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Parents' views on the success of integration of students with special education needs

Risto Hotulainen* and Marjatta Takala

Special Education, Faculty of Behavioural Sciences, University of Helsinki, Siltavuorenpenger 3 A, Helsinki FI 00014, Finland

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This study investigated how parents' views on important aspects of integration correlate with parents' actual experiences concerning the integration into mainstream education of their child with special education needs. It was assumed that the degree of discrepancy between perceived importance and corresponding actual experience contributes to the overall perceived success of integration. The data for the study were collected in 2006 from parents ($N = 219$) whose special needs children were integrated into mainstream education in Helsinki, Finland. Quantitatively analysed findings were reflected against background variables. Results showed that the importance of the given statements were affected by the child's gender and school level. The parents' actual experiences were affected by two factors. The first showed that teachers at the primary level were evaluated as being more skilful than teachers at the secondary level, and at the secondary level, teaching was more individualised than at the primary level. Second, a child's self-worth was shown to be higher when integrated into the neighbourhood school. Parents' views on the success of integration were related to their actual experiences, especially in those statements rated as important. Possible explanations for these findings and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: parents' views; special education; integration; inclusion; importance; experience

Introduction

The recent tendency in European countries has been to develop educational policy towards inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) (e.g. Kivirauma, Klemelä, and Rinne 2006; Lindsay 2007). Similarly, the aim in Finland and other Scandinavian countries has been to integrate special needs education as much as possible into all secondary and upper-secondary comprehensive schools (Välijärvi et al. 2007). The words integration and inclusion are both used in the Finnish educational context; integration primarily means temporary placement in the mainstream curriculum. In Finland, the Basic Education Act (1998) requires that education be provided according to the age and qualifications of the student. This provision forms the basis for all planning of instruction, including supportive measures and services.

Special educational support is offered in Finland in two forms, part-time or full-time. Part-time special education is a flexible support system within the Finnish school. Specific diagnoses of students are not required for them to be eligible for

*Corresponding author. Email: risto.hotulainen@helsinki.fi

part-time special education support, whereas students who need full-time support must be assessed as having SEN status. Before integration, full-time special education is provided in a special class or special school for those students who cannot cope in general education due to a disability, illness, delayed development, emotional disorder, or some other similar reason. Each student that has access to full-time special education must be provided with an individual education plan (IEP). When either part-time or full-time support is provided, the parents are informed, invited, and have the right to take part in the meetings that discuss the evaluation, the content of the IEP and its goals, and the educational placement of their children. In this paper, we are interested in studying parents' views on their SEN children's integration to regular education. We suppose that exploring parental insights improves the understanding of the needs of all parties involved in the integration process, but most crucially of the child. In the following sections, we will introduce a statistical overview of the Finnish inclusive policies and parents' perceptions of their child's integration followed by a theoretical framework and questions of this study.

Parents and inclusive policies

The number of children receiving special education in Finland is substantial. During the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of students categorised in special education, but the latest statistics (Statistics Finland 2011) show that the number of SEN students included in mainstream education has also increased. In Finland, students having SEN status and studying in mainstream are considered integrated SEN students although some of them have never been moved anywhere from their original class or group. In 2010, 8.5% of comprehensive school students were transferred or admitted to special education (SEN) student status and 23.3% received part-time special education (European Agency 2010; Statistics Finland 2011).

The opinions of parents regarding inclusion are somewhat contradictory. Parents are usually confident about inclusive school solutions (Morewood and Bond 2012), and accept full inclusion or a temporary resource room type of inclusion (Elzein 2009). The type of disability can have some effect on the choice of school form. In a Finnish study (Kivirauma, Klemelä, and Rinne 2006), the majority of parents of severely disabled students were in favour of special schools, but the majority of the parents with children with other kinds of special educational challenges supported education in the nearest mainstream school (Kivirauma, Klemelä, and Rinne 2006). Although parents ($N = 113$) seem to be satisfied with inclusion and the services provided for their children, parents whose children were in segregated settings ($n = 65$), such as in a special school or a special unit, seemed to be even more satisfied. Parents were satisfied with inclusion in theory, but in reality preferred segregated services (Nugent 2007). In general, transfer from the primary level to the secondary level occurs at the same time as teachers place a greater emphasis on grades, competition, and control, while teachers' interest in students decreases (Harter 1996). It is assumed that these differences between the type of inclusion or mainstreaming involved at the primary and secondary levels can have some effect on parents' views concerning integration.

