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Different Strategies, Different Outcomes? The History and Trends of the Inclusive and Special Education in Alberta (Canada) and in Finland

Markku Jahnukainen
University of Jyväskylä and University of Alberta

This study compares the strategies and delivery of education for students with special educational needs in the province of Alberta, Canada, and in the country of Finland, in the European Union. The rationale for comparing these two jurisdictions is grounded by the idea that both of these areas have high general standards of living, a well-developed public education system, and top results in international school achievement tests. The data consists of available educational policy papers, previous research papers, and educational statistics. This article first describes the special education system development and the current situation, followed by the funding system and discussion about the implications and outcomes of different policies. The historical analysis shows that while many similarities exist between Alberta and Finland, there are also some culturally-bound elements present that have strongly affected the progress and the decision-making process related to the organization of the education for students with special needs.

Keywords: special education, comparative education, education policy, funding

The globalization of education has been followed by the growing interest in comparative educational research (Dale, 2005) among researchers as well as practitioners. The recent interest is largely related to the popularity of different international school achievement tests like PISA and TIMSS, organized by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). However, criticisms have been raised regarding the quality and accuracy of the comparative work, in particular towards the international educational statistics (Cussó & D’Amico, 2005) and the uncritical use of the results from the international achievement tests (e.g., Hopmann, 2008). It is questioned how the social and cultural diversity is reflected in these international tests (Hopmann, 2008).

In the field of special education, the comparative research base has been relatively sparse. The majority of the literature in international special education is regarding educational

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1The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an internationally standardized assessment of reading, mathematical, and science literacy. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) is focusing on trends in students’ mathematics and science achievement.
policy and the educational circumstances of the students with disabilities in one country at a
time, making only occasional comparisons to other countries (e.g. Giota, Lundborg, & Ema-
More systematically, McLaughlin et al. (2006) compared the classification systems of chil-
dren with disabilities in the United States and in the United Kingdom, Powell (2006,
2009) in the United States and Germany, and Itkonen and Jahnukainen (2007, 2010) in
the United States and Finland. These comparisons reveal some similarities and interesting
differences in local practices and policies. Some of these differences could be attributed to
long-standing cultural traditions and local political character (e.g., civil rights history in
the United States) and some could be influenced by linguistic or semantic differences
(e.g., variable use of concept LD or learning disability/difficulty; see also Danforth
[2009]). Though comparative research in special education may be even more challenging
to accomplish than in other areas due to cultural and local variation, some global trends
such as increasing special education population, funding issues, and the general notion of
developing the inclusive schooling, are common in most Western countries (e.g. Giota
et al., 2009: Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011) and therefore should be analyzed more carefully
using a comparative setting. This analysis should provide culturally sensitive insight to the
key issues in inclusive and special education.

Rationale

The purpose of this study is to compare the strategies and delivery of education for stu-
dents with special educational needs in the province of Alberta,2 Canada, and in the country
of Finland, in the European Union. Although Alberta is one of the Canadian provinces, and
not an independent country like Finland, the situation in governing the education is compar-
able because the responsibility for education in Canada rests almost entirely with provincial
legislation, because a federal department or office of education does not exist, unlike in the
United States, for example (Ungerleider & Levin, 2007).

The rationale for comparing these two jurisdictions is grounded by the idea that both of
these areas have high general standards of living (Unicef, 2007), a well-developed public
education system, and top results in international school achievement tests (see OECD,
2007), showing that they are also comparable on several substance levels. By comparing
these two models of special education, insight with respect to special education systems
will be enhanced.

The high quality of the education systems in Alberta and Finland is particularly essential
for this study. Since the first PISA survey, both countries have accommodated many inquiries
from different parties to explain the elements of success for their special education models. A
good example is the reportage of American journalist Linda Lantor Fandel (2008a, 2008b),
who visited schools in both countries – in addition to some with good reputations in the
United States – and made a review published by the publication house Des Moines Registries
(see the blog by Des Moines Register [2008]). The reports describe teacher education,

2Both of these countries are located on the northern hemisphere with cold winters and they are rela-
tively sparsely populated, Finland has 5.4 million inhabitants living in 340,000 km² and Alberta has
around 3.6 million inhabitants in 661,848 km². This means, that in addition to large school boards
in bigger cities, these regions also have many small, rural school boards around the country.
curriculum expectations, and accountability policies, among other components of teaching. As in many previous reviews, special education is discussed only briefly. However, at least related to the case of Finland, the national special education system, in particular the meaning of broad and easy access to special support, is mentioned by the Finnish researchers (Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2007, 2010; Kivirauma & Ruoho, 2007; Moberg & Savolainen, 2006) several times but is still not investigated in a more detailed fashion. The fact that both Alberta and Finland have currently adopted inclusive education in delivering special support and have a relatively large proportion of students under these services makes this comparison highly relevant.

