

**Students' Social Self-Image and Engagement with Studies within the  
Classroom: A Qualitative Multimethod Research on Teachers' Pedagogical  
Activities in Inclusive Education**

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**Abstract**

In this study, we assessed how Finnish teachers' professional actions support their students' engagement and positive self-image at school. This qualitative multimethod study is comprised of three sub-studies: (1) the research Data Set A included pedagogical reflective journals, observations of, and interviews with, two Finnish teachers and their classes (2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades); (2) the research Data Set B involved interviews with, and observations of, two Finnish co-teachers (a class teacher and a special education teacher) and their combined 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade class; and (3) the research Data Set C consisted of individual interviews with four Finnish elementary school teachers working in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades. Our findings identified practices to enhance students' choice and sense of agency; teachers' actions to support students' perceptions of themselves as transformable and developing learners; and teachers' practices where their students can make friends and form positive relationships. In conclusion, we conceptualized the findings of this study within the theory of inclusive pedagogy to enhance the understanding of the teacher competences necessary to build pupils' self-image and engagement with their studies.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, social self-image, engagement, pedagogical practice, multimethod research.

### Introduction

In the past few decades, there has been a worldwide trend of striving toward inclusive education to improve learning for all students and emphasizing caring in schools (Norwich, 2013; Spratt, 2017). Inclusive education is a process that involves and enables students to learn in their own learning community (Slee, 2014). Inclusive teaching leans on the students' ability to develop from their own starting points (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). There are few systematic descriptions in which the connections between background values, teacher competences and inclusive teaching practices are taken into account. One example is Florian and Spratt (2013), who reported on the development and use of an analytical framework from a one-year Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). The first principle of a PGDE states that a teacher must give up deterministic views of ability and see the students as transformative individuals. The second underlying principle alleges that the difficulties the pupils experience in learning can be considered dilemmas for teaching rather than problems within the pupils. The third principle claims that the profession must continuously develop new and creative ways of working with others. In their longitudinal case study, Tjernberg and Heimdahl Mattson (2014) found that to succeed in inclusive teaching, teachers need to be committed to inclusive values of enhancing the learning of every student and continuously reflect on their professional actions with colleagues. This reflection "created an inclusive school culture in which all the students felt they were competent, valued and never excluded" (Tjernberg & Heimdahl Mattson, 2014, p. 247).

Still, there is an issue of how teacher education is able to promote pre-service teachers' pedagogical skills regarding student engagement and positive self-image (Honkasilta, Vehkakoski, & Vehmas, 2014). According to previous research, teachers find students' behavioral problems a challenging issue in their work (see. e.g., Jahnukainen, 2015; Norwich, 2013). In many cases, instead of building a supportive educational environment, teachers still apply deterministic views of learning based on the deficit model of disability (Honkasilta, 2015; Vehmas, 2010). Although special education was originally developed to support students with disabilities, the deficit model of disability marginalizes students both institutionally and individually (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), as they are guided to segregated learning environments specialized for certain deficits (e.g., Peters, 2007). The idea of inclusive education is based on the social construction of disability, which in its outmost interpretation means that disabilities are socially constructed by the given society (Peters, 2007). The social construction of disability proposes that: every student comes to school with diverse needs and abilities; the general system of education can respond to the needs of all

students; the general system of education builds on flexible teaching arrangements, high expectations for all students and well educated teachers; and creating inclusive communities and enabling full participation in society for all students increases the quality of education in general (Peters, 2007; Lakkala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2018).

The context of this study is the Finnish comprehensive school. Our emphasis is on young students' learning and educational well-being. Finland, like many other countries, is committed to international agreements designed to enhance educational equality (e.g., Salamanca Statement, UNESCO, 1994). In 1968 Finland had already made the decision to establish a comprehensive school to decrease differences in learning outcomes caused by family backgrounds and to increase educational equality (Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg, 2006). Over the last two decades, Finland has continued investing in developing a socially just system of compulsory education (basic education). Indeed, the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education was reformed in 2010 and 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education [FNBE], 2010, 2016). Today, teachers are expected to continuously assess learning environments and provide support to students in neighborhood schools (Lakkala, Uusiautti & Määttä, 2016).

