by Finnish primary school educators, particularly within the realm of special education. The primary objective is to use story-based reflections to uncover the internal logics and interpretive frameworks educators apply when navigating inclusive settings (Jahnukainen dkk., 2023; Paananen dkk., 2023). The research investigates how narratives reveal professional agency, ethical considerations, pedagogical adaptations, and systemic constraints.

The intention is not merely to document best practices or replicate policy descriptions but to uncover the reflective processes that inform and shape these practices. By doing so, the study offers a layered and contextualized understanding of inclusion as both a structural aim and a lived reality (Mihajlovic & Meier, 2023; Niemi, 2022). It also seeks to examine how stories function as tools for professional development, policy critique, and emotional processing.

Expected outcomes include a thematic map of inclusion-related narratives, identification of common dilemmas or success stories in Finnish primary schools, and insights into how educators reconcile professional expectations with personal values (Hienonen dkk., 2021). These insights can inform not only local policy enhancements but also broader international discussions on teacher agency and inclusive reform.

A notable gap in current scholarship lies in the underutilization of narrative methods in inclusion research, particularly in high-performing education systems like Finland. While quantitative metrics and policy reviews abound, qualitative accounts—especially those capturing emotional, ethical, and contextual dimensions—remain limited (Kotilainen & Takala, 2024a; Mihajlovic & Meier, 2023). This gap leaves an incomplete picture of inclusion and fails to leverage the interpretive power of educators' lived experiences.

Narrative inquiry offers a unique avenue for capturing the texture of daily educational life, including moral dilemmas, collaborative struggles, and moments of breakthrough. In the Finnish context, such inquiry has the potential to illuminate hidden tensions and innovations that are often lost in aggregated national reports or international comparisons (Karppinen, 2022; Mankinen dkk., 2024). Furthermore, it allows for the surfacing of counter-narratives that may challenge dominant policy discourse or suggest more sustainable pathways to inclusion.

The absence of teacher-authored stories in inclusion research limits our understanding of how systemic intentions translate into pedagogical actions (Kallio dkk., 2023; Mihajlovic, 2022). This study addresses that void by centering educator narratives as legitimate, valuable, and instructive sources of knowledge. In doing so, it challenges the hierarchical knowledge structure that privileges administrative data over grassroots insight and contributes to a more democratic, situated form of educational research.

This research is novel in its explicit focus on narrative as both method and object of study in the field of inclusive education in Finland (Metsamuuronen & Ukkola, 2022; Mihajlovic, 2022). While Finland has been extensively studied in terms of educational outcomes, little research has leveraged storytelling as a lens to understand the complexity of inclusive practices. The study thus offers an innovative methodological approach that humanizes data and elevates practitioner voice.

Justifying this research lies not only in its methodological innovation but also in its relevance to policy and practice (Kotilainen & Takala, 2024b; Luukkonen dkk., 2024). As educational systems worldwide grapple with increasingly complex learner needs, the Finnish example can offer insights that go beyond structural efficiency to consider the emotional and ethical labor of educators. Highlighting these dimensions is crucial to shaping sustainable inclusion strategies that respect the realities of schooling.

This article adds critical value by framing inclusion as a narrative process—an evolving story shaped by belief, context, and experience (Rönn-Liljenfeldt dkk., 2024; Saloviita, 2022). The emphasis on story-based reflection not only addresses a significant gap in current literature but also repositions teachers as meaning-makers and co-constructors of inclusive paradigms. The findings are expected to influence not only researchers and policymakers but also practitioners seeking authentic and reflective approaches to inclusion.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore the lived experiences and reflective stories of educators involved in special education in Finnish primary schools. Narrative inquiry was selected as the primary methodology due to its strength in capturing the richness of personal experiences and meaning-making processes. The study focused on constructing knowledge through storytelling, allowing participants to articulate their understanding of inclusive practices within specific social, cultural, and pedagogical contexts (Ahtiainen dkk., 2021; Hiidenmaa, 2021). This design facilitated the exploration of not just what educators do, but how they perceive, interpret, and give meaning to their daily encounters with inclusion.

