

## Review Article

# Effects of History and Culture on Attitudes toward Special Education: A Comparison of Finland and Norway

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This paper discusses the role of special education in Finland and Norway. There are major differences in how special education is understood in these countries. The different perspective that Finland and Norway have on the concept of inclusion is also striking. The PISA test results show that the Finnish school is performing well, partly because of flexible part-time special education; the early intervention strategy also plays a role in this success. These aspects are making Finnish schools inclusive; support is offered immediately when it is needed without any bureaucratic process. An effective teacher education program is also a key element in creating a successful school system. Norway's relatively weak educational results could mean that despite their strong focus on inclusion, Norwegian schools are not inclusive. The quality of special education is debated. If it is true that special education is helping to create success in schools, then clearly there is a need to discover more about the different systems and what factors may influence that success. Despite the close geographical and political relationship between Norway and Finland, there exists clear differences in the educational area.

## 1. Introduction

*Background and Aim.* In previous studies we have investigated the similarities and differences between the Norwegian and Finnish special educational system [1–3]. These studies have mainly compared specific aspects of the special educational systems in these two countries. The previous comparisons have made it clear that in order to understand in depth the differences experienced, the perspective must be broadened and the social culture within which the special educational system exists must be considered. The aim of this paper is to present the central differences in the special educational system between Finland and Norway and then to focus on the societal cultures and the educational practices of the Finnish and Norwegian states.

Since the Programme for International Assessment, known as PISA, began to be administered in the OECD countries in 2000, Finland has been among the most highly ranked nations in international learning outcomes. Norway has ranked around average, and the ranking has increased over

time until 2009 when Norway was above average [4, 5]. The difference between the educational outcomes in these two countries is even more striking because Finland and Norway are closely connected, both geographically and culturally. In addition, Norway invests more money in basic education than Finland [6]. Both countries are examples of the Nordic welfare system, and consequently, the educational systems in general are relatively similar. As part of the public welfare system, Finland and Norway have public schooling for all children and there are very few private schools. This compulsory public education is comprised of primary school (six years in Finland, seven in Norway) and middle school (three years).

The provision of special education differs in Finland and in Norway; Finland has many more pupils in special education than Norway. This difference is particularly worth noting because, from a Finnish perspective, many researchers have claimed that the provision of special education is one important factor in explaining the exceptional PISA results among Finnish students [7–9]. Kivirauma and Ruoho [7]

point to the support for special education in Finland and claim that this leads to a decreased variation among Finnish students and to the small number of weak performers (see also, [10]). Yet this claim raises important questions given the situation in Norway. If special education were the only clear difference between Finland and Norway, then the logical response in Norway would be to copy the Finnish special educational system in Norwegian schools. Although this logic has become part of the political strategy in Norway [11, 12], the present paper points out several cultural differences between Finland and Norway as well as differences in educational policy that demonstrate how complex this question is. Therefore, in this paper we will highlight the differences between Finnish and Norwegian education with an emphasis on special education. The research question is therefore: What, from a historical and social understanding, could explain the different approaches to special education in these two Nordic countries? This paper will examine the role of special education in the schools, the teacher education programs, and historical and cultural factors as they may relate to these different approaches.

## 2. The Role of Special Education in Schools

The provision of special education in Finland and Norway differs in terms of the percentage of students served, the process of identifying students, the development of IEP programs, the stage of schooling at which services are concentrated, and the content of the special education curriculum. In this section, these various areas will be examined to determine which, if any, of them may be a major factor in the differences between the two countries.

*2.1. Percentage of Students Served by Special Education.* The percentage of students receiving some kind of special education in both Finland and Norway has increased in recent years (Table 1), but the statistics also suggest that Finland has historically provided special education to a larger proportion of students (31%) than Norway has (8,4%) [15, 18–21]. However, these statistical differences need to be read with caution because each country has its own way of defining special educational needs (SEN) (see [2]).