In 2010, the support for learning and schooling in Finnish comprehensive schools was organized under three tiers: general, intensified and special support. Each learner is expected to receive support in neighborhood schools through various flexible arrangements. General support, where designing an individual learning plan is voluntary, is directed at all students. The common forms of support are differentiating instruction, remedial teaching and guidance for learning. These supports can be determined by the teachers, special education teachers, parents and the student. For example, the teachers differentiate their teaching in class, and the student may receive remedial teaching and individualized tasks in one or more school subjects. If general support activities are insufficient, then multi-professional workgroup conducts pedagogical assessments and apply a plan for intensified support. An individual learning plan is obligatory on this tier, which can include pedagogical instruction, part-time special education and assistive devices or services. If this support is inadequate, then special support is provided, which requires an extensive multi-professional assessment, an official administrative decision on the need for support and an individual education plan. Only on this tier can the syllabus of various school subjects be reduced to cover only the level of core content (FNBE, 2016).

On the basis of its national report on the implementation of support for learning and schooling in basic education, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2014) outlined

the actions to be taken in Finland to enhance the understanding and success of the three-tiered support system. The report highlighted the fact that in many teacher education programs, the school reform concerning the three-tiered support system was not visible; in particular the methods of describing the implementation of the support system were highly inadequate. The Ministry stated that the contents of all teacher education programs had to be developed with a focus in strengthening the student teachers' competences in early support for learning and schooling, knowledge of the new norms and developing appropriate pedagogies for enhancing schoolchildren's participation and engagement in their studies.

Our purpose was to find out how Finnish teachers implement the support required by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture in their practice. Our aim was to describe the actual practice, followed by a conceptual analysis of the pedagogical activities that take place.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The tradition of perceiving teaching as an action of transferring knowledge is declining (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Among others, student engagement, motivation and self-image have a huge impact on students' learning outcomes. Engagement promotes students' motivational resilience (Martin & March, 2009), which, in turn, supports students' positive self-image and learning outcomes (Pakarinen et al., 2017). Several studies evince the malleability of academic engagement (see e.g. Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer, 2014). Educational environments indeed have the power to promote or inhibit students' intellectual and social-emotional flourishing (Ryan & Deci, 2016). If the educational environment is supportive, it can create a circle of positive development where these elements strengthen each other. However, an indifferent educational environment where learning and positive self-image are not enhanced may create a circle of negative development (Honkasilta et al., 2014).

Students' self-image reveals much about their self-efficacy beliefs or self-confidence as learners (Furnham, Chamorro-Premuzic, & McDougall, 2002), which is reflected in their means of performing studies and their persistence (Pintrich, 1999; Salmela & Uusiautti, 2015). In Määttä and Uusiautti's (2018) study, university students reported satisfaction, a sense of capability and that their experiences of success during their studies were the most important to them. Indeed, the inner sense of oneself as a learner and a peer can become a major predictor of successful studies—regardless of the level of study (Marks, 2000; Ouweneel, Le Blanc, & Schaufeli, 2011).

Students' self-image is molded in school, and the teacher's role cannot be underestimated (Äärelä, Määttä & Uusiautti, 2016). According to numerous studies, positive

and encouraging feedback is important to one's receptiveness to both good and not-so-good new learning experiences, (e.g., Aoun, Vatanasakdakul, & Ang, 2016; Skinner, Pitzer, & Steele, 2016). Hattie and Yates (2013) also highlighted similar means of the effective use of feedback principles. For example, feedback needs to render the criteria for success in learning, give the learner a possibility to make errors and encourage the student to learn more and set new goals. For a positive development of self-image and engagement, students need endless feedback to develop as students and members of a learning community (Winstone, Nash, Rowntree & Menezes, 2016).

Social self-image is also connected to engagement with studies. Engagement can be defined as follows: "participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes" (Harper & Quaye, 2009, p. 3). Researchers have noted engagement to have many positive consequences that usually relate to effective and successful study pathways (e.g., Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004). Interestingly, engagement is also connected with resilience, when defined as the ability to stick to studies when facing challenges (see Bethell, Newacheck, Hawes, & Halfon, 2014). The higher the student's engagement is, the higher his or her level of resilience. According to Skinner et al. (2016), engagement widely predicts how students confront challenges at school because it determines their coping and persistence styles and levels.

Reeve and Tseng (2011) defined student engagement as a four-dimensional concept consisting of behavioral, emotional, cognitive and agentic aspects. Their findings about the meaning of students' agency is also relevant to this study. The role of students' actions, motivation and self-efficacy beliefs are important factors for meaningful learning (see Bandura, 1997), which can be seen as a descriptor of engagement to studies.

