

Including students with special educational needs in physical education: An analysis of the current Finnish national core curriculum

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Abstract

The present article draws attention to the latest curriculum reform in Finland, which came into effect in August 2016 and promoted a shift towards a competency-based curriculum which highlights diversity as a positive resource. The main aim of this study was to gain insights into the understanding of 'inclusion' within the context of PE policy in Finland and particularly focuses on the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN). This research focuses on PE, because the subject is still shaped by underlying sentiments representing traditional values such as nationalism and given gender roles which seem to contrast with the conceptualization of inclusion. Therefore, the current Finnish NCC (of PE) has been qualitatively content analysed adopting a deductive-inductive approach. The findings demonstrate that the official documents build upon a broad understanding of inclusion and diversity, which is not only restricted to students with disabilities. However, the PE curricula provide few practical implications for teaching in diverse classes which may stem from inconsistency across the analysed documents in considering diversity issues. We conclude that the Finnish curriculum leaves room for teachers' pedagogical

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autonomy, but further research is needed to explore how it frames their possibilities to work inclusively in practice.

KEYWORDS

diversity, inclusion, physical education, special educational needs

INTRODUCTION

With the demand for inclusive education for children with disabilities within a general educational setting (UN, 2006), equitable education as a fundamental right has become an important topic on the political agenda in Finland and internationally. The realization of inclusive education, however, differs from country to country reflecting its social, cultural and historical contexts (Hardman, 2008). According to previous research, this stems from inconsistency across policy documents in considering how to operationalize definitions of inclusive education, such as different priorities of groups of students which should be in focus (Haug, 2017; Nilholm, 2020).

Like in other subjects taught in schools, inclusion as an educational philosophy has shaped the subject-specific discussions of physical education (PE). However, concerns about the inclusiveness of integrated PE classes have emerged recently, as they often lack appropriate instructional strategies and accommodations (Fitzgerald, 2005; Haegele, 2019). Especially, when PE is framed as competitive sport and games and these activities are not adapted, this can have a negative influence on the experiences of learners, including those with SEN (Fitzgerald, 2005; Petrie et al., 2018).

In this respect, curricula come in the spotlight as they serve as a guide for teachers (Kirk, 2014) and simultaneously incorporate and promote the education philosophy of those in power (Penney, 2013). The PE curriculum in many countries contains exclusionary potential for those students who are not able to participate in physical activities that focus on certain normative performances or for those who do not have the ability to reflect on themselves and their learning experiences (Giese & Buchner, 2019; Meier et al., 2021). In addition, research from Germany with a special focus on health has shown that it is conceptualized in a narrow, objectifying manner in the analysed curricula, defining how bodies should be shaped in the PE class (Ruin & Stibbe, 2020). This contrasts with the suggested inclusive values in the curricular documents in many countries emphasizing the uniqueness of each pupil (Price & Slee, 2021).

In Finland, the PE curriculum seems to lag behind in the development of interculturality and other diversity issues due to the traditional ideas of a homogenous Finnish society and (sports) culture (Hakala & Kujala, 2021). Hakala and Kujala (2015) therefore suggest that teachers should be conscious of the ethos of sport behind lesson planning to counteract its force. Since it is the central role of the curriculum to act as a fundamental guide for teachers (Ennis, 2013; Kirk, 2014), it is of particular interest of this study to analyse the interplay between the implementation of an integrative approach to teaching in the new NCC (FNBE, 2016) and the subject based approaches in the Finnish curriculum traditions.

Taking PE as an example, this paper tries to analyse how the Finnish National Curriculum of PE responds to the diverse needs of students with SEN. The theoretical perspective of ableism has been used to analyse to what extent the current NCC of PE harbours exclusive potential for those children. Although the context is PE, the

perspective of ableism is applicable to other subjects across multiple disciplines and helps educators to reflect on hidden exclusive curriculum contents when teaching students with SEN in their professional practice (Buchner et al., 2015; Campbell, 2009; Giese & Ruin, 2018). The paper begins by examining the interpretations of inclusion in the current literature and the Finnish curriculum theory. The article then turns to look critically at the tensions between the curricular approaches for including students with SEN in PE and the role of traditional sports.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHYSICAL EDUCATION, SPORT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

As stated by Bailey (2005) there is a close relationship between physical education and sport, but they are not synonymous. Drawing on this broad definition (Bailey, 2005), 'sport' refers to a range of activities and 'physical education' refers to an area of the school curriculum concerned with physical activities and the development of physical competence. PE, in contrast to sport, not only refers to a range of physical activities; it also takes into account the curriculum areas and associated educational outcomes (Bailey, 2005).