The data in Table 1 is for both full-time and part-time special education in both countries. In Finland, full-time special education is given to pupils who cannot benefit from normal education [22, 23]. Whenever pupils receive full-time special education, individual educational plans (IEPS) must be designed for them. Part-time special education provides supplemental and alternative teaching for students who are identified as having learning difficulties: in Finland, this does not require an IEP because the support is considered short term, and the process of gaining access to part-time special education is deliberately made easy. In Norway, all pupils receiving special education, whether full time or part time, must have an IEP. Norway draws its statistics on children within special education from the number of students with an IEP in some or all school subjects.

TABLE 1: Distribution (%) of students in special education in Finland and Norway.

| Percentage of school-aged students | Finland 2002 | Norway 2002 | Finland 2010 | Norway 2010 |
|------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| Full-time special ed.              | 5,7          | 0,6         | 8,5          | 0,8         |
| Part-time special ed.              | 20,8         | 5,0         | 22,8         | 7,6         |
| Total                              | 26,5         | 5,6         | 31,2         | 8,4         |

Source: Statistics Finland, [13, 14]; GSI Norway, [15].

The different ways of defining children with special needs are a clear cultural difference between these two countries. In Finland all alternative teaching, except support teaching, is defined as special education whereas in Norway only teaching of students with an IEP is counted as special education. This can then be related to the strategies used in these countries for defining students with SEN.

*2.2. Procedures for Identifying Students with SEN.* In Finland, teachers in each school have an active role in evaluating a student’s need for special education. The special teacher screens first graders, and, if deemed necessary, part-time special educational services start soon thereafter without any bureaucratic hindrance. The implementation of full-time special education is more bureaucratic, involving specific procedures for identifying a student with SEN and developing an IEP. The initiative in Finland usually comes from teachers, and the school’s psychologist and a special educator make the tests and evaluations at school. The teachers in collaboration with the parents develop IEP. It is a legal document, which is updated every year.

In Norway, the initiative for special education usually comes from the teacher when questions about special needs are being raised; however, parents can also ask for special education for their child. The pupil will be evaluated by the pedagogical-psychological service (PPS), which is located outside the school, as part of the municipal services. The IEP is formulated based on an academic evaluation of the student by the pedagogical-psychological office [24]. The idea behind this system is to have well-qualified people help the school to define the need for special education and give the best possible educational support for the student. However, this system can be time consuming. It often takes three to six months, or even up to a year, before a decision is made on whether the student requires special education. Parents have to agree to this process, and they can influence the development of an IEP, but the school personnel—the general teacher or the special teacher if the school has one, usually define the content of the special educational support. In other words, the development of an IEP is clearly understood as a pedagogical task for teachers in Norwegian schools.

The differences in the bureaucratic process as experienced in Norway and Finland point at cultural differences. In Norway, the dependency on the PPS to evaluate the need for special education reduces the teachers’ ability to intervene early when they believe that a student has special needs. One

result of this system is that it fosters late intervention in Norway in comparison to Finland where there is a simpler evaluation system attached to special education.

**2.3. Stage of Schooling When Special Education Is Concentrated.** Not only do Finland and Norway differ in the overall percentage of students in special education, but the two countries also diverge in the distribution of resources according to grades. As can be seen in Figure 1, in Finnish schools the main emphasis is on the primary school, with 49 percent of the teacher resources devoted to special education being provided during early primary school and about one-fourth of the teacher resources allocated to either late primary school or to secondary school (see also [25, 26]). Full-time special education is more evenly distributed.

In contrast, the number of students receiving special education in Norwegian schools increases steadily during the school years, with fewer than one-third (28.2%) of the resources devoted to grades in early primary school and just over one-third devoted to late primary school and secondary school (see also [27]).

The use and distribution of special education in schools is a problem from a full-inclusion perspective [28]. Turning to the strategies of creating an inclusive school, the cultural differences between Norway and Finland become even clearer.