It seems that student engagement and self-image are crucial predictors of study success (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2018). Indeed, this research on student engagement may fill a gap in the existing literature: for example, Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) presented the potential contribution of school engagement as a concept to research student experience. Skinner, Furrer, Marchand and Kindermann (2008) showed that teacher's actions in relation to students' competence, autonomy and relatedness are mediated by children's self-perceptions.

### Method

The purpose of this research was to analyze how teachers promote students' social self-image and engagement in studies. We set the following research questions for this research:

- (1) How do teachers enhance their students' choice and sense of agency in practice?
- (2) How do teachers support their students' perceptions of themselves as transformable and developing learners?
- (3) How do teachers develop their students' social self-image and social engagement?

This qualitative multimethod research used an interpretive approach that followed the concurrent (overlapping) timing of phases (see Borrego, Douglas, & Amelink, 2009). The mixing of phases resembled merely data and methods triangulation, rather than explanatory or explorative strategies (Borrego et al., 2009; Creswell, 2009).

We obtained the research data in three parts. Data Set A included pedagogical reflective journals, interviews with, and observations of, two Finnish class teachers and their classes (2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades). These data were gathered in an ethnographic study cumulatively carried out in four European countries between 2014 and 2017 (within a European research program called Erasmus +, KA2). The observations and interviews were focused on the practical means of teachers as they pursue enhancing their students' social and positive self-image in their studies, regardless of the level of their learning outputs or barriers (i.e., implementing inclusive pedagogies) (see also Florian & Spratt, 2013).

Data Set B involved interviews with and observations of two Finnish co-teachers (a regular class teacher and a special education teacher) and their class between the years 2017 and 2018, which covered their students' 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades at school. The data were collected under a project called Supporting Together! (2017–2020), funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. For the study at hand, we analyzed the interview and observation data focused on teachers' actions to enhance students' social self-image, self-efficacy and engagement with their studies.

Data Set C consisted of individual interviews with four Finnish elementary school teachers of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades in 2017. This sub-study followed a phenomenographic approach to attain the teachers' perceptions and conceptions of the phenomenon (Svensson, 1994). The interviews were qualitative themed interviews that followed the aforementioned research questions.

Altogether, six of the teachers were women and two of them were men. In all the teachers' classes, there were a few students with disabilities (2–5 students). The average number of students in each class was 23. In addition, half of the co-teachers' students were students with disabilities (11 students), mostly with mild learning difficulties (ld), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), though two of them were diagnosed with intellectual disability and severe cerebral palsy, respectively.

We analyzed the data in a thematic content analysis (e.g., Bengtsson, 2016). The analysis was led by the research questions. We read the transcribed data several times to perceive the contents that described the phenomenon being studied. We then grouped the teachers' actions, in the form of reduced citations, under the same themes. We analyzed the mutual meaning of each group of citations to conceptualize the theme (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011); an example of this data analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Example of Data Analysis*

<b>Citation</b>	<b>Reduced Citation</b>	<b>Theme</b>
<i>The schoolwork is progressing in a structured way: a ring of a bell, and the students focus on the whiteboard information. There is a picture of the students' circle. The children start to collect their things and take their position in the circle. (Observation, co-teachers' class)</i>	The students practice how to control their own activities	Enhancing students' choice
<i>Scale, adapt and differentiate; in other words, in every exercise and thing you do, make them the size of the child so she/he can experience success. And if the child sometimes fails, she/he can feel that, "Hey, we got over this together!" (Interview, T3)</i>	The teachers differentiate their teaching to support the students in overcoming difficulties	Promoting students' self-efficacy
<i>Every morning we, for example, look at the calendar and practice speaking and listening to others. In other words, we learn to respect others by listening to them. (Interview, T1)</i>	Respecting others is rehearsed through certain exercises	Peer relations

*You being interested in the child's life, that's the starting point, I think. I must talk with the child. . . . One way of doing this is to have lunch at the school canteen together with the students. (Interview, T2)*

The teachers are committed to supporting their students' well-being

Teacher-student relationships

In the results section of this article, we inserted quotes from the data to illustrate how the findings appear in that data. Table 2 shows how each set of data was gathered and referred to in the text.