Still, there is a lack of evidence which supports that sport and PE may effectively contribute to social inclusion (Dagkas, 2018). Besides, PE has "repeatedly been shown to align with and reinforce particular types of hegemonic discourses that privilege a narrow group of (white, middle-class, motor-skilled, masculine) students" (Penney et al., 2018, p. 1065). From a historical point of view, sport has often been a field where (white) male individuals have the most power and which excludes women and non-white men (Bartsch & Rulofs, 2020; Sutherland, 2017). Drawing on a recent literature review by Carter-Francique and Flowers (2013), (young) women from ethnically marginalized groups are still underrepresented as participants and professional sports leaders in sports organizations. According to an interview study considering teachers' perspectives on young people from refugee backgrounds conducted by Bartsch and Rulofs (2020), gendered and racialized perceptions of threat and vulnerability dominate the participants' mindsets on this group of students. Other studies dealing with the specific setting of PE reveal similar problems as the school subject of PE is informed by the structures and values of the extracurricular sports system (Bartsch & Rulofs, 2020; Hakala & Kujala, 2021).

Several studies from the perspective of PE teachers revealed tensions between the educative and physical dimensions of PE in Finland (Mihajlovic, 2019) and Australia (Pill & Stolz, 2015), which often stem from personal sport experiences from out-of-school settings. In line with these findings, recent studies from England and Austria confirm the PE teachers' dilemma between a more traditional view of sports and the educative dimensions of PE in the curricular approaches (Herold, 2020; Meier et al., 2021).

As previous research has revealed, only a so-called narrow understanding of bodies—idealized through heterosexuality, binary gender and certain body ideals—are recognized as normal and healthy in PE (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Webb et al., 2008). Ambivalent positions regarding the educative dimensions of PE and the traditional view of sports can be found in the Finnish national curriculum (Kujala & Hakala, 2015) and other international curricular approaches (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Meier et al., 2021). The physical dimensions of PE are often related to a more traditional understanding of the aims of PE and student assessment which are not supportive when addressing student diversity in PE. For students with SEN, a generally accepted aim when addressing inclusion in PE is that these students should participate in physical activities and feel like a legitimate participant in the lessons (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010).

UNDERSTANDING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

A narrow definition versus a broad definition

The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) has been signed by most countries worldwide. The concept of inclusive education has consequently become a global policy vision. Despite the expanding international support for the idea of inclusion, the concept encompasses various definitions and has been interpreted differently in different national contexts (Haug, 2017; Magnússon et al., 2019; Nilholm, 2020). The recent literature on inclusive education often distinguishes between two definitions: To put it in a nutshell, a narrow definition and a broad definition of inclusive education. The broad definition of inclusion refers to all individuals and marginalized groups and is not restricted to those with disabilities (Haug, 2017; Thomas, 2013). This definition is in line with the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) and the 'Education for All' approach as a global movement to provide basic education for everyone regardless of their special needs, gender or cultural backgrounds (Haug, 2017). This broad understanding of inclusion incorporates a shift from the field of disability to discourses of diversity, with a focus on a variety of diversity dimensions.

The basic premises of special education, on the other hand, is that pupils can be categorized into different deficit groups (such as learning disabilities or intellectual disabilities) and that special education is a rational response to the specific needs of those pupils (Nilholm, 2020). Unlike in many other countries, special educational needs are not categorized in different deficit groups in the Finnish context. With the implementation of a national strategy consisting of a three-tiered support system in 2011, three forms of support were introduced: General, intensified and special support. As noted in the Finnish Basic Education Act (642/2010), the educational support is not reserved for pupils with disabilities exclusively, as all pupils are entitled to receive support if needed. The form of support is based on the intensity of support and pedagogical arrangements such as guidance, differentiation, teacher collaboration, part-time special education or support from the teacher's assistant (Eklund et al., 2020).

However, some authors worry that there is a risk that the interests of those with disabilities might be ignored when focusing on other diversity aspects such as the social background or ethnicity (Miles & Singal, 2010; Norwich, 2014). The narrow definition of inclusion therefore deals solely with students with disabilities. As the literature review conducted by Norwich (2014) shows, there is a dominant use of the term inclusion in relation to special education and disability. This can be traced back to the role of integration as 'the organizational principle for special education during the 1960s' (Haug, 2017, p. 208) which is closely connected to discourses of inclusion.

THE FINNISH CASE

Inclusive education in Finland

In Finland, normalisation was a strong statement in launching the comprehensive school in 1972 and supported the integration of pupils with special needs in general education classroom settings. In 1998, the new Basic Education Act (628/1998) focused on equal rights to education for all, no matter of the school or municipality (Ekstam et al., 2015). This has been regarded as an important legal step towards inclusive education. In Finland, almost 91% of all students with special support attend mainstream schools, however, only 21% of all students with special support are taught fully in a general education class (OSF, 2019).

The most common option (43%) is partial teaching in general education groups and special classes located in mainstream schools. Overall, 27% of all students with special support are taught full-time in special classes in mainstream schools (OSF, 2019). The prevalence of special education groups for children with disabilities in mainstream schools is difficult to reconcile with the ideal understanding of inclusive education (Malmquist & Nilholm, 2016).