**2.4. Inclusion and Special Education.** According to Kivirauma and Ruoho [7], an important aspect of the Finnish concept of inclusion is the “right to learn.” This right is provided in two different ways: by placing students in full-time special education so that they can learn in that environment and by providing integrated part-time special education, which guarantees the right of every student to learn. Moberg and Savolainen focused on the right to learn [29] and compared the reading test results of ninth graders (15-year olds) in 1965 with the same test results of ninth graders in 2005. Students in the lowest category performed much better in 2005. In 1965, only two percent were receiving part-time special education, whereas in 2005 29 percent of pupils received part-time special education. The researchers conclude that Finnish comprehensive schools have managed to narrow the gap between good and poor performers, partly because of part-time special education. In addition, this part-time special education is given mostly at the early stages of the school career ([18, 19]; see also [30]).

The focus on special education has been quite different in Norway. For the last forty years, Norwegian schools have emphasized integration and inclusion as important goals for schooling [31, 32]. Hence, full-time special education is used very little in Norwegian compulsory schools. The reduction of full-time special education in Norway has been going on since the mid-1970s as part of an integration reform that ended in the early 1990s with the closing of several special schools [31]. This process was supported by research that claimed academic results were higher among students in integrated settings than among those in segregated settings [32, 33]. Research carried out in Norway

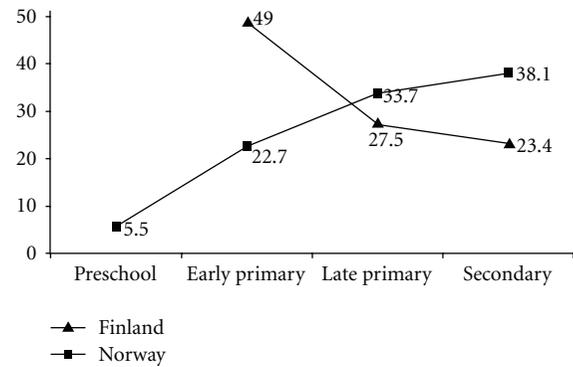


FIGURE 1: Distribution (%) of teacher resources in part-time special education [7, 15].

has also criticized the way special education marginalizes and excludes students, even if the support given is part time (e.g., [34, 35]).

In contrast, Finnish researchers have concluded that the right to learn is sometimes better ensured in a segregated setting. Students' experiences in special classes have been largely positive, with sufficient support from the most educated teachers [36–39]. The use of special education in relation to inclusion emphasizes the necessity to look into a broader social understanding of the role of special education in Finland and Norway. Research in Norway has shown that the impact of special education on the students' academic results is weak in comparison to the results obtained in general, inclusive classrooms [34, 40]. Turning to Finland, the Norwegian findings are clearly in contrast to the statement about Finnish schools made by Kupiainen et al. [41], who point to the success of early and intensive special education.

### 3. Teacher Education

Teacher education differs in many ways between Finland and Norway. It is longer and more homogeneous in Finland than it is in Norway. This has roots in the history, from which we will highlight some main events (Table 2). Full-time special education began at the same time in these two countries, but part time began much earlier in Finland. Finland received a professorship in special education already in 1948. Special education has been rewarded with more funding in Finland than in Norway.

In addition to the historical events, the cultural attitudes toward teachers differ between the two countries. The teaching profession is highly respected in Finland where the prerequisite for becoming a regular classroom teacher has been a Master's degree since 1979. Teacher education is a popular study option and consequently the selection process to enter the university is very competitive; only 10 to 15 percent of applicants are accepted [42, 43]. Since 1930, teacher preparation for compulsory education in Norway has mainly taken place in postsecondary teacher training colleges and has lasted four years [44]. Entry into teacher training college does not require an entrance examination in Norway. Instead, entrance is based on grades from high school. In principle, everyone who has passed high school

TABLE 2: The historical development of the school system and special education.