In this study, comparative findings related to the history of special needs education, recent trends of delivery, coding, and the funding of special education will be presented. The data consists of available educational policy papers, previous research papers, and educational statistics reported by the local educational authorities. This article first describes the special education system development and the current situation, followed by the funding system and discussion about the possible implications and outcomes of different policies. The main focus is on the compulsory education, which in Finland starts at the age of 7 and ends at the age of 17 and, in Alberta, starts at the age of 6 and ends at the age of 18.

A Brief History of Special Education in Alberta and Finland

The early historical development of the special education system has been quite similar in both countries. Starting in the late nineteenth century, the first services were established for students with visible handicaps (deaf, blind, and subnormal students) and were offered in separate, residential settings (Alberta: Lupart, 2000; Finland: Kivirauma, 2002). In fact, in Alberta, all hard of hearing students were sent out of the province until the 1950s as well as some students with visual impairments. In Finland, special institutions for the “feebleminded” were located in different settings in the countryside. During the early-twentieth century, there was a gradual growth in the number of students served in special schools and special classes (Table 1), however, the total special education enrolment stayed relatively low until the 1960s (Figure 1). Only limited services were available for children with disabilities within regular schools until the 1950s (Church, 1980; Kivirauma, 2002).

Table 1
Growth in Number of Students Labeled as “Subnormal,” “Sight-Saving,” or “Hard of Hearing” in Alberta (AB) and in Finland (FIN) between 1920 and 1950

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Subnormal</th>
<th>Sight-saving</th>
<th>Hard of hearing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AB</td>
<td>FIN</td>
<td>AB*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>0 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>33 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>28 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>25 (18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Church, 1980; Kivirauma, 2002.
*Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of students sent out of the province.
During the 1960s, in addition to increases in the total number of students being identified with special needs, there were increases in the number of classes and the types of special classes in both countries (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Kivirauma, 2002). The types of needs that were now being identified included orthopedic handicaps and speech problems. In both countries, “observation classes” were created to facilitate the clinical diagnosis of learning and behavioral problems (Church, 1980; Kivirauma, 2002). This expansion of special education has mostly continued until the present day (Figure 1). Though there are significant similarities between the general trends, after the 1960s some major differences ensued that have had a long-term impact on the current state of special education programming in these jurisdictions.

Parents’ roles as educational advocates for students with special needs in Alberta have been stronger and of greater magnitude (Andrews & Lupart, 2000) when compared with Finland. In the latter area, the development was driven mostly by professionals and politicians. In contrast, the “free, public education for all” ideology has been strong in Finland since the first compulsory school act in 1921 (Sahlberg, 2007) and the objective of basic education is “to support pupils’ growth towards humane and ethically responsible membership of society” (Halinen et al., 2008, p. 7). These social-democratic ideas have been generally accepted by all political parties (Halinen et al., 2008), which may explain why the changes in organizational structure from segregative to integrative and more recently to an inclusive system has been relatively slow but consistent in Finland. Halinen et al. (2008) stated: “developing the curriculum has been continuous and it has concentrated rather on consolidating basic values than on searching for a short-term solution” (p. 17). Although during the late-1990s neoliberal ideas of decentralization, accountability, and free school choice also arrived in Finland, it seems that in terms of adopting neoliberal thinking it still remained as the “most underdeveloped” even among Nordic countries (Johannesson, Lindblad, & Simola, 2002, p. 327).

Figure 1. The historical trend of the percentage of special education students in the whole-school population from 1920 to 2007, in Alberta and Finland.


