In this paper, we try to examine the classical sociological points of special education, especially the organizational form of special education, social background of students and the minority status of students. The material of the study was collected mostly during 2003 from one large city in Finland. This city has more than a 100-year-long tradition of organizing special education, and it is also still organized very traditionally, that is mainly in special schools. The oldest functioning special education school was founded in 1901. This form of organization based on special schools is no longer typical in Finland. Over 1000 questionnaires were sent to special education school teachers, and students and their parents, as well as to special needs assistants. The percentage of returned responses was between 70% and 80%. Local material is practically the only way to get information of these critical points because of the Act on the Protection of Privacy and the administrative orientation of state statistics. The results show that boys are strongly over-represented in special education. Over three out of four of the students in classroom-based special education are boys. According to our comparison, the children from immigrant families account for less than one out of ten students in general education, but in classroom-based special education they represent nearly 14%, and in part-time special education as much as one-quarter (25%). The form of education differs also in regard to the social class of the parents. The parents have been divided into upper, middle and lower social classes according to their occupation. The proportion of upper-class parents of the student group in general education (42%) is doubled when compared to the parents of both special education groups. The majority of the parents of severe disabled students support the idea of special education schools, but the majority of the parents from the other special education groups are in favour of education in the nearest school.

Keywords: Inclusion; Integration; Segregation; Social class

Two contradictory aims have directed the disability policy of the Finnish compulsory school system. On the one hand, there is a tendency to ensure the fluent and efficient functioning of the school by homogenizing classes through constant observation,
evaluation and classification (Hoskin, 1979; Foucault, 1980; Tomlinson, 2001), and on the other hand, there is a constantly increasing demand to extend teaching to include all disabled pupils and to integrate their education with that of other pupils (Carrier, 1986). In addition, the building of the Finnish welfare society after the Second World War, and especially since the 1960s, has assigned new tasks to the school system. At the same time, similarly to other Western countries, there was a distinct change in the disability policy in Finnish society; this led to strong criticism of the segregationist policy of placing special education pupils in separate institutions (Dunn, 1968; Deno, 1970). While formerly the disabled had been separately placed away from the non-disabled, the aim was now to educate them alongside the others and have them participate in the normal activities of the society. For the school system, this meant that it faced pressure to close down traditional special schools and classes, and the demand to offer teaching to completely new groups of disabled pupils who had previously been excluded from the education system (Tuunainen & Nevala, 1986).

A comprehensive school produces a special education system

The ideological basis of the former Finnish parallel school system was the uneven distribution of intelligence among the population, which the classic tradition had tried to prove. Discussion about the ‘theoretically gifted’ as opposed to the ‘practically gifted’ demonstrated this way of thinking, and indeed, at the same time, the attempt was made to make such differences less discriminative by characterizing both groups as ‘gifted’ (see e.g. KM, 1946, p. 51, and 1952, pp. 20, 175). The school system was built according to this theory and following this division: the grammar school was for the theoretically gifted and the civic school for the practically gifted. Pupils continued from the former to upper secondary schools and then to universities or through middle school or vocational institutes to working life. Special education based on special schools and special classes fitted within this system. Some pupils were simply considered to have such a different mental structure and capacity that permanently segregated education was a completely natural solution. It was also natural from a historical perspective, for pupils from different backgrounds and with different abilities had always been taught separately (Kanner, 1964).

In Finland the comprehensive school system implemented during 1972–7 meant a break with this way of thinking. For the first time in the history of the school system, education in Finland was seen as a way of achieving far-reaching social reforms. The goals of education, in this case, necessitated changing the parallel school system to the comprehensive system, and involved the promotion of social, regional and gender equality. From the viewpoint of special education, the attempt to equalize social difference was fundamental, since dividing an age group into different education streams conflicted with goals. In addition, the comprehensive school system involved educating the whole age group for nine years, instead of the former four years, so that pressure was increased for bringing special education and normal education closer together (Kivinen, 1988).
From segregated space to differentiated teaching

With the growth of part-time special education, which became more common after the comprehensive school reform, the problem of the relationship between segregated and integrated special education became the principle question in the field of special education. The robust expansion of part-time special education represented a new, less discriminating special education in accordance with normalization principles, whereas classroom- and school-based special education represented the exclusive policy of the parallel school system (Moberg, 1982).