In Finland, a multi-tiered framework of educational support was introduced in 2010 which resembles the Response to Intervention (RTI) model in the U.S. (Björn et al., 2016). According to Official Statistics of Finland (OSF, 2016) segregating methods for special instruction in special groups are common practices in schools. This contrasts with the notion of inclusion that has been supported by inclusive education policies, such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). The increase of pupils with special needs in general education classrooms in Finland has mostly resulted from the overall growth in the identification of pupils with special support (Pulkkinen & Jahnukainen, 2016). Finland still has a high number of students receiving special educational services compared to other European countries (OSF, 2016).

Curriculum design in Finland

Official texts like curricula are read within certain settings which are framed by each country's unique curriculum tradition (Autio, 2017; Haapaniemi et al., 2020), cultural and policy contexts (Penney, 2013). From a historical point of view, the Finnish curriculum tradition is mainly influenced by the two curriculum approaches of Anglo-American Curriculum theory and the German 'Lehrplan' and its conceptualization of 'Bildung/Didaktik'. The Scandinavian tradition of Bildung-centred Didaktik—as defined by Klafki and others—can be described as a process of character-formation that refers to the ability to recognize and follow one's own interests in society and to behave within society as a responsible citizen (Sjöström & Eilks, 2020).

In the tradition of 'Lehrplan' and 'Bildung/Didaktik', the Finnish curriculum has always been strongly subject-based. However, the structure of the curriculum document has gradually changed from subject content to more general objectives (Haapaniemi et al., 2020; Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Lähdemäki, 2019). While the 2004 curriculum version still stressed the role of subjects, the latest curriculum (FNBE, 2016) consists of two equal main parts: The first part consists of general and broader education goals, transversal competencies and values in contemporary times including the conception of learning and diversity issues. The second part presents the objectives, core contents and evaluation criteria for each school subject (see Figure 1). Thus, the first part serves the function of providing a general framework to inform the more subject-specific part.

While the ideal of 'Bildung' dominated in Finland in the first half of the twentieth century, Finland has been influenced by educational ideas from the United States after second world war (Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Vitikka et al., 2012). At that time, teacher autonomy became more important and the idea of the teacher as a researcher emerged (Hakala & Kujala, 2021). Teacher autonomy has been supported by a research-based teacher education in Finnish universities. As teachers play a central role in delivering the curriculum content to their students, understanding their perceptions of the curriculum as a framework for their teaching is important (Ennis, 2013; Haapaniemi et al., 2020). In Finland, the newest curriculum reform emphasizes the teachers' didactic autonomy and building on the teachers' professionalism (Haapaniemi et al., 2020; Sahlberg, 2013). Teachers play a central role in converting the curriculum content into meaningful lessons and therefore have a high responsibility for their students' learning progress (Haapaniemi et al., 2020). Several studies indicate that teachers in Finland have didactical autonomy as long as the content of their

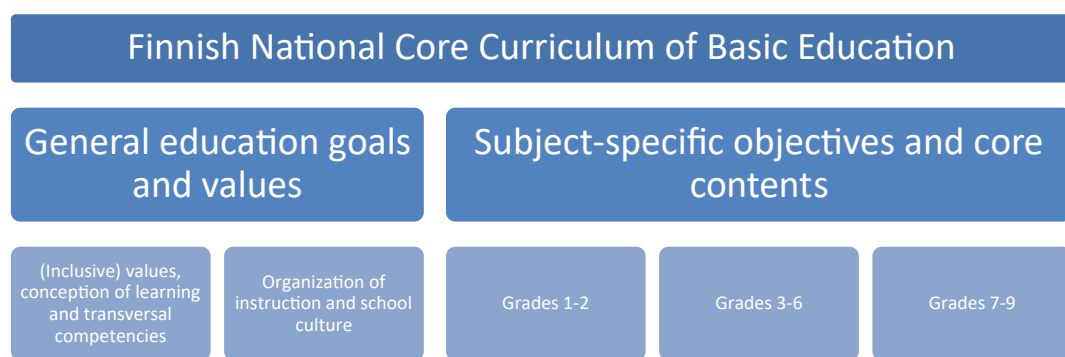


FIGURE 1 Structure of the Finnish national core curriculum of basic education

teaching follows the basic principles of the national curriculum, serving as a framework for their teaching (Haapaniemi et al., 2020; Mihajlovic, 2019).

Although various interest groups were officially involved in the curriculum design process of the latest curriculum, they did not play a significant role developing the final version of the NCC (Säily et al., 2020). This strongly controlled design process accompanied by global neoliberal influencers has been criticized by some scholars (Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Säily et al., 2020), arguing that the process may not have included the voices of young people sufficiently.

Finnish PE

As pointed out by Hakala and Kujala (2015, 2021), the subject PE is traditionally committed to the idea of a homogenous Finnish society and culture, which is in contrast to the values mentioned in the current core curriculum. The historical roots of this situation can be traced back to the traditional values in the (Finnish) sports culture which are based on nationalism, given gender roles and achievement orientation, and thus restrain alternative discourses in PE curricula (Hakala & Kujala, 2021). Besides, there seems to be a gap between the understanding of inclusive education in the curriculum and the realizations of inclusive practices on school level. In former curriculum versions, PE content was divided between girls and boys and even today, PE classes are mainly organized separated in the secondary level, although there is no legal basis for this (Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Yli-Piipari, 2014).

