

# Successful integration?

## School leaders' attitudes to inclusive education

*Inclusive education is a matter of contention in Estonia. Many voices express doubt that students with special needs can successfully learn with other students in inclusive classrooms. The use of special classes has risen, and teachers widely report a lack of confidence in handling students with diverse needs. Dr Äli Leijen and colleagues at the University of Tartu examine the attitudes of school leaders towards inclusion and uncover how these views are shaped by context and may, in turn, affect how schools ultimately implement inclusion.*

At its core, inclusive education is the integration of students with special educational needs (SEN) into mainstream schools by means of cognitive, affective and social engagement. A key part of this process is school leadership. School leaders must promote a shared vision of inclusion, which will broadly determine the proportion of time SEN students spend in separated and mixed classrooms, as well as the practices found in each setting. Moreover, they will allocate the resources and foster the collaborative school culture on which inclusion is built. Indeed, the importance of such a role raises the following question: how do school leaders form their attitudes towards inclusion?

### FOR ALL OR NOT FOR ALL?

There is a hot debate among policymakers, scholars, and educational stakeholders on whether inclusive education is truly achievable. Some argue

that educating children with cognitive disabilities requires a level of specialised knowledge and expert skill that is only reliably available in special schools. These voices describe an insufficiency of guidance and support for teachers in mainstream schools to be able to work with students with complex needs and to simultaneously provide adequate instruction for the rest of the class.

Furthermore, sceptics stress that when inclusion fails, it risks increasing behavioural problems, drop-out rates, and developmental delays, as well as disrupting learning for all participants. Critics of inclusion sometimes draw a distinction around students with physical disabilities and less severe cognitive needs, for which mainstream schools can possess the necessary skills and resources. However, these exceptions are seen to prove the rule that 'one size fits all' education does not, in fact, 'fit all'.

Many advocates of inclusive education emphasise a commitment to equal rights. By their very nature, mainstream schools offer the most heterogeneous pool of educators and youth with whom incomers can interact to develop their sense of wellbeing, identity, and competencies. As a result, educational segregation denies a sense of belonging within the mainstream and full participation in society. Moreover, separating some students who might 'set typical learners back' potentially fosters broader intolerance of the needs of disabled individuals across workplaces, social life, and even the family.

Inclusion advocates further affirm the viability of the policy. From the social constructivist perspective on learning, child development depends not only on inherited capacities but crucially on access to educational, technological, and other resources. If social conditions

and not individual traits primarily shape learning outcomes, then mainstream schools and teachers can indeed harness pedagogical and physical tools to achieve inclusive education.

### CONTEXT AROUND INCLUSION

The Estonian government grants the right for SEN students to attend mainstream schools. Such groups may receive an adapted curriculum and additional support when needed. Meanwhile, scepticism of inclusion across the country ranges from explicit opposition to the principle through to a feeling among teachers that responsibility for SEN students ultimately rests on support staff at their school – including speech therapists, psychologists, and special needs teachers. Over the last decade in Estonia, special classes in mainstream schools have become more popular, and teachers report lacking the necessary competence to handle classes with diverse needs. Thus, despite the legislative backing of inclusion, SEN students often study in segregated classes without a guarantee of their academic and social inclusion.

The form that inclusion takes is not merely determined by government policy. Teachers and school leaders actively carry out and shape practices of inclusion. This capacity to influence institutional workings

## Exceptions prove the rule that 'one size fits all' education does not, in fact, 'fit all'.

is referred to as 'agency'. However, agency is contextual. School staff must draw upon their own competences, past practices, views and goals, and environmental support to make decisions and take action. These underpinnings of agency are partly built by school leaders. They steer the school's vision of what successful inclusion can and should be, the degree of collaboration in the culture, as well as structural and material conditions from which other staff partially gain their agency.