However, integration, suggested as the replacement for the traditional segregated system, has been interpreted conceptually in contradictory ways. In general, integration has been considered in terms of placing special education pupils with the mainstream education groups, so that pupils are labelled ‘integrated pupils’ and, in practice, their ‘difference’ changed into ‘deviance’, using a new terminology. When used this way, it has had little to do with the ‘democratic’ aims of integration, of which equal treatment is a major goal in this connection. Integration concerns groups and school classes, with the natural differences of pupils accepted within the everyday routines of the groups and classes. The achievement of integration demands a change of paradigmatic viewpoint from that of the individual to that of the group. ‘Homogeneous’ classes are an extremely rare phenomenon under natural circumstances, and exist only as a result of our classifying concepts and practices (Emanuelsson, 2001). Feuser (2001, pp. 189–90) has referred to this phenomenon as the ‘myth of segregation’. This view, then, is based on the traditional view of the disabled, according to which disabled people need their own peaceful, separate space, namely special schools and classes.

Thus, during the last years of the last century, the concept of inclusion gained a hegemonic status as the key concept in the field of special education, and the discourse of each field within education having to define its own place in relation to it. It has indeed become an essential part of special education, with no need any longer to argue its importance. Included is a promise of something more than integration or ‘mainstreaming’, and by relating to it, the player in the field signs up for the progressive players’ team, and politicians obtain support with a welfare state speech that avoids questions considered too concrete (Thomas & Loxley, 2001, p. vii). The existence of an inclusion discourse or even inclusion policies does not, however, mean that inclusion functions in practice. For instance, in Sweden the number of pupils in ‘special units’ (grundsärskolan) increased by as much as 62% during 1993–9, despite promises and statutes (Allodi, 2002, p. 51). If branding practices do not change, then legislation alone is an insufficient condition for reform (Thomas & Loxley, 2001, p. 4). From the viewpoint of a democratic society and of a truly comprehensive school system, the shift towards protecting children’s rights is perhaps the most essential issue within the inclusion debate. It is no longer a question of compulsory education or the children’s special needs, but rather the right to participate in the common education (Thomas & Loxley, 2001, p. 124; Allodi, 2002, p. 50).
The growth of special education

Special education is not an autonomous field in relation to general education and the school system. In particular, changes in education policy carried out during the past two decades may have very significant consequences in the field of special education.

In Finland, special education traditionally can be arranged in two forms, part-time or full-time. In part-time special education, the pupil has the status of a general education pupil who receives on the average two hours of special education per week. Part-time special education does not require official administrative decisions, but can be implemented as an internal measure within each school. On the other hand, transferring a pupil to full-time special education always requires an official decision by actors outside the school (in practice, the school board). Once the decision to transfer a pupil to full-time special education has been made, the usual choice is between transferring the pupil to a special school or to a special education class within the same school. In principle, the difference between full-time and part-time special education is clear, but in practice, the situation is more complicated. Pupils who have been officially transferred to special education may continue school in their general education class with, for example, support from a part-time special education teacher or special needs assistant, either completely integrated or partly integrated. Such integrated special education pupils now account for over one-third of all pupils in full-time special education. Their curriculum might be the same as in general education, partly modified or wholly modified (Table 1).

The growth in the number of special education pupils is evident whether it is a question of segregative or integrative form of organization. In addition, this growth has been steady and constant, as the number of pupils transferred to special education has almost doubled in five years (Tilastokeskus, 1999, p. 44). However, the greatest growth can clearly be seen in the number of completely or partly integrated special education pupils, which has increased nearly tenfold. The number studying in special schools or special classes has grown only slightly.