A CURRICULUM FOR STUDENTS WITH SEN—THE PERSPECTIVE OF ABLEISM

As stated by Price and Slee (2021), reforming the curriculum for students with disability is a much larger project than simply adapting syllabi. It requires a much more expansive view of curriculum, and it requires the recognition of the ways in which curriculum practices systematically exclude students with disability (Price & Slee, 2021).

In this study, the theoretical perspective of ableism can help to reflect and deconstruct hidden barriers to inclusion. As pointed out by Giese and Ruin (2018, p. 8), 'curricula for PE classes document the institutional standards against the backdrop of the zeitgeist in educational policy, sport pedagogy and society as a whole'.

Thus, if we seek to understand the emergence of any particular curriculum version, the complex histories that characterize how a school or a subject function must also be understood (Brady & Kennedy, 1999). As previous research has shown, the desired curricular goal in PE is to shape the students' bodies to conform to the requirements of particular sports, which goes back to the strong role of extracurricular sports in the past (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Hakala & Kujala, 2021). Until emphasizing the educational goals of PE in the current curricular shift in Finland (FNBE, 2016) and internationally, normative expectation of a healthy and functioning body capable of performing at a high level has been idealized in curriculum documents (Giese & Ruin, 2018). Still today, PE curricula with normative performance expectations are currently in use in many countries, especially if the curricula are designed output/competency orientated (Meier et al., 2021; Paveling et al., 2019).

Through the lens of ableism, romanticized body images and a normative understanding of performance are problematic when dealing with diverse learners in the PE class (Giese & Ruin, 2018). In many cases, children with disabilities are regarded as something different from the norm and stereotypical representations still exist in school curricula: 'Much like the missing contributions of women and people of colour in school curricula of years past, so it remains for people with disabilities. Just as girls and children of color once saw few and/or stereotypical representations of themselves in school curricula, so it remains for children with disabilities' (Valle & Connor, 2011, p. 195). From the perspective of ableism, curricular documents should question the assumption that a person's disability refers to certain characteristics, which may have discriminatory and exclusionary potential. For instance, stereotypes which are associated with specific disabilities include the presumption that children with visual impairments automatically refer to the inability of the person to see objects as clearly as a healthy person. However, vision impairments are heterogeneous due to the complex nature of the visual system and therefore, children with vision impairment usually require diverse adaptations or technologies to have access to mainstream education.

Numerous studies have shown that PE curricula are often dominated by competitive activities that stem from traditional sport culture (Meier et al., 2021; Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Haycock & Smith, 2010; Giese & Ruin, 2018; Smith & Green, 2004). The curriculum content therefore reduces the opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in PE (Tant & Watelein, 2016).

Other studies show that a broader and more holistic understanding of performance and flexible evaluation criteria are important to accommodate the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities (e.g., Ruin & Meier, 2017). Moreover, the success of learning is often strongly connected to the ability of self-reflection. This may also exclude those children who are not able to do so due to their intellectual disability (Giese & Buchner, 2019). A current curriculum analysis revealed that the Finnish core curriculum of PE harbours at least some exclusive potential for those students, who do not have the ability to reflect on themselves and their learning experiences (Mihajlovic, 2019). However, a more systematic analysis is needed to explore the interplay between the general conception of the curriculum and the subject-specific issues of PE.

METHODS

Study design

The analysis of the documents was guided by the two following research aims:

- First, the analysis tries to gain insights into the understanding of 'inclusion' within the context of PE policy in Finland and how 'inclusion' is defined within the official curriculum framework.

- Second, the main purpose of this study is to investigate how the current Finnish (PE) curriculum addresses the inclusion of students with SEN.

Different parts of the Finnish NCC were selected for this analysis in line with the research aims, which included the general part of the curriculum and the teaching guidelines for the subject PE. The data analysis was conducted in English, as the data source—the Finnish national core curriculum—was available in English language. Therefore, no translations of the documents into English were necessary. Using the perspective of ‘ableism’ as a theoretical background, the specific aim of this analysis is to examine to what extent the current curricular approaches harbour exclusive potential.

Data material

The official documents that served the main source of this analysis were the first chapters of the curriculum that consist of values and general goals and principles of Finnish basic education and the subject syllabus of PE concerning grades 1–2, 3–6 and 7–9. Beforehand, as part of a literature review, former curriculum studies on Finnish PE programs have been reviewed.

The general part of the curriculum also includes chapters on the conception of learning, the development of an (inclusive) school culture, the role of transversal competences, and general assessment criteria.