| Finland  | Norway   |
|--|--|
| Full-time special education since the 1860s for disability groups.   | Full-time special education since the 1860s for different disability groups.   |
| Part-time special education for reading and writing as well as speech difficulties since the 1940s. More easily accepted by parents than segregated special education [16]. Not considered very special, rather as part of normal support. | Special classes in normal school since 1955. Part-time special education since the 1980s. Part-time special education was introduced as a strategy when the use of special schools was reduced from the mid-1970s. |
| First professorship in special education in 1948.  | First professorship in special education in 1991.  |
| Both full-time and part-time special education teachers trained since 1960. Before that, various courses available.  | Special teacher training school since 1961. No special training for part-time special education.   |
| Unified nine-year-long “school for all” was created for all of Finland between 1972–1977 [16]. Part-time special education (the equality ideology) has increased since then.   | Unified nine-year-long “school for all” since 1969. From the 1990s on, a stable use in special education (between 5 and 6 percentage). An increased use of special education since 2006.                           |
| Schools receive more money per pupil with special needs than per ordinary pupil.   | No additional money.   |
| During the 1990s’ depression, more resources were given to segregated special education, fewer for part time [17].   | No additional money for schools.   |

with the minimum requirements in Norwegian language and mathematics can be offered a place to study at a teacher training college. However, about 30 percent of all students who accept a place at a teacher-training college do not finish their studies [45].

The usual way to become a special education teacher in compulsory school in Finland is first to obtain the class or subject teacher’s degree then acquire work experience for some years. Thereafter it is possible to apply to study for a special teacher degree, which takes one year, and the course of study is comprised of 60 credits. Norway is quite different in that having a special education teacher degree is not required for becoming a special education teacher in the school system [46]. However, preference in hiring is usually given to teachers who have studied special education as part of regular teacher training in a teacher training college or in a Master’s degree program in special education offered by some of the colleges and universities.

## 4. Discussion

*4.1. Cultural Explanations for Differences in Special Education.* Given the educational differences between selected systems in Finland and Norway described above, a question arises

TABLE 3: Historical development.

| Finland  | Norway  |
|--|---|
| Part of Sweden until 1809.   | Part of Denmark until 1814.   |
| Part of Russia until 1917 (then independent).  | Part of Sweden until 1905 (then independent).   |
| Civil war in 1918 between the “white” and the “red” with white the victor.                   | Development of a strong labor party that dominated the post-war period.                                       |
| Attacked by Soviet Union in 1939 At war with the Soviet Union until 1945.                    | Attacked by Nazi Germany in 1940 Occupied until 1945.   |
| Great war debt to Soviet Union.  | Help from the US Marshal Plan.  |
| Postwar period was dominated by forest industry and later a range of different industries.   | Post war period was dominated by metal industry and from 1970 oil.  |
| Huge depression in the early 1990 caused by the disappearance of the eastern trade partners. | Relatively mild depression in the early 1990s because of strong oil production.                               |
| Fast change to a post-industrial economy based on technology and innovation.                 | A slow change towards a post-industrial economy oil export is still the most important factor in the economy. |
| Member of the European Union (1995).   | Not a member of the European Union.   |
| Not a member of NATO.  | Member of NATO.   |

about these differences. In this section, we focus on elements from the history of the two nations and the variation of educational environments that may have an effect on the different approaches to special education.

*4.2. Historical Aspects of Education.* The historical development of Finland and Norway is similar in some ways; however, there are some central differences in the historical development. Table 3 outlines some basic differences between the two neighboring countries.

The focus on education in Finland was strong long before Finland became independent in 1917. The importance of education was stressed by political leaders such as Johan Vilhelm Snellman (1806–1881), who pointed out that a small nation has no resources other than human ones (e.g., [47]). Given its position on the periphery of Europe, with no special natural resources, except forests, Finland has always invested in education as the key to the nation’s success. The geographical position and size of Norway is quite similar to that of Finland; however, the natural resources have always been abundant in Norway (fishing, hydropower, mining, and oil); therefore, education has not historically been looked at as the key to the nation’s success. In the Norwegian context, education has rather had the role of building a national identity [48, 49].