The growth in the number of special education pupils in Finland has been interpreted as a joint effect of several factors. First, a neo-liberal education policy means

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting or form of special education</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completely integrated in general education</td>
<td>4653</td>
<td>6061</td>
<td>7224</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partly integrated in general education</td>
<td>1852</td>
<td>5602</td>
<td>6190</td>
<td>7439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special class</td>
<td>7972</td>
<td>9377</td>
<td>10,866</td>
<td>12,147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special school</td>
<td>12,002</td>
<td>11,200</td>
<td>10,900</td>
<td>10,029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21,826</td>
<td>30,832</td>
<td>34,017</td>
<td>36,839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Special education in Finland

a shift towards strengthening competition, in which any kind of pupil selection takes on added emphasis. Special education is one form of selection (see e.g. Kivirauma, 2001; Määkinnen & Poropudas, 2001; Rinne, 2001). Second, teaching in schools has developed towards a more efficient ‘machine bureaucracy’, and therefore large groups of diverse pupils are considered to be an even bigger problem. Thirdly, behind this increase in special education, we can see the growth of professional power. At this point, teachers’ increased power in part-time special education transfers is central, as they do not need to submit to authorities outside the municipal educational administration. Fourthly, there are new classifications in the field of special education (e.g. dysphasia, autism, ADHD), which are marketed by other professionals, mainly medical experts. These new categories suit middle-class parents especially well, who are eager to accept medical explanations for their children instead of social ones.

Emanuelsson’s (2001) interpretation of the situation in Sweden is that significant decreases in resources, together with the decentralization of the school administration, have increased the burden of teaching; in such a situation, there is strong pressure to maintain the traditional structure (p. 135). Feuser considers similar economic cuts in Germany as a total withdrawal from ‘a national level of social and societal responsibility’ (Feuser, 2001, p. 191). In the opinion of Tomlinson (2001, p. 170), who has studied the British school system, these reforms have limited the tasks of education exclusively to the economic field and excluded other than economic discourses from the decision-making process; while earlier education functioned as a supporting pillar of the welfare state, now it has the same function in the field of economics (p. 166).

Data and subjects

The data in this study were collected mostly during 2003 from Turku, a large city in Finland. There are 15,000 pupils enrolled in the comprehensive schools of Turku, of which 1100 (7%) are in special education. In addition, 3700 pupils (24%) received part-time special education. The city has more than a 100-year-long tradition in organizing special education; this is still organized very traditionally, that is mainly in special schools (Kivirauma et al., 2004). The oldest functioning special education school was founded in 1901 (Kivirauma & Vuorio-Lehti, 2001). This form of organization based on special schools is no longer typical in Finland, as can be seen in Figure 1.

According to new school legislation, the arranger of education is also responsible for the evaluation of its activities. How to evaluate, who is to evaluate and how often is not prescribed. Often schools ask a university to perform the evaluation. The results of this study are based on such evaluations. In their entirety, the results have been published as a research report (Kivirauma et al., 2004).

The purpose of the study was to obtain a picture of the city’s special education as it was seen and experienced by different interest groups. Over 1000 questionnaires were sent to special education school teachers, and the pupils and their parents, as well as to special needs assistants. The responses rate was between 70% and 80% in all groups, except in the special needs assistant group in which it was lower.
In this article, we focus our interest on the critical sociological aspects of special education, in other words, on the social background and gender of pupils transferred to special education, the number of minority children in different special education settings and on the organizational form of special education (Tomlinson, 1982; Hurn, 1993). Local material is practically the only way to get information about these critical points because of the Act on the Protection of Privacy and the administrative orientation of state statistics.

Describing the data

The subjects of the study

The subjects of the study were the pupils of five of the eight special education schools in the city of Turku, as well as part-time special education pupils in 13 schools that participated in a corresponding research project on general education.¹

Three schools were excluded from the study for either administrative or content reasons. A Swedish-language special education school² and the special education school of the former detention home for boys were excluded because they did not fall under the administration of the Finnish-language school authority. The hospital

![Graph showing the relative percentage of pupils in special education school in Turku and in Finland over time.](image)

Figure 1. The relative percentage of pupils in special education school in Turku and in Finland
school was also excluded since its pupils are atypical in relation to other special education pupils. Included in the study were the school for socially maladjusted (SMA) pupils, the school for educationally subnormal (ESN) pupils, the school for the deaf, the school for severely disabled pupils and the school for physically handicapped pupils. Part-time special education was arranged in all of the 53 schools in the city of Turku. For this study we chose 13 schools (25%) such that they represented the entire city, both regionally (city centre/suburb) and socially.