The population for this study consisted of primary school educators in Finland who were actively engaged in inclusive education practices. Participants were drawn from three urban municipalities in southern and central Finland, known for their established inclusion policies. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify educators with at least five years of teaching experience and demonstrated involvement in inclusive education (Ferreira & Bottema-Beutel, 2024; Hautamäki & Podolskiy, 2021). A total of 17 participants were selected, including 12 classroom teachers and 5 special education coordinators. This sample size allowed for in-depth data collection while maintaining a manageable scope for narrative analysis.

The main instruments used in this research included semi-structured interviews and reflective journals (Antinluoma dkk., 2022; Kääpä dkk., 2022). Interviews were guided by a flexible protocol designed to elicit detailed stories about participants' experiences with inclusive practices, ethical dilemmas, collaboration, and classroom adaptations. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Reflective journals were collected from a subset of participants who volunteered to document their thoughts over a four-week period, providing longitudinal insights into their professional reflections and classroom dynamics.

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period during the spring semester of the 2024 academic year. Initial contact was made through school principals and municipal education officers, followed by informed consent and scheduling of interviews. Interviews were conducted in English or Finnish, depending on participants' preference, and subsequently transcribed and translated where necessary (Naukkarinen & Jouhkimo, 2021; Paloniemi dkk., 2023). Journal entries were submitted electronically on a weekly basis and anonymized prior to analysis. All data were coded thematically using NVivo software, focusing on emergent themes such as identity, inclusion philosophy, emotional labor, and institutional support (Sirkko dkk., 2024). Triangulation was achieved through the combination of interview and journal data, enhancing the validity and depth of the findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents a summary of participant demographics and professional profiles involved in the study. Participants included 12 classroom teachers and 5 special education coordinators across three Finnish municipalities. Their teaching experience ranged from 6 to 24 years, with an average of 13.7 years. Most participants (82%) had formal training in inclusive education, and over half (59%) had experience with immigrant or multilingual students. The table also includes indicators of prior participation in reflective teaching programs.

**Table 1. Demographic and Professional Profiles of Participants**

Participant Code	Role	Years of Experience	Inclusion Training	Diverse Student Experience
T01	Classroom Teacher	10	Yes	Yes
T02	Special Education Coord.	15	Yes	Yes
T03	Classroom Teacher	8	No	No
T04	Classroom Teacher	18	Yes	Yes
T05	Special Education Coord.	20	Yes	Yes

A consistent theme emerging from the data was the emotional and ethical dimension of inclusion as described through participants' personal stories. Teachers frequently narrated their experiences in terms of care, frustration, growth, and ethical tension. For instance, narratives from teachers with longer tenures revealed greater emotional resilience when responding to complex student needs, whereas early-career teachers expressed uncertainty in balancing curriculum goals with inclusive practices. These distinctions suggest an experiential learning curve that contributes significantly to the success of inclusive classrooms.

Participants frequently described inclusive practice as a dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed methodology. This fluidity was reflected in their continuous adaptation of instructional strategies, student assessment methods, and classroom management approaches. Many educators viewed inclusion not only as a legal or institutional mandate but also as a moral imperative that demanded compassion, patience, and critical reflection. Such perspectives were especially prominent among educators working in multicultural classrooms.

Inferential analysis revealed that educators with prior reflective practice training were more likely to articulate complex emotional and ethical themes in their narratives. Using comparative coding between participants with and without such training, thematic density scores showed a 37% higher occurrence of moral and relational reflections among the trained group. This difference underscores the correlation between reflective habitus and depth of inclusive engagement, as measured by the frequency and diversity of values-oriented expressions in their stories.

Narratives from special education coordinators indicated a deeper engagement with systemic constraints compared to general classroom teachers. They frequently emphasized issues such as inter-professional collaboration, resource allocation, and bureaucratic limitations. These reflections often revealed tensions between institutional policy and pedagogical autonomy. In contrast, classroom teachers were more likely to highlight interpersonal aspects such as student behavior, parental expectations, and self-efficacy. These relational distinctions suggest that role-specific perspectives shape the lived experience of inclusion in complementary yet divergent ways.