Table 2

*Research Data and Reference Codes*

Data (code)(code)	Type of Data	Extent of Data	Time	Reference Code (T = Teacher)
<u>Data Set A (DA)</u>	Pedagogical reflective journal	Teacher 1: 24 pages Teacher 2: 43 pages Typewritten	Gathered over 4 months, 1 week/month, September–October 2015	Pedagogical journal, T1/T2
	Interview	3 interviews/teacher Teacher 1: 1h 28 min, transcribed 17 pages Teacher 2: 2h 8 min, transcribed 29 pages	September–October 2015	Interview, T1/T2
	Observation	T1's class: 3 days T2's class: 3 days 66 handwritten pages	September–October 2015	Observation, T1's class/T2's class
<u>Data Set B (DB)</u>	Interview	3 group interviews: 3h 18 min, transcribed 43 pages	October 2017; January 2018; November 2018	Interview, T3/T4
	Observation	4 days 6 typewritten pages	October 2017; January 2018a and b; November 2018	Observation, co-teachers' class
<u>Data Set C (DC)</u>	Interview	4 interviews, separate Teacher 1: 48 min, transcribed 14 pages Teacher 2: 41 min, transcribed 11 pages Teacher 3: 53 min, transcribed 9 pages Teacher 4: 48 min, transcribed 13 pages	Spring 2017	Interview, T5/T6/T7/T8

We conducted this qualitative multimethod research by concentrating on general reliability criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability) (Shenton, 2004). Even though the data sets were small when it came to the number of research participants, we evaluated the data as rich. We used data triangulation to ensure credibility: for example, the observations and reflective journals were to support interpretations of the interview data. Naturally, dependability criteria are difficult to reach in qualitative research like this. By providing sufficient detail about the data sets and adding data excerpts in the results, we attempted to ensure transferability.

When it comes to confirmability (Shenton, 2004), we used researcher saturation (see Wray, Markovic, & Manderson, 2007). This means that the analyses and interpretations were done in collaboration with the researcher team (the authors of this article) to ensure that individual prejudices and opinions would not affect the findings. This kind of reflectivity was especially important, as the researchers are experienced teachers, which may affect objectivity.

As there were children involved in Data Sets A and B, we gained permission to study them from each student and their parents. In Data Set A, 42 students out of 44 agreed to participate in the research. The two remaining students were not mentioned or documented in observations or any other data. In Data Set B, there were 20 students who all gave their permission. In the next section, we introduce the findings from our analyses.

## **Results**

### **Practices to Enhance Student Choice and Sense of Agency**

In all three data sets, student choice and sense of agency were supported in many practical ways. In Data Set B, the observations showed that the co-teachers emphasized student choice at the beginning of the first school year. During the first fall season, the co-teachers' prior aim was to teach the first graders how to work and study and thus created ways to facilitate the students' self-determination in their studies. This notion was supported by Data Sets A and C, where the teachers appreciated their students' choices and gave them the responsibility to decide over some matters:

The instructions are always given clearly and with no rush. There's no hurry. The co-teachers tell that they decided consciously to proceed unrushed and teach above all how to study. This was practiced quite a lot for the first month. The schoolwork is progressing in a structured way; a ring of a bell, and the students turn their attention to the whiteboard information: there is a picture of the students' circle. The children start

to collect their things and take their position in the circle. (Observation, co-teachers' class, DB)

By dividing the group work tasks, the idea is not to produce the best output, but that everyone will find their own way of working in the group. (Interview, T6, DC)

The teacher marks homework for the students. Student A complains about the homework. The teacher lets him decide between two optional tasks. (Observation, T1's class, DA)

In all three data sets, the teachers held reflective discussions with their students both individually and in groups. The teachers saw the discussions as methods of teaching how to become aware of one's own actions, to develop the students' own metacognition and the consequences of those developments in studies and social relationships. In addition, they created different kinds of class practices, such as written tasks for goal-setting and assessment conversations, to promote students' self-awareness and agency. The basis was formed by teaching some ethical principles of social relations. In all three data sets, the teachers utilized students' real decision-making situations when considering the meanings of different options in social contexts:

A conflict in the queue (quarrel between two students) was solved by interactive ethical discussion with me [the teacher]. We named the problem, considered the solution together and decided to try it. Later, we will evaluate if it has worked. Every student learned about the situation because of the joint discussion. (Ped. journal, T1, DA)

During the break, the children pretended to be a reindeer herd. They had a problem of who got to be the lead reindeer. If there are many of them, the herd will fall apart, the children said. The co-teacher asked what kinds of suggestions the students have for solving the problem. They discussed different options and found a solution: they all can be the lead reindeer on their own turn. (Observation, co-teachers' class, DB)

Heard some kind of messages [from the classmates] that the girls are quarreling, and they shut someone out.... The girls themselves suggested how to improve the situation. One of the girls then said, "I can sit at the same lunch table if I notice that she is alone."  
(Interview, T7, DC)

The teachers' pedagogical actions that develop the students' agency create the basis for the next section of our results. When the students know how to work and study, teaching can move forward to learning content. This enables them to shape the students' concepts of themselves as learners.