The subject-specific part of the curriculum defines objectives, core contents and assessment criteria for each subject. Regarding PE, the objectives refer to certain key content areas (physical, social and psychological functional capacity). Besides, connections between the transversal competencies and the content areas of each subject are defined in the subject-specific part of the Finnish NCC. The different parts of the curriculum that have been analysed in this study are displayed in Table 1.

Data analysis

The current Finnish NCC (of PE) was qualitatively content analysed adopting a deductive-inductive approach combining ‘emerging and predetermined codes’ (Creswell, 2014, p. 199). The data analysis followed the guidelines of the qualitative content analysis (QCA) by Kuckartz (2019). The starting point was a coding frame with deductively formed codes which related to the two main research aims. Theory-based concepts were first

TABLE 1 Analysed data material

General part of the curriculum	Subject syllabus of PE
Analysed Chapters:	Analysed Chapters:
1 The significance of local curricula and the local curriculum process	13 Grades 1–2
2 Basic education as the foundation of general knowledge and ability	13.4.11 Physical education
3 Mission and general goals of basic education	14 Grades 3–6
4 Operating culture of comprehensive basic education	14.4.13 Physical education
5 Organization of school work aiming to promote learning and wellbeing	15 Grades 7–9
6 Assessment	15.4.17 Physical education
7 Support in learning and school attendance	
8 Pupil welfare	
9 Special questions of language and culture	
10 Bilingual education	

TABLE 2 Sub-categories of the main category “responding to students with SEN in PE”

Sub-category	Examples (Quotes)
<p>Individualized educational support (contents referring to forms of support and pedagogical arrangements such as guidance, differentiation, teacher collaboration, part-time special education)</p>	<p>‘The need for special aids may be associated with vision, hearing, mobility or other physical needs. It may also be related to special learning needs. For example, various information technology applications, audio books, tools for illustrating mathematics or aids that support concentration may be used’. (FNBE, 2016, p. 131)</p>
<p>Positive body image (contents referring to the construction of the body and health such as questioning the body ideal of a ‘healthy and fit body’)</p>	<p>‘In grades 7–9, it is particularly important to strengthen the pupil’s positive self-image and acceptance of his or her developing body’. (FNBE, 2016, S. 691).</p>
<p>Assessment criteria (contents referring the student assessment and specifically addressing the individual needs of students with SEN)</p>	<p>‘The aim of assessment is to recognize the pupils’ personal strengths and development needs and to support them. The pupil’s state of health and special needs shall be taken into account in the instruction and assessment of physical education’. (FNBE, 2016, p. 264)</p>

translated into a general framework of codes. The coding system was then differentiated in more detail and thus revealed specific themes and patterns within the data (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015).

For the purpose of the analysis in this paper, these main categories were translated into a category system for deductive coding. First, the two main categories—‘Understanding inclusive education’ and ‘Responding to students with SEN in PE’—were chosen based on a thorough review of literature in the field of sports and PE. Second, each category was differentiated within the coding system while specific themes emerged in an inductive way during the data analysis. Following the six steps of QCA a proposed by Kuckartz (2019), the text material was first prepared and read through several times. Secondly, main categories corresponding to the current literature were formed (see Table 2). In the third phase of the analysis, the corresponding text segments were coded with the two main categories. In the following fourth phase of the analysis, the coding frame was developed further by creating subcodes directly in relation to this data (data-driven creation of sub-categories). For instance, the main category ‘Responding to students with SEN in PE’ coded the text segments in the documents regarding how the PE curriculum meets the needs of students with SEN. Examples for each sub-category that refer to this main category are displayed in Table 2.

First, all text passages to which this category was assigned were compiled. Then each of these text passages was coded a second time. This was done based on the procedure similar to that of inductive category development by Mayring (2010). In the fifth phase, the sub-categories were revised carefully, checked for reliability and finally used to present the results. In the final phase, the category-based presentation of the results was reported and documented with illustrative quotes from the original material.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In each of the following sections, an overview of the most significant results will be provided, and some key passages are quoted from the analysed documents to exemplify the findings.

Understanding inclusion

The general part of the Finnish National Core Curriculum builds upon a broad understanding of inclusion, capturing any group of students, not solely children with disabilities. Referring to the legal framework of the Finnish Constitution and the Non-Discrimination Act (21/2004), 'nobody may be discriminated against on the basis of gender, age, ethnic or national origin, nationality, language, religion, belief, opinion, sexual orientation, health, disability or other personal characteristics' (FNBE, 2016, p. 22). In the general part of the curriculum, the accessibility to education for all students has been associated with the principle of inclusion and should be achieved by supporting the pupils' well-being in cooperation with the homes (FNBE, 2016, p. 31). More precisely, schools and families should work together to support students' learning and development. However, the term 'inclusion' is mentioned for the first time in the current Finnish national curriculum. In the underlying values of basic education, it is stated that the 'development of basic education is guided by the inclusion principle' (FNBE, 2016, p. 19). Consequently, diversity is recognized and appreciated as an asset in the curricular documents. Further on, social exclusion is regarded as a violation of human rights and a threat to the child's personal development:

Exclusion from learning means that a child's educational rights are not implemented and is a threat to his or her healthy growth and development. (FNBE, 2016, p. 25)

While in many countries, inclusive education is often reduced to special needs education in policy documents, the Finnish curriculum seems to see (inclusive) education as a 'social movement against educational exclusion' (Slee & Allan, 2001, p. 177). As a tool for social justice, the curriculum may help schools in overcoming processes of exclusion (Slee & Allan, 2001).