The research method was multi-evaluational, that is the research included teachers, pupils and parents. In the school for severely disabled pupils, however, we included only the teachers and parents, as we believed that completing a written questionnaire might be too difficult for the pupils in this school. As in the research study on general education in the comprehensive schools of Turku, we included pupils and their parents in the 3rd, 5th and 8th classes (usually aged 9–10, 11–12 and 14–15 respectively). Information was collected from both Finnish and immigrant pupils and their parents in these classes (see Tables 2 and 3). Of the teachers, we included all those working in special education schools in the city of Turku, as well as special education teachers working as small group teachers and part-time special education teachers in general education. In addition, we included all those working as special needs assistants in the city of Turku as one target group.

Data were collected using questionnaires. Permission was requested from the parents for their children’s participation in the study before administering the questionnaire. The permission request slips were delivered to the parents via the pupils, who were to return them to their teachers in a sealed envelope. The teachers then forwarded them to the researchers. In the school for severely disabled pupils, in which the pupils did not participate in the study, the questionnaires for the parents were sent home directly by post.

Questionnaires meant for immigrant pupils and their parents were translated into their native language at the interpreters’ centre. We chose those languages whose speakers were most abundant in the material. These were Arabic, Albanian, Kurdish, Somalian, Russian and Vietnamese. However, there were no Kurdish translators in

### Table 2. The pupils in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pupils</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
<th>Grade 8</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special education school students</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Response rate)</td>
<td>(82.2%)</td>
<td>(73.1%)</td>
<td>(76.7%)</td>
<td>(77.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time special education students</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Exact percentages cannot be given for part-time special education because we did not receive reliable information on the number of pupils in part-time special education from all teachers during the study period.*
the interpreters’ centre, and thus the questionnaire was translated into only five languages.

The content of the questionnaires

Pupils’ questionnaires. Pupils in the 3rd and 5th classes responded to two questionnaires based on the earlier study on general education and other research studies. The forms for the pupils were modified slightly to suit the type of teaching involved (full-time special education, part-time special education or small group teaching). Pupils in the 3rd class received only one questionnaire.

Of the questionnaires directed to the pupils, one dealt mainly with evaluating how they enjoyed being at school and the atmosphere of the classroom. The questionnaire was the same one used in the research project studying general education in Turku a few years earlier (Olkinuora & Mattila, 2001), containing statements which the pupils had to evaluate on an agree/disagree Likert scale. The 5th- and 8th-graders were offered a five-step scale, while the 3rd-graders were given an easier to answer three-step scale.5

The other questionnaire concentrated on special education and factors related to it. The questionnaire was mainly based on an instrument used by Kuorelahti (2000), in which the central factors were how the pupil enjoyed being at school, the pupil’s attitudes towards special education and the changes in school life caused for the child by special education. The questionnaires meant for different forms of special education varied slightly. However, we attempted to keep the differences in the forms minimal, to allow comparative evaluation between different forms of special education and between special education and general education.

Parents’ questionnaires. The questionnaires used for the parents in the special education project were based largely on those used in the general education research project. The questionnaire contained both open-ended and structured items. The aim was to gather information on the family and the educational level of the parents, as well as their views on school, learning and education. Items were added to the questionnaire that dealt with the initiation of special education for the child, the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
<th>Grade 8</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents of special education school students</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Response rate)</td>
<td>(74.2 %)</td>
<td>(70.5 %)</td>
<td>(69.1 %)</td>
<td>(71.8 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents of part-time special education students</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
parents’ view on the benefit of special education and how much the parents were in contact with the child’s special education teacher (Figure 2).