Following this ecological model of agency, the views and practices of inclusive education may be influenced by several characteristics of school leaders and their schools. For example, leadership experience in special and mainstream



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### ATTITUDES OF SCHOOL LEADERS

Scholarly evidence has grown on school leaders' views towards inclusion. These studies make use of various question frameworks, but only one approach aligns with the ecological model of agency. This is the Kielblock framework containing four attitudinal areas on teachers' vision, differentiation, support, and practices. Dr Äli Leijen and colleagues at the University of Tartu, Estonia, used this framework to assess Estonian school leaders' attitudes towards inclusion. In the case of school leaders, three areas of attitudes were distinguished – vision, support, and practices. Further, they examined the interrelation between the different areas of belief and the impact of background characteristics of school leaders and their schools.

The study found that, on average, school leaders held relatively positive attitudes towards inclusive education, but specifically with regards to vision and practice. On the adequacy of support, however, they reported extremely negative feelings. This demonstrates a widespread dissatisfaction among school leaders in Estonia about the level of support available for inclusion both within and outside their school. Nevertheless, there was a high degree of variance in the results and across question categories, indicating that context matters in forming such attitudes. Indeed, leadership of special schools was associated with more negative views on inclusive practice than mainstream school leadership.

A fascinating finding was that practice attitudes were strongly predicted by

Inclusive education promotes a sense of belonging within the mainstream and full participation in society.



**BELONGING**

**INCLUSION**

**DIVERSITY**

**EQUITY**

**IDENTITY**

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leader vision and much less by levels of support. Following the ecological model of agency, this finding might indicate that school changes start from the creation of a shared vision and that leaders with a positive vision will adapt the environment accordingly and promote adequate structures of support for teachers to become more inclusive. Vision, therefore, may be the key to unlocking the full potential of inclusion. Meanwhile, a surprising result was that school leaders

attending relevant in-service courses had significantly more negative attitudes towards inclusive practice.

A possible reason may be that such courses in Estonia tend to focus on teacher-dominated instruction for SEN students and not on more inclusive and horizontal forms of pedagogy.

#### LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

The present study demonstrates the utility of a newly modified questionnaire for examining the attitudes of school leaders towards inclusion – finally named

the ATIES-EST scale. As shown, the scale may be used to uncover attitudinal data for analysis through the ecological model of agency. Consequently, the scale may be employed in research across the world to gain deeper insight into the multifaceted aspects of school leaders' attitudes towards inclusion, with relevancy for both the national context and international comparison. The study also revealed that while school leaders' attitudes lean slightly positive, support

### Practice attitudes were strongly predicted by leader vision and much less by levels of support.

provisions for inclusion are widely criticised in Estonia. As the current research did not dig into the details of available support, future studies may be required to understand how best to make related improvements.

A limitation of the research was that searching for overall significant trends meant that the distinctive experiences of school leaders received less attention.

Studies elsewhere could therefore cluster schools or school leaders to gain a better understanding of the ways that interventions could be diversified to promote positive inclusionary attitudes. Further on the matter of interventions, the recent results indicate a cause for concern regarding the current provision of in-service courses. The particular approaches and focal points of such courses may be worth revision and continued research.

The key takeaway from the research is that school leaders' attitudes towards support did not predict

their attitudes towards inclusive practices as strongly as vision. The evidence, therefore, points to the value of leaders starting their inclusion efforts by framing a shared vision of inclusive education. Then, leadership may work to strengthen collaboration between teachers and support staff, which will grant them agency to work to consolidate such a shared vision and the practices of inclusion.

# Behind the Research



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## Research Objectives

The inclusive education research group at the University of Tartu studies school leaders' attitudes towards inclusive education.

## Detail

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Pedaste, Tiina Kivirand, Pille Nelis, Lii Kaudne, Gerli Silm, Carolina Šuman, Eneli Liblik, and Marje Johanson.

teaching quality of inclusive education curriculum.'

### Bio

The inclusive education research group at the University of Tartu has been led by Professor Äli Leijen. Other members of the team are Professor Margus

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### Collaborators

The inclusive education research group is collaborating actively with Tallinn University (Estonia), Stavanger University (Norway), and Oslo University (Norway).

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