One particularly compelling narrative came from Participant T04, a classroom teacher with 18 years of experience in multilingual settings. Her story illustrated the intersection of inclusive practice with language policy, cultural identity, and student trauma. She recounted how a Syrian refugee student's emotional withdrawal was addressed not through formal intervention alone, but through sustained personal dialogue, visual storytelling, and art-based expression. This



individualized approach helped the student regain classroom engagement and trust, offering a case example of holistic inclusion in action.

Another case centered on Participant T10, a special education coordinator who described efforts to integrate neurodiverse learners within mainstream science lessons. Through co-teaching and modified task structuring, the team facilitated accessible learning without stigmatizing the students. T10 emphasized that success hinged less on tools or resources and more on shared attitudes and collaboration. This account demonstrates how inclusive outcomes can emerge organically through trust-based professional relationships rather than prescriptive planning alone.

The narratives reveal that inclusion is not merely a functional accommodation but an evolving professional and emotional commitment. The data suggest that successful inclusive practices are contingent upon multiple interacting factors, including personal values, institutional flexibility, community support, and professional collaboration. Although challenges such as emotional fatigue, time constraints, and cultural dissonance persist, educators' stories underscore their resilience and capacity to reflect critically and compassionately.

Educators' interpretations of inclusion varied by context and background, but all narratives converged on the theme of relationality. Whether addressing structural barriers or emotional tensions, participants described inclusion as being fundamentally about human connection and recognition. These findings imply that any meaningful advancement in inclusive education policy must be grounded in the lived experiences and stories of those who practice it daily.

Findings from this study reveal that inclusion in Finnish primary schools is perceived by educators as both a structural responsibility and a personal moral undertaking. Educators described inclusion as emotionally demanding yet profoundly meaningful, shaped by relational dynamics, institutional supports, and professional autonomy. Thematic analysis indicated that teachers with prior reflective training articulated more nuanced perspectives, demonstrating a stronger alignment between inclusive pedagogy and internalized professional values. Participants' narratives illustrated how inclusion is deeply embedded in the rhythms of daily classroom life, beyond formal policies and frameworks.

Educators consistently referred to inclusion as an evolving narrative that requires flexibility and constant adaptation. Their stories emphasized not only the challenges of differentiated instruction and diverse student needs, but also the value of empathy, cultural awareness, and emotional labor. Personal accounts also highlighted how inclusive practices often relied more on interpersonal commitment than on structural intervention alone. These results suggest that inclusive education thrives in environments that foster teacher agency and encourage continuous reflection.

The study further demonstrated that inclusion is often interpreted through emotionally-laden decisions and ethical dilemmas rather than procedural compliance. Teachers spoke of moral tensions—balancing fairness, attention, and expectations—when working with students from vastly different backgrounds. This emphasis on ethical dimensions reinforces the understanding that inclusion cannot be reduced to a set of technical strategies, but must be embraced as a holistic, humanistic endeavor. In this way, educators' stories illuminate the lived complexity of implementing inclusive ideals.

Differences were noted between classroom teachers and special education coordinators in how they framed their experiences. Coordinators often referenced systemic limitations and institutional advocacy, while classroom teachers emphasized relational dynamics and immediate instructional challenges. This divergence of narrative emphasis points to the different kinds of expertise and responsibility each role entails within the inclusion ecosystem. Their stories, however,

collectively affirm the centrality of collaboration and shared ethical commitment to inclusive success.

Prior studies on Finnish education have typically highlighted systemic efficiency, centralized policies, and the effectiveness of MTSS frameworks. This research diverges by focusing on the emotional, ethical, and experiential aspects of inclusion through personal storytelling. Studies such as those by Niemi et al. (2020) and Lakkala et al. (2022) have emphasized policy coherence and inclusive infrastructure, whereas the present study brings attention to the interpretive agency of educators. This shift from structure to story offers a complementary lens that adds depth to the predominantly outcome-based analyses found in the literature.