### **Teachers' Actions Supporting Students' Perceptions of Themselves as Transformable and Developing Learners**

An important means of supporting students' positive self-image or self-efficacy was to provide positive feedback in various ways. Based on our observations and interviews, the teachers used various methods of praise (vocal, facial expression or physical touch) to support their students. Assessment, and therefore praise, was continuous throughout the lesson, so the students were encouraged while they studied. The teachers did not only praise the students with the highest scores or results, but they also tailored the learning tasks according to the students' current phase of development. That way, the most important index for getting thanks or attention was the accomplishment of the task:

I'm pleased that every student learned and I could give personal feedback to every student, as I asked the students to show the exercises to me after completing them. All students were also given homework at their own level. (Ped. journal, T1, DA)

Scale, adapt and differentiate; in other words, in every exercise and thing you do, make them the size of a child so she/he can experience success. And if the child sometimes fails, she/he can feel that, "Hey, we got over this together!" (Interview, T3, DB)

I have knowingly tried to increase the amount of positive feedback because it is not a self-evident habit for us Finns. (Interview, T8, DC)

In Data Set B, the co-teachers systematically developed their pupils' ability to assess their processes of doing exercises, thus improving their metacognitive skills:

The students sit in the circle, and the co-teachers present them the characters from Winnie the Pooh [as soft toys]. In the ceiling, each toy has an emoji that matches the toy's character. Self-evaluation begins: the students pin their own wooden clothes peg with their name on it to a toy figure that corresponds to their sensations of doing in the previous school task. Then each student presents reasons for their solutions. For example, Paula is frustrated because during the [previous] exercise, she twice

accidentally picked up the same word for the worksheet. Her assessment is analyzed appropriately as a whole. (Observation, co-teachers' class, DB)

In Data Set A, the teachers consciously transmitted the values of appreciating each student's uniqueness and celebrating diversity. Similar aspirations were found in Data Sets B and C. Through supportive experiences, the combined effect of different factors stimulating learning outcomes and self-image cumulated positively in students' lives.

Teacher: While there is a whole spectrum of students here, it is this where richness comes from.... I try to be equal, no matter who the student is...whatever the circumstances are. Of course, you'll have to give a little more sympathy or support if someone has a demanding situation. But the rules are the same for everyone. It doesn't matter if you are an immigrant or if you have a diagnosis, except then you have to make some adaptations. But it is not so simple. You have to consider it on a personal level. For some, you need to accept something and for others not. (Interview, T2 DA)

Then, if I see kinds of signs like a student is uncertain of him—or her—self, I purposefully try to bring forward the child's strengths, hug [him or her] and in many ways keep her/him close to me. (Interview, T5, DC)

And we were talking about the unhurriedness.... I strongly think that teaching without schoolbooks [in our class] is a big thing.... We have time to listen to [students]. Sometimes our first lessons happen while sitting in our circle and discussing if there really is a matter coming from the children. We are very sensitive to those matters of children. (Interview, T4, DB)

When the teachers supported their students' concepts of themselves as capable learners, they emphasized formative assessment. The teachers gave feedback continuously, and accomplishing the task was the preferred goal. This way, the students were encouraged to gradually set new goals for themselves. Still, the teachers did not concentrate on individuals, but they were aware of the meaning of positive communal relationships, as described in the next section.

## Teachers' Practices Where Their Students Can Make Friends and Form Positive Relationships

A highly relevant part of the socio-psychological atmosphere in the classroom is social engagement. Indeed, in the data sets, we identified various actions to promote social engagement. The teachers strived to make their students feel that they appreciated them and their peers. The teachers represented in our data took care of the students; they were loyal and interested in them and showed affection even on the students' 'bad days'.