The rapid development of Finnish culture and the Finnish industrial sector after World War II has led researchers to describe Finnish society as a melting pot with a collective agricultural mentality and a postindustrial individualistic

TABLE 4: Different perspectives on education in Finland and Norway.

| Perspective                            | Finland  | Norway   |
|--|--|--|
| Educational policy                     | Basic Education for all since 1970.<br>Continuous growth of special education since 1995*.<br>Education appreciated. | The same school legislation for all since 1976.<br>Continuous growth of special education since 2005.<br>Education not so important. |
| Focus on inclusion                     | The right to learn.  | The right to participate.  |
| Inclusion from an opposite perspective | The Finnish school system is not inclusive. It segregates students and limits the opportunity to participate.        | The Norwegian school system is not inclusive. It fails to make the pupils learn.   |
| Teachers' position                     | High education, high status, independent, powerful.  | Average education, low status, restricted power.   |
| Strategy                               | Special education; flexible part-time special education; early intervention.   | Adapted education; bureaucratic special education; late intervention.  |

\*Similar statistic system since then.

society [50]. The global financial depression in the 1990s again emphasized the important status of education and paved the way for changes in the educational system in Finland with more emphasis on school autonomy and competition. It was clear to many that there was a strong connection between education and success at work and thereby with the success of the nation as a whole [51]. Simola et al. [51] have summarized their description of the Finnish school system as adapted to a “competition state” in which a market-oriented ideology is supported by the schools.

In contrast to the focus experienced in Finnish schools, the focus in Norway, until 2006, has been on a reduction of competition in schools. Norwegian academia and education was highly influenced by the radical uprising in the late 1960s, and this movement has continued to have a great impact on the development and content of the Norwegian school system (e.g., [52–54]). These ideas were partly incorporated into the social democratic development of the school system through pedagogical theories based, for example, on the work by Paulo Freire and the influence of Jürgen Habermas. Thus, the main change seen in the Norwegian system over the last thirty years has been a greater emphasis on progressive education [48, 55, 56].

As part of this democratic development, school reforms in Norway have mainly worked to create schools for all, in which everyone has the same opportunities. This goal has led to the absence of grades before the eighth level, for example, and the right to attend high school, even if a student has failed at secondary school. The schools' obligation is first to help the student's individual development and growth [57].

Looking again at the situation in Finland, it is apparent that the strong ideology of “one school for everyone” has also been part of the political goal of education. In contrast to Norway, in Finland the focus has not been on the right to participate, but on the right to learn; hence research shows that today the differences within a given school are greater than the differences between schools. This indicates the homogeneous nature of education throughout Finland [26, 58]. In other words, comprehensive school in Finland has aimed at equal opportunities as well as equal results see [58].

Reviewing the role of special education in the Finnish educational system, it can be seen that special education

has been, and still is, used as educational support for those students that perform below average. Special education is therefore an important part of the educational system in order to help students learn. However, according to the law from 2010, the support is aimed to be given more and more in regular education [23].

In Norway, however, the cultural tradition is to avoid special educational interventions because it is considered as an organizational strategy that reduces the student's ability to participate. Special education is not considered a best practice at all:

Research shows that there is a clear distance between the inclusive ideology and the current practice. Although a slow change appears in the statistics for students with disabilities, there are few other changes to see. It may seem as if the good ideas with formal special education become its own enemy when establishing inclusive education [57].