Exclusionary practices should be avoided by offering flexible support forms for learning that are based on the pupil's individual needs:

The support received by the pupil must be flexible, based on long-term planning, and adjustable as the pupil's needs for support change. Support is provided for as long as necessary, and at the level and in the form indicated by the pupil's needs. (FNBE, 2016, p. 108)

Forms of educational support are not only restricted to students with disabilities and include other dimensions of diversity such as linguistic diversity. As the analysis shows, recognising and respecting diversity is an important aspect of the underlying values of the current curriculum. In contrast to the inclusive values highlighted in the general part of the curricula, however, diversity issues seem to play a minor role in the PE curricula and are mainly reduced to the diversity dimension '(dis-)ability'. Cultural diversity and gender equality are promoted for the first time in the current PE curriculum, as stated above (FNBE, 2016). As pointed out by Hakala and Kujala (2021), previous Finnish PE curricula entirely excluded cultural diversity until 2014.

Responding to SEN in PE

While the general part of the Finnish NCC addresses the concept of inclusion in a broad and comprehensive way, the PE curricula mainly reduce the concept of inclusion to the dimensions of '(dis-)ability'. Differences among pupils concerning gender-related questions are not mentioned at all in the PE curricula. When referring to diversity issues, however, the PE curriculum hardly gives guidance that could be useful for practitioners on school level. In general,

there remains freedom for individual schools and teachers to interpret the curriculum as they wish, as suggested in the chapter 5.6 'Issues subject to local decisions' (FNBE, 2016, p. 77).

Individualized educational support

As stated in the general guidelines of the Finnish NCC, every pupil has the right to receive educational services and special aids he or she needs to participate in education. These special aids are free of charge and available at all levels of support (FNBE, 2016, p. 131). As the following quote illustrates, the need for special aids may be associated with different educational needs:

The need for special aids may be associated with vision, hearing, mobility or other physical needs. It may also be related to special learning needs. For example, various information technology applications, audio books, tools for illustrating mathematics or aids that support concentration may be used. (FNBE, 2016, p. 131)

In this regard, the teacher's task is to plan, instruct and assess the learning approach of the individual student with SEN and the entire group, if necessary, in collaboration with an assistant or other school staff members (FNBE, 2016, p. 131).

Drawing on the theoretical concept of ableism, the curricular documents do not 'label' students with SEN by highlighting that every pupil has the possibility to receive educational support at some point, not only students with certain disabilities.

Students who are unable to study according to the individual syllabi of subjects receive instruction organized by activity areas rather than by subjects, to provide the pupils with knowledge and skills that allow them to manage their lives as independently as possible (FNBE, 2016, p. 126).

As stated in the curriculum, the arrangement of instruction by activity areas mostly refers to pupils with more severe developmental disabilities which requires the decision of special support (the strongest form of support) and an individual education plan (FNBE, 2016, p. 126). The support forms may be either organized in remedial teaching or part-time special needs education (FNBE, 2016, p. 129), which often take place in segregated placements (OSF, 2016). Remedial teaching may be used as a precautionary measure to prevent (learning) difficulties. In PE, the aim is to identify developmental delays and difficulties in learning motor skills at an early stage and to provide timely support:

In grades 1–2, it is important to recognize difficulties in learning motor skills that may also be connected to other learning difficulties. (FNBE, 2016, p. 263)

Overall, the curriculum expects teachers to identify and respond to the individual needs of their students which requires pedagogical expertise and cross-sectoral cooperation between teachers and other professionals for 'assessing the need for support and planning and implementing support measures' (FNBE, 2016, p. 108). However, segregating methods for special instruction in special groups are still common practices in Finnish schools (OSF, 2016).

Body image

Throughout the document, the task of PE to ensure that the students have enough positive experiences of their own body is mentioned several times (FNBE, 2016, p. 260, p. 262,

p. 454). The following quotation illustrates the importance of supporting a positive body image and the acceptance of the own body in grades 7–9:

In grades 7–9, it is particularly important to strengthen the pupil's positive self-image and acceptance of his or her developing body. (FNBE, 2016, p. 691)

Furthermore, in both sections of the curriculum, the general education section and the PE section, the binary of 'he' and 'she' offers a 'simple' interpretation of gender, but it excludes those with different identities. Regarding the exclusion of students identifying as non-binary in the curricular documents, there is a risk that teachers do not take into consideration the existence and needs of transgender people. In doing so, it may prevent teaching gender in a more complex way.