Note: Finland part-time refers to the temporal special support delivered by the special educators for students not in need for full-time special education placement.
On the contrary, in Alberta, the political structure is dominated by more conservative thinking, and the neoliberal ideas have spread quickly from theory to the practice including free school choice, high stakes testing for Grades 3, 6, 9, and 12 and providing several alternative school options including private and charter schooling (Taylor & McKay, 2008). In the area of special education, Alberta had very early on adopted the extensive use of testing and assessment to diagnose and label categories of exceptionalities formally initiated special education (Lupart, 2000). This led to the current complex coding and funding system, which is currently under revision and criticized by parents as well as professionals in the field (Alberta Education, 2009). In Finland, the emphasis early on has been providing needs-based services for the school-age population. The assessment and diagnosing of special needs has not been a major component, partly related to the fact that “special education” at universities has been defined as part of the educational studies and associated to “special pedagogy” and teachers’ practices rather than educational psychology (Hautamäki, Lahtinen, Moberg, & Tuunainen, 1999).

From Special Schools to Inclusive Education

From a retrospective point of view, the main historical finding of the special education systems in Finland and in Alberta is that they followed the same developmental path, from segregative environments to more inclusive settings. However, after the first period of “mainstreaming” (Andrews & Lupart, 2000; Kivinen & Kivirauma, 1989) starting in the 1970s, these jurisdictions adopted clearly different strategies. The Finnish system was (and still is) built on the “pragmatic” idea of the least restrictive environment, meaning that there is a continuum of different placement options (Deno’s [1970] Cascade of services: regular class, special class, special school, and institutions) and to the greatest extent possible, students with disabilities will be educated in the option closest to that of the regular classroom with other students. In Alberta, the ideological shift has been more explicitly to develop a fully inclusive educational system.

This ideological difference is also apparent in the current definitions of inclusive and special education. The Standards for Special Education document (Alberta Education, 2004) defines inclusive education the following way:

In Alberta, educating students with special education needs in inclusive settings is the first placement option to be considered by school boards in consultation with parents and, when appropriate, students. Inclusion, by definition, refers not merely to setting but to specially designed instruction and support for students with special education needs in regular classrooms and neighbourhood schools. (p. 1)

The Finnish Basic Education Act (1998) uses the following description:

If, owing to a disability, an illness, retarded development, an emotional disturbance or a comparable cause, a pupil cannot be otherwise taught, the pupil must be admitted or transferred to special-needs education. As far as possible, special-needs education shall be organised in conjunction with other education or else in a special-needs classroom or some other appropriate facility. (p. 6)

In practice, the difference was that Alberta adopted—after the initial integration period—the inclusive policy very rapidly during the late-1980s. Already in 1992, the government
reported that the majority of special education students (60%) were placed in regular classrooms full-time (Alberta Education, 1992; Lupart, 2000). During the recession years in the 1990s, the resource-room type of service was cut off and only two service options remained: the full-time inclusive classroom or the full-time special class or school. At the same time, the special education student population was increasing in number due to changing identification practices, and Lupart (2000) reported that inclusion was accompanied by feelings of distrust and misunderstanding. In addition, the regular classroom teachers were highly frustrated by the challenges of meeting the diversity of needs within their classrooms.

In Finland, the inclusive movement has been much slower, and for a long time the number of students with disabilities in the regular classroom remained relatively low (Figure 2). It must be noted, however, that the number of students coded as “official” special education students has been consistently lower than in Alberta (Figure 1). This could be attributed to the effective use of the part-time special education, which is the most distinctive feature of the Finnish special education system (Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2007, 2010; Kivirauma & Ruoho, 2007). Since the 1970s, this has been the main service delivery model (Figure 1, light dashed line), which, following the influences from Sweden (Kivirauma, 1991), began as a resource-room type pull-out model, but currently has many variations including collaborative and consultative teaching (Kivirauma, 2001; Ström, 2002). The function of this delivery model is preventive and it could be defined using the current US response-to-intervention (RtI) model (e.g., Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008) as a targeted intervention for at-risk students (Tier 2 level, which is not considered as special education and does not require a formal diagnosis of disability)\(^3\). In Finland, since the

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\(^3\)In fact, the recent (effective starting 1 January 2011) amendment of the Basic Education Act utilizes the vocabulary of the RtI movement and defines part-time special education as part of the strengthened interventions (Act of Amendment of the Basic Education Act (642/2010)).
1970s, there has been an easy access to this kind of service without a need for formal assessment or referrals, and the main goal is to prevent/remediate the mild problems related to reading, writing, and mathematics as well as deal with mild/temporary behavioral difficulties (Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2007).