You being interested in the child's life, that's the starting point, I think. I must talk with the child.... One way of doing this is to have lunch at the school canteen together with the students. (Interview, T2, DA)

...during the breaks...most of my pupils are together with me playing.... We spend a lot of time together.... [Sometimes] the pupils, instead of going out to have a break, stay to chat and hug [me], telling what is going on with them. (Interview, T5, DC)

In Data Set A, Teacher 1 used school buddies to develop students' social skills. In buddy lessons, a multi-age pair from different classes study together, sharing responsibility and learning from each other. In addition, the buddy classes make excursions together:

Today, I was also pleased that the [older] school buddies brought the true joy of learning and pleasure of working together to our class.... They motivate my students, and they also teach the young ones. Both the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders are doing just fine together. I think they both want to cooperate together. (Ped. journal, T1, DA)

The teachers created different kinds of learning environments and structures to facilitate positive relationships among the students and enhance friendships for students who need help. They organized various activities to enhance the group's feeling of social cohesion:

In the class, I use a sort of class tree. The children do good things for each other, and with those actions they gather leaves for the class tree. At every hundredth leaf, the whole class gets a prize. (Interview, T5, DC)

The [respectful] class atmosphere helps us approve each other. Sometimes we exercise how to say a positive thing about the peer sitting next to you. (Interview, T8, DC)

Today I had a conversation with my immigrant pupil.... I know that he very much would like to belong to the peer group. He needs concrete skills in how to be a friend.

I asked whether he wanted to sit beside someone.... After the conversation, we moved his place to beside the pupil he mentioned. (Ped. journal T2, DA)

The teachers' commitment and time spent building positive relationships between the pupils also appeared in Data Set B, where half of the co-teachers' class consisted of students with disabilities. The pupils did not see anything special in their peers, but saw special needs as a natural part of people's lives:

One parent told us that she started chatting with her child: "You are now in a class that is a bit different" [thinking that there are many children with disabilities], and the child looked at her and noted, "Yes, I think that some pupils in our class have such long school commutes that they have to take the bus!" ... Then the parent thought, okay, that was about it. There is no point of continuing [the conversation about the diversity in the class]. (Interview, T3, DB)

This chapter described the results in creating a positive and caring community among the students. At its best, teachers seemed to create an atmosphere of acceptance that spreads among the children in the classroom. Next, we discuss our findings from a pedagogical and conceptual perspective.

### **Discussion**

In our results, through thematic reading, we divided our data into three categories according to the teachers' actions. Next, we interpreted the themes in the context of pedagogy. We then categorized the themes according to the teachers' aims and conceptualized them through pedagogical concepts.

The first category of our results describes the actions in which the teachers aimed to enhance student choice and agency. The teachers utilized the students' ideas in solving problems. They constructed learning practices in ways that enabled the students to predict and learn how to behave and what to do to manage their everyday duties and responsibilities toward their studies. In pedagogical terms, the teachers applied student-oriented agency through group facilitation.

The second category of teachers' actions marks out the aims to provide students a sense of themselves as transforming and developing human beings. The teachers differentiated their teaching and gave their students tasks tailored to them. They praised the students for accomplishing their exercises. Gradually, they guided the students to assess their

own actions and feelings when studying. This category builds up multitudinous pedagogical concepts and includes elements that may be embedded in a teacher's personal characteristics and philosophy, namely, the commitment to teach all children in their class and the belief in people's transformability. The pedagogical activity can be summarized as identification and appreciation of students' diversity and uniqueness.

The third category portrays the various actions that teachers organize for their students to be able to make friends and form positive relationships. They showed devotion to their students' well-being by spending time with them in informal situations and teaching them how to get along with each other. Here, again from a pedagogical point of view, the teachers put into operation actions that were discreet and manifold. For example, the teachers paid attention to the safe and caring socio-psychological atmosphere in the class and school and transmitted values of appreciating all their students. The pedagogical concepts concluded from this category is the teachers' aim to reinforce their students' social self-image and social engagement in their learning community.

Next, we discuss these categories by contrasting them with Ryan and Deci's (2016) self-determination theory and other, related, research. Self-determination theory is based on three main concepts: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Teachers are educators for future adults. Teachers' presumptions of what their students can achieve may affect the teachers' own decisions. A student-oriented teaching approach develops the students' cognitive and metacognitive skills as they learn to execute and evaluate their own ideas and learning. Ryan and Deci (2016) referred to autonomy as supportive of teaching style and instruction. When compared to earlier research, the pedagogical activity of student-oriented agency through group facilitation was also noted as a functional practice in supporting students at-risk of school failure (see Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Pakarinen et al., 2017). According to Hamre and Pianta (2005), the classroom experience that the teacher offers by selecting certain pedagogical activities may play a large role in the positive adaptation of their students.