Besides, one focus of PE is obviously on maintaining or increasing individual physical performance. In the assessment criteria at the end of grade 6, it is stated that: 'The pupil knows how to assess his or her physical fitness and to improve his or her speed, flexibility, endurance, and strength by exercise' (FNBE, 2016, p. 453).

For this purpose, body experiences are to be used to align with the supposedly 'normal' development of a 'fit' body and to improve the individual fitness level in a process of accepting his or her developing body. In line with findings from Germany, the pupils are mainly supposed to take responsibility for their own body and thus, also for their own health (Ruin & Stibbe, 2020). In contrast to the German findings, however, the Finnish PE curricula rather seem to build upon a salutogenic understanding of health, in which the focus is not on short-term fitness promotion, but on "strengthening personal resources and a stable self-esteem, which also accepts weaknesses of the individual" (Ruin & Stibbe, 2020, p. 12).

From the perspective of ableism, the construction of the body and health in the current Finnish NCC seems to be problematic at some point, as performance expectations are relativized at a surface level, but nevertheless the PE curriculum exhibits a potential for discrimination for persons with disabilities: As pointed out by Giese and Ruin (2018) there is a 'fundamental unspoken assumption that the individual is able to move autonomously and purposefully and that he or she can, at will, access a functioning body that is largely unrestricted in its ability to move'.

As the following sub-theme shows, there is some exclusionary potential related to students with disabilities who are unable to reproduce normative motor skills due to their body composition.

Assessment criteria

Regarding students with SEN, the PE curriculum for grades 1–2 highlights the importance of meeting the individual needs of all students concerning the instruction and assessment of PE. The following quote illustrates this:

The aim of assessment is to recognize the pupils' personal strengths and development needs and to support them. The pupil's state of health and special needs shall be taken into account in the instruction and assessment of physical education. (FNBE, 2016, p. 264)

In many passages, the curriculum highlights the importance of meeting the individual needs of all students in the assessment and instruction. In some cases, the current PE curriculum falls short for students with disability through the normative, expected achievement standards in some assessment criteria. For instance, 'the pupil has basic

swimming skills if he/she is able to swim 50 metres using two different strokes' (FNBE, 2016, p. 453). The ableistic view on this assessment criteria indicates that the expected achievements are linked to the ability to be able to reproduce normative motor skills. However, there are individuals (with disabilities) who do not possess these skills, and they will be denied the chance to succeed in such educational settings (Giese & Buchner, 2019; Giese & Ruin, 2018).

From the perspective of ableism, the current Finnish NCC harbours some exclusive potential which is related to the learners' ability of self-reflection. Although the inclusion of critical thinking and self-reflection within the curriculum can be interpreted as a support for strengthening the educative dimensions of PE, there is little information on how students with more severe disabilities may achieve these expected achievement standards. There are several passages in the Finnish PE curriculum in which educational achievement refers to a highly developed capacity for abstraction and reflection. As stated in the assessment criteria for PE at the end of grade 6, for instance, pupils should possess the ability to reflect as a precondition to acquire new knowledge and skills:

While acquiring new knowledge and skills, the pupils learn to reflect on their learning, experiences and emotions. (FNBE, 2016, p. 28)

In other words, the ability to be educated seems to be closely related to the ability of reflection. Drawing on the concept of ableism, individuals with intellectual disabilities or a behavioural disorder, for instance, might not be able to engage the processes of self-reflection as expected in the curricular documents and therefore be overlooked and excluded (Buchner et al., 2015; Giese & Ruin, 2018). The FNBE (2016) therefore suggests that the instruction and assessment of students with severe disabilities be arranged by activity areas which do not necessarily imply full participation of the students with SEN in a mainstream class. When studying by activity areas, verbal assessments are used for all grades instead of numerical grades (FNBE, 2016, p. 99). In this regard, there are tensions between certain notions of inclusive education supporting the understanding that individuals with disabilities should be entitled to full membership in regular classes (Haug, 2017) and the (educational) goals in PE, which do not seem to be fully aligned to this particular notion of inclusive education.

The tensions between the educative and physical dimensions of PE also become visible in PE teachers' reflections concerning the perspectives on the nature and objectives of PE (e.g., Pill & Stolz, 2015). When addressing inclusion in PE, teachers in recent studies highlighted the priority of students having fun or enjoying physical activities as most important to teaching PE (Mihajlovic, 2019; Tant & Watelein, 2016). These findings are in line with previous research conducted by Pill and Stolz (2015) in Australia and mirror the PE as PA perspective. Other teachers, on the other hand, show a rather standardized understanding of performance (and a kind of traditional assessment) based on the physical fitness level, which contrasts with the suggested flexible assessment criteria of many curricular documents (FNBE, 2016; Herold, 2020). Drawing on previous work by Hay and Penney (2012), teachers need to be knowledgeable and skilled in assessing their students in order for assessment to be positively influential in PE. Moreover, PE teachers should be committed to enhancing students' own knowledge and skills in this area (Hay & Penney, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The intention in undertaking this research was to portray the understanding of inclusion in the current Finnish NC for PE and particularly focusing on the inclusion of students with SEN. The Finnish national curriculum addresses inclusion in a comprehensive manner,

referring to various diversity dimensions and (inclusive) values which are associated with fundamental human rights. However, the extent to which inclusion is addressed varies considerably between the general part and the subject-specific part for PE. While the general part of the Finnish NCC addresses diversity issues in a specific and comprehensive way, the PE curriculum mainly reduces the concept of diversity to the dimensions of '(dis-)ability' and 'cultural diversity'.