**Special Education Coding and Funding**

In general, the use of non-labeling practices has increased in everyday context, yet at the administrative level we still have a flourishing culture of special education codes and categories. These conventions are part of the special education governing and in particular they are tightly bonded to special education funding.

The incentives created by special education funding models have been a topic discussed in several research papers. The emerging body of research on the effects of special education funding models on special education rates seems to indicate that special education funding systems are having a significant impact on the program’s enrolment rates (Greene & Forster, 2002; Pijl & Dyson, 1998). In fact, the research demonstrates that the “bounty” system (defined as when the school receives more funding if it has coded students) has contributed to the special education enrollment growth rate and may have created appalling financial incentives for mainstream school to identify more of their students as having special educational needs and has contributed to the significant increase of students in certain categories of special needs (Greene & Forster, 2002). The special education funding issues have been emergent in both Finland and Alberta (Alberta Education, 2008b; Jahnukainen, 2006; Ministry of Education, 2007).

**Special Education Funding in Alberta**

In Alberta, students are identified as having special education needs if they meet the criteria for special education “codes” that were developed by the provincial government’s department of education, Alberta Education. For school-aged children, there are 17 codes that reflect a wide variety of disabling conditions, ranging from sensory and speech-language impairments, to learning and intellectual disabilities, as well as emotional and behavioral difficulties. There are also codes for students with physical and medical disabilities that impede their learning, as well as a code for intellectual giftedness. While some of the codes conform closely to accepted psychological or medical diagnostic criteria for clinical disorders (e.g., learning disabilities, mental retardation), a formal diagnosis is not required for all codes. Specialized assessments (e.g., psycho-educational) are nevertheless conducted for most students in order to acquire information about student needs and functioning levels, both for identification purposes and Individualized Program Plan development (Alberta Education, 2004).

The Alberta government classifies the 17 diverse codes into two major categories, those of “severe” disabilities and “mild to moderate” disabilities. However, only four codes fall in the category of severe disabilities. These severe codes represent students with severe to profound retardation (Severe Cognitive Disability), students with clinical disorders that require constant supervision to ensure safety needs (Severe Emotional/Behavioural Disability), students with severe neurological or physical disabilities that require extensive learning modifications and/or personal assistance (Severe Physical or Medical Disability) and students with a combination of two or more moderate to severe disabling conditions that are not related (Severe Multiple Disability).
The distinction between the severe and non-severe categories is an important one, because it is directly linked to the funding. Alberta Education (2008b) currently provides school boards with approximately three times the special education funding for each student within their jurisdiction that meets the eligibility criteria for any of the four severe codes (A.L. Charrette Consulting, 2008). The remaining 13 mild to moderate codes are supported through the “base instructional funding” that Alberta Education provides to school boards. These dollar amounts, however, are provided to school boards irrespective of whether or not students have special educational needs. Although Alberta Education does not specify how much of a school board’s base instructional funding should be used on special education, it is expected that school boards draw from this general pool of funding to meet the needs of their students with mild to moderate codes. In other words, unlike the case of severe disabilities, there is no discrete dollar amount that school boards receive for each student who has been identified as having mild to moderate needs.

Special Education Funding in Finland

In the Finnish system, there are currently 14 categories of special needs in full- and part-time special education (e.g. Statistics Finland, 2009). Eight categories are defined as difficulties related to learning (e.g., reading and writing difficulty, learning difficulties in mathematics or in foreign languages). The remaining six categories are considered more profound impairments. The one severe category, severely delayed development, includes students with moderate, severe, and very severe delayed development to follow partly or completely modified, individualized programming. The eligibility for part-time special education is always decided at a school level, based on the teachers’ and parents’ observations. In cases where full-time special education placement is considered, the school psychologist and school physician are consulted (Basic Education Act, 1998).

The Finnish full-time special education funding has been based on the idea that the funding follows the child (referred to as “bounty” funding by Greene and Forster [2002]). Until recently, students in need of full-time special education did normally get 1.5-fold funding and a relatively small proportion of students with mainly severe or profound disabilities got 2.5- or 4-fold funding compared to other compulsory school students (Ministry of Education, 2007). However, the funding system was changed starting from January 1, 2010, and there is currently no extra funding for any students with special educational needs, although the students with severe disabilities will get individually defined extra funding from other than normal education base funding resources (Kirjavainen, 2010). Thus there has been a recent change from combined base and bounty funding to the base funding only model. In other words, the schools and municipalities won’t anymore get any kind of extra funding by defining some students as having special educational needs in the Finnish system.