**Implementation of the questionnaire**

The questionnaire for the *pupils in special education schools* was administered in autumn 2002. One or two of the researchers visited the schools and administered the questionnaire in one class at a time. This practice proved to be quite viable, since some of the pupils needed assistance in reading and understanding the questionnaire.

The researchers encouraged the pupils to ask about problematic questions and tried to assist each child individually without, however, guiding their responses. Immigrant children could choose whether to answer the questionnaire in translated form in their mother tongue or in Finnish. Many of the immigrant pupils wanted to have both the Finnish and translated form in front of them simultaneously.

Questionnaires directed to *pupils in part-time special education* were first administered in late autumn 2002, and the material was finally collected at the beginning of 2003. The study material included all those pupils who received part-time special education or small group teaching during weeks 46 and 47 of that year. The special education teachers distributed the permission request forms to their pupils during these two weeks, and the pupils returned them to their teachers as soon as possible. The actual questionnaires were completed one grade level at a time, so that one or two researchers visited the part-time special education pupils from the 3rd, 5th or 8th class who had been gathered in the same room and administered the questionnaire. In implementing the questionnaire one grade level at a time was found to be a viable
arrangement, since there were few pupils from each grade level, and administering the questionnaire to children of the same age at the same time was considered a good idea. An attempt was made to give the children assistance as needed in the same manner as with pupils in the special education schools. However, pupils in part-time special education did not seem to need as much assistance as those studying in special education classes, but seemed to understand the various sections of the questionnaire in a more independent way.

The questionnaires for the parents of pupils in part-time and classroom-based special education were given to the children to take to their parents after they had filled in their own questionnaires. If the pupils asked about the forms directed to their parents, they were told that they contained the same type of questions about school that they had themselves answered. The pupils returned the completed questionnaires to the school. Those parents who had given permission for their child to participate in the study but whose child was not in school the day the questionnaire was administered received the questionnaire by post.

Expanding special education: the educational path for boys from lower social classes

While studying the families of pupils in general education, it was found that approximately 70% of the pupils were from families which could be classified as 'a nuclear family', that is the family included both parents and one or more children (Rinne & Nuutero, 2001). The average family background of the special education pupils clearly differed from the background of pupils in general education. The differences were not large, but distinct and systematic. Of the pupils in general education, 71% came from two-parent families, while the corresponding proportions were 67% in the case of families of part-time special education pupils and 60% in the case of classroom-based special education pupils. Special education pupils, especially pupils transferred to special education classes, clearly were from single-parent families more often than the other groups of pupils.

If family background distinguishes special education pupils from general education pupils, so does gender, for boys were strongly over-represented. More than three out of four of the pupils in classroom-based special education were boys. The highest over-representation of boys was found among SMA pupils (86%). In addition, there were clearly more boys in education for the disabled (72%) and ESN education (70%). Surprisingly, there was a majority of girls in part-time special education, in our data, as less than half (45%) were boys, which is clearly less than the national average (65%).

In addition, the proportions of children from ethnic minorities in this study varied depending on the form of education. According to our comparison, children from immigrant families accounted for less than one out of ten pupils in general education, but in classroom-based special education they represented nearly 14% and in part-time special education as much as a quarter. Clearly, the great majority of immigrant pupils in special education came from Muslim countries (e.g. Somalia,
Iran), approximately half of them. The next largest groups were Russians and Estonians, especially in classroom-based special education, where there were nearly as many as there were Muslims. Approximately one-third of immigrant pupils in general education were Estonians and Russians. Probably the over-representation of part-time special education pupils from minority cultures can be explained by their lack of Finnish-language skills. Over one-half of the immigrant pupils transferred to special education, in this study, did not feel that they had received sufficient assistance in learning the Finnish language before the transfer (Laaksonen & Klemelä, 2004, p. 208).