*4.3. Various Educational Environments.* Although the cultures of these two Nordic countries are similar, several conceptual and ideological differences point to a different utilization of special education. In order to understand the difference experienced, the history as well as the educational arrangements and arguments as part of the cultural system should be examined. First, the basis of each country's current educational policy is different mainly for historic reasons (see Tables 2 and 3). In Finland, the strong appreciation for education is seen as a route to success, whereas education in Norway, to a higher degree, is connected to the national identity project. Secondly, *statistical and conceptual problems* occur when the special educational systems of these two countries are compared. There is a significant difference in the understanding of both *inclusion* and *special education*. From a Finnish perspective, part-time special education in regular schools and full-time special education in special schools are part of an overall inclusive strategy [9], as is the new form of support, called intensified support [23]. In the Norwegian framework, however, special education is placed in opposition to inclusion. Consequently, it is fair to say that attitudes and procedures concerning inclusion and the right

to learn or to participate diverge, indicating the different educational aims as shown in Table 4.

These differences in the educational environment can be rooted in different perspectives on competition in education. As presented previously, to reduce competition in schools has been a major challenge in the Norwegian school system, whereas the Finnish school has been said to be part of a “competition state” [51]. This issue raises a series of questions about the relationship among academic results, competition, and inclusion. According to Barton and Slee [59], competition and inclusion are not compatible in the school system. Yet as presented here (e.g., [7, 37, 60]), the inclusive measure of the “right to learn and participate” challenges the understanding of inclusion as a theoretical framework. It appears as though the Norwegian state and its school system are coming closer to the global situation with stronger focus on competition and academic results described by Simola et al. [51]. The main reason for this appears to be the poor Norwegian results on the PISA test [61].

The relatively weak academic PISA results seen in Norway [4] could mean that the Norwegian schools, in spite of their strong focus on inclusion, are far from succeeding in creating a good school for all. The emphasis on “adapted education” in Norway has made it more difficult to determine whether students in fact benefit from ordinary teaching. The inclusion discussion in Norway resembles Low’s [62] concept of “stupid inclusion,” meaning that it is neither politically correct nor is it allowed to label some needs as “special.” The point made is that, when labeled differently, needs can also be forgotten.

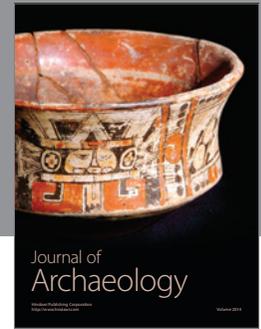
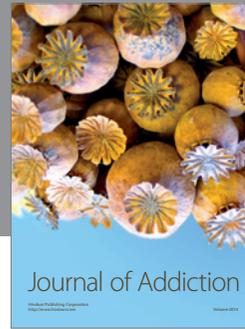
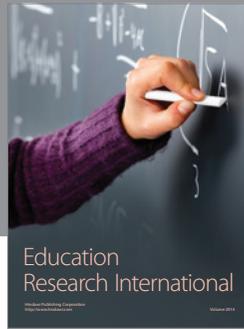
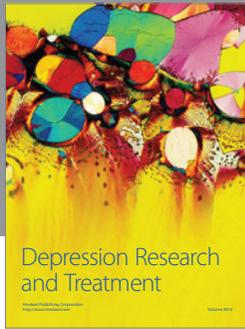
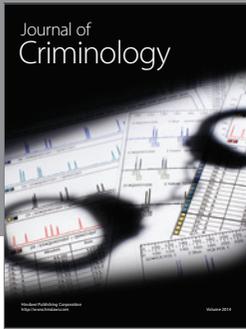
## 5. Conclusion

The description of the Norwegian and Finnish special educational environment shows that despite the close geographical and political relationship between these two countries, there exists a clear difference in the educational area. Inclusion is seen differently in Norway and in Finland. In Finland, it first means the right to learn because in a historical context Finns had an obligation to learn in order to support their country. In Norway, inclusion is connected to the social aspects of learning as the right to participate. In a historical context, this can be related to a political project of creating a national identity based on the Norwegian state’s responsibility to its citizens. The Finnish state wants to guarantee equal educational opportunity to all citizens and this goal is partly reached via early intervention in the form of special education with highly educated professionals. Norway wants to guarantee similar study places to all, so that no one is excluded.

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