Differences among pupils concerning gender-related questions are not mentioned at all in the PE curricula. A PE teacher may read the general part in terms of general issues (such as a general understanding of diversity), and the subject-specific part in order to know how to specify the content and learning outcomes for e.g., PE-teaching. Thus, a uniform understanding of diversity-related intentions between the two parts of the Finnish NCC is missing. From the teachers' perspective, it is their task to mediate issues of diversity between the two parts of the document. Or in other words, the NCC provides teachers with inconsistent guidance for teaching.

In line with recent findings from Austria (Meier et al., 2021), the PE curriculum in Finland mainly scratches the surface and provides few implications for teaching and learning in diverse classes. Compared to the curricular documents from other countries, however, normative performance expectations and body ideals are not in the focus of the analysed curricula in Finland. Although standardized competencies exist in the Finnish curricular approaches, these performance expectations have a less normative character than in other countries (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Haycock & Smith, 2010; Ruin & Meier, 2017). As the Finnish national core curriculum in PE is rather short on content, it leaves decisions on content and teaching methods to individual teachers and schools. Due to the flexibility of the curriculum, teachers in schools are likely to choose certain sports and physical activities based on their individual interests that are not explicitly mentioned in the curriculum. In the spirit of *Bildung*, there is a culture of trust in Finnish teachers and their professional ethics emphasizing the childrens' individual growth (Haapaniemi et al., 2020; Hakala & Kujala, 2021).

The findings of the present study support the need for practitioners to challenge normative perceptions and resist seeing diversity as a deficit, instead recognizing diversity as a strength and an asset. Still, there seems to be a discrepancy between the curriculum and the reality in schools due to country specific traditions of separating boys and girls in Finnish PE (Annerstedt, 2008; Yli-Piipari, 2014) and the role of traditional sports in PE (Hakala & Kujala, 2015). As pointed out by Kujala and Hakala (2015), the ethos of sport can still be regarded as a 'silent partner' in PE curricula.

We conclude that the subject of PE seems to be unique in the narrowness of its conceptualization of inclusion due to the prominent role of sports and particularly the 'ethos of sport' in constructing the subject of PE (Kujala & Hakala, 2015; Hakala & Kujala, 2021). The unique narrowness does not only refer to the Finnish PE curriculum, but—more general—for PE curricula in many countries. Compared to the curricular documents from German-speaking countries (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Ruin & Stibbe, 2020), for instance, ability expectations of neoliberal societies that follow the production of fit and healthy subjects are less in the focus of the analysed curricula in Finland.

Further on, as stated by Hakala and Kujala (2021, p. 12), "these issues restrain alternative discourses in PE curricula even today and, simultaneously, not only alienate students from their bodies but also prevent their self-understanding and their growth in moral subjects". Consequently, it is important for teachers to understand the historical foundations of the subject as well as the current unethical discourses influencing PE (Englund & Quennerstedt, 2008; Hakala & Kujala, 2021). Research from the (PE) teachers' perspective on the aims of the subject reveals that PE teachers struggle with the tensions between educative dimensions of PE and its traditional role (Mihajlovic, 2019; Pill & Stolz, 2015).

We identify the necessity to coordinate the conceptual frameworks of curricular documents in order to avoid contradictory and confusing messages, as it has already been suggested by other scholars (Meier et al., 2021). When it comes to curriculum studies, it is therefore necessary to question the extent to which these educational policy guidelines may become reality on a practical level in schools. It is important to keep in mind that the practical-level implementation 'relies on the practitioners' input, as well as being embedded in particular societal and cultural structures' (Kangas et al., 2020, p. 5). In Finland, teachers are expected to be critical practitioners and to act as curriculum specialists, however, little is known if this educational autonomy contributes to the development of inclusive practices on the classroom level.

As part of a larger research project, a qualitative interview study with (PE) teachers is underway to build on this curriculum analysis and to explore the interplay between curriculum theory and its reflections in inclusive teaching. Further research is needed to systematically examine the exclusive potential of current curricular approaches from an international or comparative perspective as curricular documents provide teachers with a compulsory framework for teaching in their subjects (Meier et al., 2021).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study followed the general ethical standards according to the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2016).

DATA DEPOSITION

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [CM], upon reasonable request.

GEOLOCATION INFORMATION

The data was collected in 2016/17 during a one-year stay of the corresponding author as a visiting doctoral student and researcher at Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [CM], upon reasonable request.

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