The form of education differed also in regard to the social class of the parents. The parents were divided into upper, middle and lower social classes according to their occupation. The distribution of the parents of different pupil groups according to social classes is presented in Figure 3. The message in the figure is clear. The proportion of upper-class parents (42%) is doubled for the pupil group in general education compared to the parents of both special education groups. The differences are minor between the special education groups (Figure 3).

Among the parents of the general education pupils, there are clearly fewer from the lowest social class (approximately one in eight) in relation to the parents of the special education pupils (every fifth or even every third). Middle-class, or rather middle social group, representation is rather similar among the parents of all three pupil groups. Clearly the majority of the families of the part-time special education pupils (a little over 31%) are situated in the lowest social class. However, a part of the ‘other’ group could also be situated in the lowest social class.

If the study had been done using only the social class of the fathers as a criterion, the picture would have been a little different, because the social class of the fathers was, overall, lower than that of the mothers. As many as two-thirds of the fathers of the part-time special education pupils (65%) were from the lowest social class, and
only every seventh father (15%) in the highest social class, while the corresponding proportions among the fathers of general education pupils were 43% and 35%. The fathers of the pupils in classroom-based special education were situated between this, closer to the fathers of the part-time special education pupils.

Thus, at least in Turku, the social class of the family seems to be a highly significant indicator of the probability of the offspring of a family getting into, being sent to or ending up in special education. Even though the exception proves the rule, the main trend is that the higher the social class of one or both of the parents, the less likely it is that the child will be involved in special education. In particular, children from the lowest social classes are clients of part-time special education, which, among other things, may be caused by the fact that their family has not accustomed them to the middle-class behaviours and use of language that is required at school, and therefore they are branded as mildly deviant and occasionally ‘picked out’ from the group.

The form of organization of special education

How, then, should special education be organized according to the parents—i.e. in connection with general education in the nearest school, in special classes or at special schools? Figure 4 is intended to provide an answer to this question, where we may notice clear differences in parents’ attitudes about the place in which special education should be organized.11

On the whole, we can see that only in the case of children in the group ‘other forms of classroom-based education’ (severely disabled, deaf and physically handicapped) do the majority of the parents support the idea of separate special education schools. The majority of the other parents are in favour of education in the nearest school.

Figure 4. The parents’ view of the venue for special education, according to educational stream
While two-thirds (67%) of the parents of the ‘other classroom-based education’ pupils absolutely support organizing education in special schools, 42% of the parents of SMA pupils support it and less than a third (31%) of the parents of the ESN pupils do. Similarly, at the other extreme, the organization of special education in the nearest school in connection with general education is supported by a third (33%) of the parents of the ESN pupils, but only by a sixth (17%) of the parents of the SMA pupils and only a seventh (14%) of the parents of the ‘other classroom-based special education’ pupils. A special class situated in the nearest school received the approval of approximately one-third of the parents of the ESN pupils (36%) and the parents of the SMA pupils (34%). Among the parents of ‘other classroom-based special education’ pupils, less than one-fifth (19%) supported this form of organization. This confirms that the present system of educational streaming is by no means without its problems, nor is it unanimously accepted by the parents.

Conclusion

According to the official special education ideology, all children should receive special education according to their needs. In practice, the situation is often rather different. Decisions about special education are affected not only by the child’s welfare, but also by several institutional constraints and external pressures. As an example of the former, we could mention the special education services offered in the city in question, and of the latter, the pressure from parents (Keogh, 1987, p. 237). The importance of institutional constraints is evident in this study, since the organization of special education differs so much from the average situation of the country. This means that a pupil is more likely to be directed to a segregated special education environment than peers living in other areas. An interesting question, of course, is why the organization of special education in this city is so different from that in other cities, but based on the present data this question cannot be answered. The over-representation of the lower social classes in special education has been found in several studies over several decades. Mainly due to problems with the data used, this is often operationalized as poverty (Kirk et al., 1997, p. 558; Dyson, 2004). Even though the over-representation of the lower social classes in special education is evident, it is worth remembering that the majority of lower social class children do not need special education (Scott-Jones, 1987, p. 255).