Narrative findings in this study support the arguments presented by Sapon-Shevin (2013) regarding the emotional complexity and moral courage required for authentic inclusive practices. The emphasis on relational and ethical storytelling aligns with Slee's (2011) critique of inclusion as often overly technocratic and devoid of human subjectivity. This study thus contributes to a growing body of literature that repositions teacher narrative as a valuable epistemological source in understanding inclusion. Compared to previous work, the study expands the scope of inclusion research by focusing on narrative meaning-making rather than compliance.

Data from this research contrast with studies that treat inclusion as a relatively smooth, well-integrated process in Finland. Stories of emotional fatigue, moral struggle, and limited institutional support challenge the notion of an unproblematic inclusion system. These divergences suggest that even in high-functioning systems, the lived practice of inclusion remains fraught with tensions that are best understood through narrative inquiry. The use of reflective storytelling in this study, therefore, serves as a corrective lens to policy idealism.

Findings also reflect tensions reported in studies of inclusion in other culturally homogenous nations undergoing diversification. Similar to research in Scandinavian contexts (e.g., Haug, 2017), this study found that inclusive ideals sometimes collide with cultural unfamiliarity, time limitations, and the need for emotional scaffolding. Educators often relied on their own values and interpersonal skills rather than structured training to navigate inclusion effectively. These findings reinforce the importance of teacher agency and moral disposition in inclusive reform.

The narrative-driven results suggest a powerful indicator of the ethical foundations of inclusive education. Educators' reflections reveal that inclusion is not only a pedagogical stance but also a commitment to relational justice and emotional labor. The complexity of their stories implies that inclusion must be approached as a value-laden endeavor rooted in trust, reciprocity, and reflective practice. These reflections serve as a barometer of educators' emotional investment and ethical responsibility in making inclusive ideals actionable.

The emotional undertones of the narratives indicate that inclusion carries substantial psychological weight for educators. Participants' stories were filled with moments of frustration, self-doubt, and hope, highlighting the personal toll and triumphs embedded in their professional journey. The sustained effort to build inclusive classrooms despite structural and emotional challenges speaks volumes about teachers' resilience and dedication. This outcome reflects not only institutional norms but internalized ethical frameworks that guide daily teaching decisions.

The strong moral undertone in educators' narratives points to the need for policies that go beyond logistics and funding. Inclusion, as practiced in these classrooms, is deeply embedded in ethical choices and personal interpretation. These insights suggest that any model of inclusion that disregards the human story risks superficiality and disconnection from classroom realities. The reflective stance adopted by many participants may serve as a model for teacher preparation programs seeking to humanize inclusive education.

Narratives of inclusion in this study carry implications for teacher training, educational leadership, and policy design. The findings suggest that teacher education must prioritize emotional competence, cultural responsiveness, and ethical sensitivity as much as instructional strategies. Institutions should provide space for teacher reflection and peer storytelling as professional development tools. These practices may help bridge the gap between policy and practice by honoring the lived complexity of inclusion.

At the policy level, attention must be given to integrating narrative and reflective inquiry into school reform processes. Findings demonstrate that inclusive education cannot be sustained by structural design alone but must be cultivated through relational depth and meaning-making. Educational leaders should recognize the value of story-based professional dialogue in shaping ethical and context-sensitive strategies. Storytelling, in this regard, becomes both a research method and a leadership practice.

At the classroom level, this research encourages educators to continue framing inclusion not merely as differentiation or accommodation, but as an ethical practice of presence and care. Reflection on personal stories can help teachers identify their own biases, renew their motivation, and develop deeper empathy toward students with diverse needs. Cultivating a storytelling culture may also foster professional resilience and collaborative problem-solving among teaching staff.

The implications for future research are equally significant. Story-based reflections reveal areas of silent struggle often absent in conventional surveys or evaluations. Qualitative studies that center on educator voices should be expanded to include multilingual classrooms, neurodiverse student populations, and cross-cultural comparisons. These avenues may deepen our understanding of how inclusive practices are both culturally situated and personally enacted.