Inclusive settings, although appreciated, also cause worries for parents. For example, parents of children with special needs seem to have mixed feelings concerning inclusion, because some children seem to be more preferred than others are. According to those teachers teaching in mainstream education, children with

behavioural challenges are considered more demanding than some other SEN students (Moberg 1998; Elzein 2009). This might put extra pressure on certain parents in the integration process. Indeed, the study of Crawford and Simonoff (2003) showed that parents of children with emotional behavioural disorders especially experienced stigmatisation and isolation in the placement process.

Often the key issues behind unsuccessful inclusive practices are the lack of services as well as communication challenges with the school representatives (Leyser and Kirk 2011). The findings of Dobbins and Abbott (2010) indicate that there is a need for educators and researchers to engage with the views of parents, and to recognise relationships among all parties involved in the integration process at an interpersonal and organisational level, so that home–school relations can be improved. Thus, by studying parents' views we are not solely able to improve support of their SEN children but understand the importance of parent involvement, how to support families, and types of approaches to take in practicing effective communication with families.

Aims of the study

This paper reports on the experiences of inclusive placement (i.e. integration) according to Finnish parents of SEN children. We formulated a theoretical model based on Harter's Self-concept theory (Harter 1999). According to Harter (1999), a person's self-worth depends on success in a domain that the individual considers important. Accordingly, we postulated that perceived success in domains that are rated as important predicts overall satisfaction towards integration, and vice versa. For example, when clients find that all the other aspects related to educational placement are well organised and planned except for their accessibility to the needed use of a wheelchair, lower personal satisfaction resulted. By using this frame, called *semantic discrepancy between perceived importance and experiences* (SeDPIE), we tried to capture the most relevant factors for successful integration as judged by parents.

In this study, we focus on parents and their experiences related to integration of their SEN children into school life. Sometimes the setting, segregated or inclusive, is chosen due to a lack of alternative provisions, and sometimes segregation is chosen even though other options are available (Waddington and Reed 2006; Leyser and Kirk 2011).

Although there are some international studies available (Peterson and Hittie 2003; Skårbrevik 2005), to our knowledge, quantitative studies, especially about Finnish parents' corresponding experiences, are rare. This study is relevant to both current worldwide tendencies towards inclusion and to the situation in Finland where the Basic Education Act changed in 2010 regarding SEN students. The new law directs schools towards inclusive settings and to solutions where support would be increased in regular classes (Basic Education Act 2010). It is important to know the opinion of parents concerning inclusion, if inclusion is to be promoted. Commitment to inclusion from all partners, including parents, is necessary in order to make it function (Eriks-Brophy et al. 2006; Hodkinson 2010).

Our research questions are: (1) which issues did parents find most important regarding the successful integration of SEN children, (2) what experiences did parents have of integration, (3) do the backgrounds of the parents with successful and unsuccessful integration experiences differ, and (4) how do the parents who had successful and unsuccessful integration experiences differ from each other concerning integration importance ratings and integration experiences? It is especially interesting to study

how the background of the integrated SEN children and their parents affect parents' views of the success of integration. Thus, findings reflected in the independent variables (IVs) of the study are parents' occupational level, child's gender, child's grade level (primary and secondary level), neighbourhood school participation, and the particular category of SEN diagnosed for the student.