To generalize and without going into details, we can state that this connection between social background and special education is based on several physical and cultural factors. One of the most important cultural factors is the pupil’s minority status. The connection between special education, social background and ethnicity is complicated. The question is whether minority children are over-represented due to poverty or due to ethnicity. In addition, we should ask if the over-representation is the problem as such, or rather whether there is a problem with the efficiency and quality of, or respect for, education (Reschly, 1987, p. 31). The appropriateness of the classification systems used is also part of the problem; and indeed this has been seriously questioned (Ysseldyke, 1987, pp. 266–8). In this material, as in previous studies, both
children from lower social classes and those of minority status were notably over-represented. Thus, in Finland, one of the Nordic countries which has adopted an egalitarian compulsory school system and which is one of the top countries in PISA comparisons, the school seems to be most suitable for Finnish- and Swedish-speaking middle- and upper-class children, especially girls (Kuusinen, 1992; Linnakylä et al., 2003).

The century-long development of special education has normally been presented as a transfer from exclusion to inclusion, that is from special schools to special education organized in connection with general education (Bordier, 1991, pp. 1219–21). The development has not been linear and includes numerous contradictions (Vislie, 2003). The same trend is noticeable in Finland. On the one hand, the number of integrated special education pupils is rising, but so too is the number of pupils being taught in a segregated environment. In Finland, as in many other countries, the focus of education policy has shifted in the direction of more freedom for parents to choose their child’s school, in which case the importance of the parents’ choices is emphasized. This has been seen as threatening the aims of equality in education (see e.g. Ball, 2001). However, the situation in special education is not that simple. If this policy were followed in special education in the study city, it would lead to a radical decrease in the number of pupils in the most segregative environments—i.e. in the special education schools. One of the aims of the comprehensive school reform carried out in the 1970s in Finland was to increase regional, social and gender equality. In light of the results of this study, acting along the lines suggested by the parents of special education pupils would undoubtedly promote the realization of the original comprehensive school principles.

Notes

1. Of these, one general education lower secondary school left the research project after it had begun.
2. Swedish is the second official language of Finland. Swedish speakers account for 5.5% of the general population, with slightly fewer in Turku than in the country as a whole (5.2%). Swedish-language schools usually function under their own administration.
3. Small group teaching is an informal form of special education in which the pupils receive more individualized teaching than it is possible to provide in part-time special education. Small group teaching is situated between full-time and part-time special education, but is not officially considered special education at all. In Turku, however, all small group teachers are special education teachers. The material of this study includes all four small groups functioning in the city, and the pupils in them account for approximately one-third of those in the part-time special education group.
4. The results of the teachers and school assistants are not included in this report.
5. Despite this, the questionnaire proved too difficult for 3rd-graders, and thus they were excluded from the analysis of the pupils’ responses. However, the parents of third-graders are included in the parents’ material.
6. The differences between the family types of the pupils in classroom-based special education and of the general education pupils are statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 14.06; p = 0.001$).
7. The family is classified as an immigrant family if at least one parent was born abroad and/or is a citizen of a country other than Finland.
8. The classification of social class is based on the occupation classification of Statistics Finland (Tilastokeskus). According to this, parents are divided into three classes: upper class = higher managerial or administrative personnel and special experts; middle class = experts, office workers and customer service personnel, nursing and salespeople; lower class = farmers, forest workers, etc., construction, repair and process and transport industry workers, other occupations; other = homemakers, retired people and pupils. In Figure 3, the social class of the family is calculated according to the social class of the parent who is higher in the classification. In addition, the study includes distributions and differences calculated for fathers and mothers separately.

9. The differences in the social class of the parents were statistically significant between different forms of education (between general education and classroom-based special education \( \chi^2 = 64.46; p = 0.000 \) and between general education and part-time special education \( \chi^2 = 30.50; p = 0.000 \)).


11. The number of non-responses, however, in part-time special education was large (51.4%).

References


KM (1946) Kansakoulun opetussuunnitelmakomitean mietintö I [Report from the Committee for Primary School Curriculum I] (Helsinki, KM).

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