Implications of Different Inclusion and Funding Strategies

In terms of the outcomes of the basic education in general, it is clear that based on the OECD PISA studies (e.g. OECD, 2007), both countries have been very successful. However, when comparing the cost of the education system, on average Alberta spends over twice the amount ($10,394/student)\(^4\) (Alberta Education, 2008a) per student than in

\(^4\)Comparison is done using the purchase power parity (PPP) to US dollars (OECD, 2009).
Finland ($4,526/student, Kumpulainen, 2008). Although separate information regarding the costs of the special education system is not available in these countries, it could be speculated that this difference might be at least partly explained by differences in special education coding and funding systems. The current Alberta model of coding and funding with severe disabilities incentives implemented in 2001/2002 has created an appalling situation in which schools are torn between an accurate code for a student with special needs and using the severe categories to receive extra funding required to address the needs of students with moderate, or sometimes mild, disabilities. This trend was under investigation by the Severe Disabilities Realignment project during 2007–2008 and the review committee found several shortcomings related to the students’ eligibility (Alberta Education, 2008b). Another problem related to the complex coding system is that it is based on costly specialized assessment procedures, which take time to be accomplished. We can also speculate that the current situation is partly due to incorrect implementation of the inclusion ideology as simply a “placement” in regular education without any extra support.

On the contrary, the Finnish system seems to be more flexible, addressing the needs of students with mild or temporary special support needs with relatively low costs in the regular school context. It can be assumed that cost-effective, part-time special education can offer special support for many students who in Alberta’s system would wait the results from specialized assessments (Andrews & Lupart, 2000), with no guarantee that he or she would even qualify for the support deemed necessary in the severe special education categories. The focus of the Finnish part-time special education is in prevention and the outcomes are clearly demonstrated as the smallest standard deviation between students’ achievements in every area of the PISA 2003 and 2006 school attainment tests (Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2007; Kivirauma & Ruoho, 2007). In other words, the part time special education is narrowing the gap between the high and low achievers, giving additional help for struggling students. On the contrary, there currently does not exist a universal type of service in the Alberta system. Individual schools may have resources to offer some additional support for students without formal eligibility to special education, but it is haphazardly organized and inconsistent between schools. The type of special support, if any, the students coded with having “mild/moderate” disabilities and educated in regular classrooms are receiving, is also in question (Alberta Education, 2009).

In terms of the effects of the different coding and funding systems, Figure 3 demonstrates how the Alberta funding mechanism based on the severe (3-fold funding) and mild/moderate (no extra funding) codes is affecting the observations related to the students’ “disability”. We can see an upward trend in the use of the severe category after implementing the severe disabilities category in 2001/2002. On the contrary, the Finnish system has not created such a need or incentive because the basic support by the part-time special education is available in almost every school and all full-time special education categories were given at least 1.5-fold extra funding. One could assume that also in the Finnish system, the rapid increase of using regular class placement (Figure 2) could be explained by the funding incentives. This can be at least a partial explanation, however, there are many small technical and administrative changes that better explain the change of the trend (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011; 5

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5There is no official information about the cost of the assessment procedure. However, discussions with several principals have revealed that the average cost of one student’s specialized assessment is around $2,500.
Jahnukainen, 2006). In any case, there is no reason to suspect that the trend presented in Figure 3 would be based on the real differences in the school-age population between these two regions, but instead, is more or less related to the local funding mechanism.

**Discussion**

The starting point for this study was to compare the special education systems in two countries that achieved excellent results in international school achievement tests and with exceptional reputations regarding the development of the public education system. The historical analysis showed that while many similarities exist between Alberta and Finland, there are also some culturally-bound elements present that have strongly affected the progress and the decision-making process related to the organization of the education for students with special needs.