Method

Participants

In 2006, a total of 1020 SEN students had been integrated into mainstream classes in the City of Helsinki. At the suggestion of the Educational Office of the City of Helsinki, only the schools having more than six SEN students were chosen to participate in the target group of this study. The Educational Office of the City wanted this survey to offer information from school districts and schools. These results are reported in the earlier study report (*reference deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process*). After this restriction, the planned sample was 625 integrated SEN students. This sample was determined to correspond to the same balance (girls/boys and primary/secondary level) as the original sample ($N = 1020$). The other background information, namely the parents' occupational level, neighbourhood school participation, and classification of the SEN, was planned to be gathered from the parents. During spring 2006, a six-page questionnaire entitled *Semantic discrepancy between perceived importance and experiences* was mailed to the parents of the integrated SEN students along with an introduction letter and a return envelope. The introduction letter mentioned that all their answers would be confidential and that participants did not have to answer any questions with which they did not feel comfortable. A total of 219 (35%) parents responded to the mailed questionnaire. Due to the anonymity of the mailing of the questionnaires, no follow-up request could be made if there was no response to the original correspondence.

Instrument

The SeDPIE questionnaire gave information about the following four dimensions: (1) background information from parents and their SEN children, (2) statements concerning the importance of various domains ($N = 18$) of integration, (3) parents' experiences with integration on those 18 domains of importance, and (4) overall success of integration (see Table 1). Details about these four dimensions and the methods by which they were evaluated are described as follows.

(1) *Background information* concerning parents' occupation, child's grade and gender, neighbourhood school participation, and SEN classification was gathered.
(2) *Importance of statements* was measured by asking SEN parents to rate 18 statements (on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being not at all important and 7 being very important). These statements were formed to gather information from the different aspects of integration and their relevance for the success of integration. Statements were formed based on both the recommendation list offered by the Finnish Foundation of the Educational Curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education 2004) for the SEN integration policies and earlier studies (e.g. Stallard and Lenton 1992; Naukkarinen 2005; Skårbrevik 2005).

Table 1. Importance statements and reliabilities of the corresponding experience scales ($n = 215$).

Importance statements	Corresponding experience scales (item *n*)	Cronbach's alphas
(1) Child's self-worth	3	0.88
(2) Teachers' teaching skills (of SEN students)	8	0.90
(3) Preparations (mapping strengths and weaknesses)	9	0.82
(4) Sufficient SEN support after integration	3	0.72
(5) Openness	3	0.71
(6) Improved social relations	2	0.76
(7) Co-operation (between home and school)	3	0.88
(8) Child's willingness (to transfer into a common classroom)	2	–
(9) School's equal treatment of all students	2	0.71
(10) Child's lessened perception of difference	3	–
(11) Attentiveness to child's opinion when preparing integration	3	0.80
(12) Well-being of the other students	3	0.81
(13) Written individualised educational plans (has supported integration)	3	0.75
(14) Improved learning outcomes	3	0.78
(15) Economic resources (are good enough for integration)	3	0.74
(16) Individualised learning assessment	2	–
(17) Individualised materials, tasks, and instructions	2	0.75
(18) Awareness of parents of other children (about our child's integration)	2	–
In all	59	
+ Integration has been successful	3	0.82

Note: Those words written in parentheses are not used later in the text.

In Table 1, the statements that asked about importance are listed (on the left, column 1)

(1) *Integration experiences* were assessed by asking the participants to respond to 59 items (see Table 1, column 2) that measured actual experiences related to the above-mentioned statements of importance (on a scale of 1–5). The intent was to capture parents' views about how successful integration of their child has actually been in those areas they rated as important. Items were formulated in the past tense (perfect) and in both positive and negative directions. For example, the first importance statement *Child's self-worth* was covered with three experience items: (a) after integration the student has had low self-esteem, (b) after integration the student accepts her/himself as she/he is, and (c) after integration the student has considered her-/himself as a worthy

person. The scale reliabilities along with the number of researched items within the scale are shown in Table 1 (on the right).

(2) *Success of integration* was determined by three questions (see Table 1). This variable was later recoded into two different classes, successful and unsuccessful experiences, in order to study if these two classes have different properties concerning the background variables (cf. Pedzahur and Schmelkin 1991).

According to the results shown in Table 1, the reliabilities of the SeDPIE questionnaire were not as high as expected or desired. For example, the four experience scales were excluded from the analysis because their reliabilities were under the recommended 0.70 values (Nunnally 1978).