When the category of promoting students' sense of themselves as transforming and developing human beings is considered through the concepts of the self-determination theory, it resonates with the concept of competence. According to Ryan and Deci (2016), perceiving oneself to be competent at an activity can best take place when the students feel autonomous rather than evaluated or controlled, and when feedback is informational in its characteristics. As with our study's results, several previous studies indicate that students who are given choices in their studies are significantly more intrinsically motivated than those who do not

have the possibility to make choices (e.g. Furrer et al., 2014; Spratt & Florian, 2015). In pedagogical terms, to provide students with a sense of competence requires teachers to identify and appreciate students' diversity and uniqueness. Our results show that the students' tasks and objectives need to be built systematically and gradually. Additionally, Furrer et al. (2014) found it important to break tasks into manageable components and provide informational feedback. It is of great importance to understand that the decisions and choices made in the present will change children's capacity to learn and how they will transform (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Our results are consistent with previous research that shows that high self-efficacy promotes effective learning outcomes while growing the student's resilience and motivation, though, in contrast, low self-efficacy hinders successful studies (Bandura, 2010).

Teachers' abilities to reinforce their students' social self-image and social engagement in their learning community is a major factor for increasing relatedness (see Ryan & Deci, 2016). Sense of belonging is a significant contributor to not only well-being in students, but also their learning (Burke & Cloughton, 2019; Carter et al., 2015; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009) and even sustainable futures (Slee, 2019). It is important to the students to feel that the teachers appreciate them and their peers and set the example of how to show respect and care toward each other in the classroom (see Leskisenoja & Uusiautti, 2017). Furrer and Skinner (2003) even suggested that relatedness is a key predictor of children's academic motivation and performance. The teachers' actions in our research are in line with Furrer et al.'s (2014) findings that students' relatedness is likely to strengthen when they are given opportunities to talk and listen to each other, share learning experiences and give emotional support.

However, an important question is how teachers perceive their abilities to implement the aforementioned activities. We examined teachers' actions through pedagogical lenses and assessed them via previous research and self-determination theory. Many studies have found a clear connection between teachers' beliefs, abilities to reflect and teaching practices (e.g. Jordan & Stanovich, 2001; Körkkö, Kyrö-Ämmälä & Turunen, 2016). Blömeke, Gustafsson, and Shavelson (2015) defined teachers' competence as "including 'criterion behavior' as well as the knowledge, cognitive skills and affective-motivational dispositions that underlie that behavior" (p. 4). They defined teacher competence as a continuum, beginning from the disposition of teachers' cognition and affect-motivation, continuing to situation-specific skills and ending in observable teacher behavior. Depending on the competence in question, the contents of teacher's values, knowledge, skills and behavior vary. The situation-specific skills in the middle of the model consist of teachers' perceptions, their interpretations of the

situation and the pedagogical decisions made based on those interpretations. Finally, the decisions are actualized in teacher's observable performance. To illustrate the findings of this research, we placed the pedagogical concepts deduced from our findings and the teachers' performance into the frame of Blömeke et al.'s (2015) continuum of competence (see Figure 1). However, the content of the first box, teacher's disposition, is not specified as we did not directly explore teachers' personal values and knowledge in our study. The categories drawn from the findings of our research, and introduced here, can be found as contents under the topics Situation-specific skills as teachers' pedagogical aims and Performance as pedagogical practices in Figure 1.