The patterns observed in the results stem from a combination of systemic characteristics and deeply personal orientations of educators. The Finnish education system's commitment to equity and autonomy sets a conducive framework for inclusion, but the success of implementation ultimately relies on individual agency and ethical engagement. Teachers who perceive inclusion as a moral calling tend to engage more reflexively and act more flexibly in their practice. These outcomes are further supported by institutional norms that promote trust, collaboration, and reflection.

Educators' stories reveal a reciprocal relationship between systemic structure and personal disposition. Structural enablers such as flexible curricula and access to special education resources empower teachers, but personal values and professional ethics determine how these resources are used. Differences in narrative tone and depth between educators with and without reflective training support this dynamic interplay. Institutional culture and individual narrative agency thus co-construct the real-world application of inclusive education.

The ethical and emotional layers that emerged from this study may be attributed to Finland's professional trust in educators and decentralization of pedagogical judgment. Participants' willingness to reflect openly about their struggles and growth suggests a professional culture that values self-awareness and vulnerability. These cultural traits help explain why stories of inclusion carry significant emotional depth and moral reflection in the Finnish context.

The interpretive richness of the narratives is also shaped by Finland's emphasis on lifelong learning and teacher autonomy. The space granted for self-reflection, experimentation, and dialogue within schools supports the development of ethical and reflective practitioners. These systemic and cultural conditions help create an environment where inclusion is more than policy—it becomes an evolving professional story.



Narrative inquiry should be further integrated into teacher education and policy evaluation. The study highlights the necessity of elevating teacher voices in the design and monitoring of inclusive education. Reflection and storytelling must be treated not as supplemental activities but as core components of inclusive development. Schools and ministries alike should consider institutionalizing time and platforms for reflective storytelling as part of continuous improvement efforts.

The current findings point toward the need for further inquiry into how narratives can influence organizational change in education. Story-based reflections not only document current experiences but can also inspire ethical innovation and cultural shift. Policymakers, researchers, and practitioners must ask: whose stories are we listening to, and how are they shaping our understanding of inclusion? By making space for educator narratives, we commit to a more humane, responsive, and sustainable form of inclusive education.

This research calls for the institutionalization of storytelling as both professional development and policy feedback mechanism. Teachers' voices are essential for shaping reforms that resonate with classroom realities. The next step lies in creating ecosystems that recognize stories not only as data but as instruments of transformation. Narrative becomes the bridge between ethical intention and systemic execution in the pursuit of true inclusion.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that inclusive education in Finnish primary schools is shaped not merely by policy and institutional frameworks, but by the deeply personal narratives and ethical commitments of educators. The most distinctive finding lies in the emotional and moral weight carried by teachers as they navigate the complexities of inclusion. Inclusion is not perceived solely as a technical task or administrative mandate, but as an evolving story of care, judgment, and professional reflection. The centrality of teacher voice, particularly in narrating ethical dilemmas and interpersonal strategies, marks a significant departure from existing inclusion literature that often emphasizes policy implementation over practitioner interpretation.

The study offers a valuable contribution to the field by positioning narrative inquiry as both a conceptual and methodological advancement in inclusive education research. By framing inclusion as a lived and storied process, this research introduces a reflective epistemology that centers teacher subjectivity, moral reasoning, and relational practice. The integration of storytelling as data not only uncovers hidden tensions and innovations within daily practice but also expands the methodological repertoire available to researchers and policymakers interested in understanding inclusion from the ground up. This approach enhances the theoretical discourse on inclusion by foregrounding narrative agency and ethical imagination.

The research, while rich in interpretive insight, is limited in its geographical scope and participant representation. The focus on three municipalities in Finland and the small sample size may constrain the generalizability of findings, particularly across different cultural or institutional contexts. Future research should explore comparative studies between rural and urban schools, examine multilingual or immigrant-heavy classrooms in more depth, and integrate student and parent narratives to complement educator perspectives. Additional inquiry into the long-term impact of reflective storytelling on inclusive teaching practices could further illuminate how narrative becomes not only a lens but a tool for systemic transformation.

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