Analysis procedures

Analyses of the relationship between the IVs (parent's occupation, child's grade, child's gender, neighbourhood school participation, and SEN classification) and dependent variables concerning the importance statements (18) were conducted with Kruskal–Wallis H test and Mann–Whiteney U test. Analyses of the IVs and experiences (14) added to the scale *Integration has been successful* were conducted using MANOVAs. Log transformations (LN) were performed for both to the positively skewed importance statements and experiences. The necessary assumptions for MANOVA were checked by the test of homogeneity of variance and the Box's M test. The effect sizes (η^2) of comparisons were calculated by dividing the difference between means of the comparison groups by the weighted standard deviation to yield a standard score (Cohen 1977). Of the four IVs considered, one to two was entered into the MANOVA at a time to find significant interaction effects. Cross-tabulation (χ^2) was used to study if the child's SEN classification had a statistically significant relation to the experienced success of integration. Due to the large number of dependent variables and the consequent number of significance and *post hoc* (Bonferroni) tests, the likelihood of making a Type I error increased. Regardless of the use of the Bonferroni correction, when reading the results of the pair-wise comparisons, the reader needs to be cautious about results that were significant between $p < 0.05$ and $p > 0.001$ levels (Abdi 2007).

Results

Characteristics of the study sample

In the following, characteristics of the study sample are presented. The socioeconomic background of the parents was categorised into four occupational levels: level 4 – professionals, technicians, and associate professionals ($n = 28\%$); level 3 – clerks ($n = 40\%$); level 2 – service workers and sales workers ($n = 77\%$); and level 1 – elementary occupations ($n = 33\%$) (ILO 1990; Statistics in Finland 2001). In all, 177 parents informed the researchers of their occupation. According to the child's gender, there were 55 (26%) parents of girls and 163 (74%) parents of boys. The balance between genders corresponded to the original, with a total of 1020 integrated SEN students. However, there was a small difference among the grade levels. In the original, a total of 1020 integrated SEN students consisted of 59% primary and 41% secondary level students, which also corresponds to the national figures (Statistics Finland

2007). In our sample, 150 (68%) students were at the primary level (grades 1–6) and 63 (32%) were at the secondary level (grades 7–9). There were 178 students who studied in the neighbourhood school, whereas 32 were reported by their parents to be studying elsewhere. The categorisation of SEN reasons was planned to follow the categorisation used by Statistics of Finland. However, there were no students with severe developmental delay and only a few students with mild developmental delay. In 2006, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) did not have their own category in the categorisation done by Statistics of Finland, although parents clearly stated attention problems (e.g. ADHD) as a primary cause of children being assessed for SEN status. The following frequencies per category emerged: (1) learning disorder ($n = 42$); (2) attention disorder ($n = 38$); (3) physical or corresponding disability ($n = 6$); (4) emotional, behavioural, or social disorder ($n = 40$); (5) autism or asperger syndrome related to learning difficulties ($n = 9$); (6) dysphasia ($n = 26$); (7) hearing or visual disorder ($n = 12$); (8) multiple disorders ($n = 16$); and (9) other reasons, such as overlapping comorbidity ($n = 19$). Information related to the primary reasons for the SEN was received from only 208 parents; 11 parents did not report a reason for the SEN categorisation.

Importance ratings in successful integration

In general, the importance rating of the statements had high values (scale 1–7), with mean values ranging in descending order from 6.77 to 5.80, and with the exception of *awareness of parents of other children*, which had a deviant mean ($M = 3.80$). The highest three ratings had means from 6.77 to 6.70 (*child's self-worth*, *teacher's teaching skills*, and *preparations*), whereas the lowest three had mean values under 6.00 (from 5.90 to 5.80), respectively (excluding *awareness of parents of other children*). In Table 2, descriptive statistics of importance statements are shown along with the corresponding values of the related experiences.

To study the effect of the background variables for importance ratings the Kruskal–Wallis H test was used for parents' occupational level and the particular category of SEN and Mann–Whiteney U test for the child's gender, child's grade-level, and neighbourhood school participation, respectively. Significant effect was found on the variable of a child's grade level.

Child's grade level: Mean rank comparisons showed that there were statistically significant differences on six importance ratings (see Table 3). In general, parents of the secondary level children gave higher values for the statements which were related to individualised treatment.