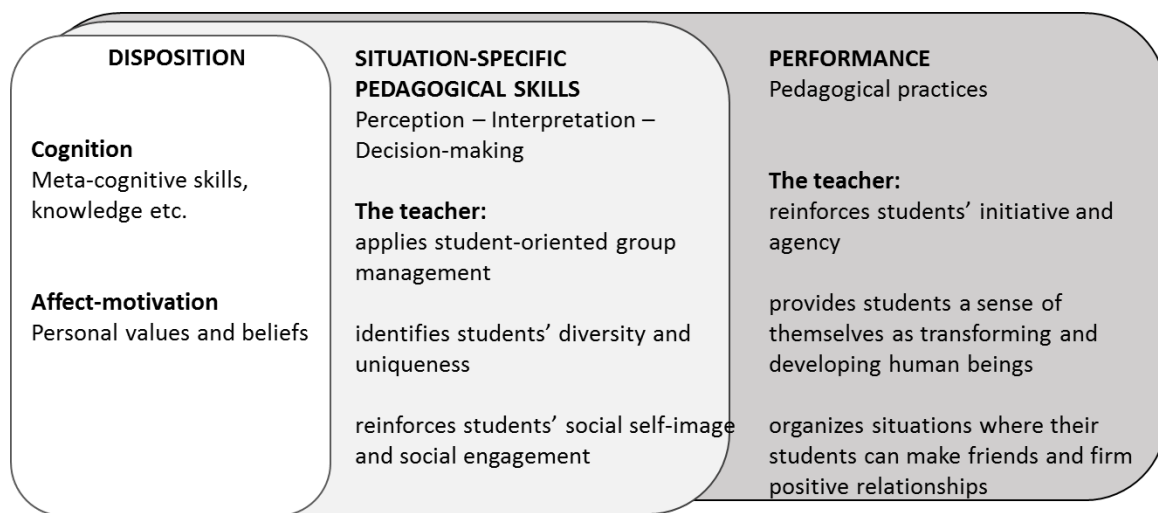


Figure 1. Teachers' competence as a continuum when implementing inclusive education (adapted from Blömeke et al., 2015)

Figure 1 illustrates the competences related to inclusive pedagogy and especially to teachers' abilities to identify students' uniqueness and strengthen their agency, self-efficacy and social self-image and relatedness. The pedagogical concepts deduced from the teachers' pedagogical practices are introduced in the middle of the box. The themes of the pedagogical practices drawn from our research data and findings are placed in the box in the right. Blömeke et al. (2015) highlighted that competence can also be viewed vertically in terms of performance levels. Teachers possess higher and lower levels of competence, which means that through practical experience and deeper understanding of the principles of inclusion, their competence can move on to higher and higher developmental levels. Overall, teachers' competences develop as a process (e.g., Lakkala et al., 2016).

### Conclusion

Although we were not able to analyze the teachers' disposition, such as personal values and beliefs based on our data sets, assumedly the teachers who are competent to implement inclusive pedagogy in heterogeneous classes have certain features in their disposition (see Figure 1; Blömeke et al., 2015). For example, tact and balance between pedagogical authority and care can be seen as the foundational elements of teaching that allow the teacher to select student-oriented aims to guide their perception, interpretation and decision-making in a favorable direction (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012; van Manen, 1991).

Our earlier study showed that teachers do perceive inclusion widely from the levels of culture, principles and practices (Lakkala et al., 2018). However, the demand to support students individually is challenged by limited resources and the lack of multi-professional support (see Chang, 2009; Milner & Tenore, 2010; Norwich, 2013). Still, the conceptualization of practices can provide teachers with the skills to reflect on their own actions in the classroom (Äärelä et al., 2016) and to grant timely support in heterogeneous classes. According to Niemiec and Ryan (2009), "teachers' support of students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness facilitates students' autonomous self-regulation for learning, academic performance, and well-being" (p. 133).

In the past decades, the commitment to take care of and teach all students has been linked to the values of inclusive education (e.g., Slee, 2014). Implementing inclusive pedagogies in schools has turned out to be difficult because the values of inclusive education are quite universally approved, but the needs and methods of implementing them in heterogeneous classes are challenging (Norwich, 2013). We position our findings, the teachers' pedagogical decisions and their practices among inclusive pedagogy, as they enhance students' participation and equality in education and match many features connected to inclusive pedagogy (see Florian & Spratt, 2013). Before teachers can create students' sense of competence, they have to build a safe and caring community around the students and reinforce the students' agency. Only then can students' learning take place and competence develop.

Blömeke et al.'s (2015) conceptualization provided a basis on which to reflect our findings. Our pedagogical model helped promote the teacher competences needed when implementing inclusive pedagogy and reflected pedagogical activities at many levels, all the way from disposition to skills and eventual performance. With this conceptualization, praxis can occur as teachers bridge inclusive education as a theoretical concept to implementation that benefits students in practice. They have means to perceive their activities in the

classroom and how they are connected with their own beliefs and attitudes, as well as their conception of student learning.

#### **Author's Note**

Suvi Lakkala was the main author of this article; performed the main analyses and outlined the conclusions; and also supervised Perttu Grönfors' data collection (Data Set C). Outi Kyrö-Ämmälä participated in the data collection (Data Sets A and B) and the tentative analysis of Data Set A. Satu Uusiautti contributed to the theoretical review, methodological writing and theoretical conclusions.

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