The strong emphasis on the specialized assessment procedure since the 1960s (Andrews & Lupart, 2000, p. 30) as a gate-keeping process for special education eligibility is one noteworthy difference. The Alberta special education system is built on a strict system of coding and, in general, special education services are not delivered without adequate diagnosis and a code. After the funding system changed in early-2000, the mild/moderate codes were supported from the base instructional fund and the severe codes received the three-fold funding, it is observed that there is a strong tendency to use severe codes as opposed to mild or moderate codes. The government has noticed this trend and has organized the severe disabilities realignment in 2008 to help rectify this tendency (Alberta Education, 2008b). In the Finnish education system, one can receive special education services without a diagnosis, based on the observed needs of the student, and therefore the coding is not such a crucial part of organizing the special education services. The Finnish definition of special education eligibility is based on observed needs (a “difficulty model”) rather than

![Figure 3. The percentage of special education students served under the “severe” category in Alberta and in Finland from 2003 to 2007.](image)

**Sources:** Alberta Education, 2009; Kumpulainen, 2008.

**Note.** For Finland, the number of special education student in prolonged (11-year) compulsory education has been used as a reference. This group includes students with profound intellectual disabilities but also other students with severe disabilities/developmental delays (Statistics Finland, 2009).
diagnosed disabilities (a “disability” model) (see Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2010). However, in total, more students are granted services by the Finnish system, but with lower average costs than in Alberta.

The differences in the role of the special education assessment procedure seem to reflect the general policy towards accountability approaches of the educational authorities in these two countries. Finland, like other Nordic countries (see Hopmann, 2008), has been quite reluctant to adopt any large-scale accountability approaches or high-stakes testing (e.g., Sahlberg 2007, 2009). As Hopmann (2008) observes, the accountability or evidence-based practice talk is not popular in Nordic countries. Instead, the core role of teachers as professionals is emphasized (Hopmann, 2008; Sahlberg, 2007; Simola, 2005). In general, the cultural climate for the teaching profession is different. In a Nordic perspective, schools “are seen as places run by highly educated and esteemed teachers who know best how to do their job” (Hopmann, 2008, p. 432).

Another interesting feature is the commitment to the inclusive education ideology, which has clearly been stronger in Alberta—at least in administrative level. It seems evident that, probably because the “earliest times were significantly isolationist and derogatory for those considered exceptional” (Lupart, 2000, p. 3), there has been an ideologically and morally stronger need to tear down the former system considered as segregative. Instead of creating inclusive education for students with disabilities, the Finnish strategy has been based on the ideas of equality and equity and building “education for all” in its truest sense (Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2010; Sahlberg, 2007). This accounts for the progress of the inclusion of students with disabilities, which has been more gradual. The emphasis has been on preventive actions for students with mild problems. The slow progress may reflect the “educational conservatism” (Sahlberg, 2009; Simola, 2005) typical for the Finns, but also partly the general satisfaction of parents regarding the existing special education services (Kivirauma, Klemela, & Rinne, 2006). The “pedagogical conservatism” refers to the attitude common for other Nordic countries (Hopmann, 2008), where the individual teacher has “old-fashioned” autonomy and respect but also additional responsibilities regarding budget development and curriculum (Sahlberg, 2007). The pedagogical conservatism also entails keeping a “reserved distance from students and parents” (Simola, 2005, p. 461), which is quite the contrary when compared to Albertan or, more generally, North American expectations.

Though the starting point for this comparative study was an analysis of the similarities based on some general measures of wellbeing, it is interesting to note that a more complex system is at work. The local micro-trends (parent’s role, assessment) have more long-standing roots, though the macro-trends (from segregation to inclusive education) on the surface seem to follow the same kind of phases. Interestingly, some major differences, like enthusiasm in terms of developing the specialized assessment system, as well as in terms of adopting a deep commitment to the inclusive education movement, may be partly explained from the same sources. It seems that Alberta, as a typical settlers’ society with a multicultural population and therefore several competing views regarding organizing education and other common businesses (e.g., Taylor & MacKay, 2008), in terms of special needs education, has been forced to choose a procedure that is based on the assumed maximal objectivity and acceptance between different stakeholders. In the relatively homogeneous Finnish society, however, there has been (and still is) a strong trust in the local school’s—and even more on the individual, well-educated teacher’s—professionalism. In Alberta, it seems to have been more practical to follow the current assessment and accountability trends, which appear to offer more objectivity for the decision making process.
It is clear that there is not a single “correct” or “effective” strategy that could be recommended; this study shows that even in Western, welfare societies, the local socio-political and historical context provide the premises for the decision making and it seems that at least in the light of the general measure of wellbeing, the choices made in Alberta and in Finland have served these countries relatively well in the end. This idea should be borne in mind when planning to implement a new or modified special education model or planning to import different approaches from other countries.

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