Parents of the primary level children, in turn, had higher mean ranks on *school treats all students equally* and *co-operation* than parents of secondary level students.

Integration experiences

The rated integration experiences (scale 1–5) ranged in descending order from $M = 4.04$ to 2.93 (see Table 2) showing that parents' experiences were very positive. For example, the scale measuring overall satisfaction towards integration, called *successful integration,* had the second highest experience mean ($M = 3.89$). It is notable that experience scales related to the well-being of the child and communication received higher values in comparison to those scales that focused on practical and technical implementation of the integration.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the importance ratings and corresponding experience scales.

			Corresponding experience scales	
Importance statements	*M*	SD	*M*	SD
Improved social relations	6.58	0.75	4.04	1.10
Co-operation	6.57	0.78	3.85	1.19
Child's lessened perception of difference	6.44	0.85	–[a]	
Child's self-worth	6.77	0.59	3.84	1.09
Openness	6.59	0.68	3.81	0.95
Teachers' teaching skills	6.75	0.55	3.78	1.00
School's equal treatment of all students	6.51	0.95	3.75	0.93
Child's willingness	6.52	0.72	–[a]	
Preparations	6.70	0.65	3.50	0.82
Written individualised educational plans	6.20	0.97	3.49	1.05
Individualised materials, tasks, and instructions	5.83	1.28	3.49	1.01
Improved learning outcomes	6.18	1.09	3.46	0.75
Sufficient SEN support after integration	6.62	0.67	3.45	1.03
Economic resources	5.90	1.21	3.41	0.99
Child's opinion when preparing for integration	6.37	0.80	3.38	0.98
Individualised learning assessment	5.90	1.00	–[a]	
Well-being of the other students	6.23	0.93	2.93	0.50
Awareness of parents of other children	3.58	1.92	–[a]	
+ Integration has been successful			3.89	1.08

Note: [a]Four experience scales were deleted from the analyses due to low reliabilities.

Table 3. Effect of the child's grade level on importance statements.

Statement	*M*	SD	Mean rank	*Z*-score	*p*	η^2
Written individualised educational plans	1 = 6.12 2 = 6.43	0.98 0.92	100.32 126.22	−2.00	0.049	−0.32
School treats all students equally	1 = 6.60 2 = 6.25	0.83 1.15	113.71 96.41	−2.33	0.020	0.37
Co-operation	1 = 6.66 2 = 6.33	0.65 0.97	115.72 93.62	−2.99	0.003	0.43
Attentiveness to the child's opinion when preparing for integration	1 = 6.25 2 = 6.64	0.85 0.63	99.76 123.12	−2.85	0.004	−0.48
Individualised materials, tasks, and instructions	1 = 5.73 2 = 6.13	1.32 1.15	100.84 122.43	−2.47	0.019	−0.32

Note: 1 = primary level; 2 = secondary level.

To respond to the second study question, MANOVA tests with four background variables and 14 log-transformed integration experience scales were performed. Significant multivariate effects were found for the following background variables: *child's grade level* (*Wilk's lambda* = 0.60, $F = 6.12$, $p = 0.000$) and *neighbourhood school participation* (*Wilk's lambda* = 0.83, $F = 1.96$, $p = 0.020$).

Table 4. Effect of the child's grade level on perceived experiences.

Scales	M	SD	F^a	p	η^2
Written individualised educational plans	1 = 3.33	1.05	6.83	0.009	−0.45
	2 = 3.80	1.04			
Teachers' teaching skills	1 = 3.96	0.92	11.46	0.001	0.58
	2 = 3.38	1.05			
School's equal treatment of all children	1 = 3.86	0.90	5.23	0.024	0.40
	2 = 3.49	0.97			
Attentiveness to the child's opinion when preparing for integration	1 = 3.15	0.94	17.67	0.000	−0.78
	2 = 3.89	0.98			

Note: 1 = primary level, 2 = secondary level.

[a]Statistical analyses were performed with log-transformed values.

Child's grade level: Pair-wise comparisons showed that there were statistically significant differences on four integration experience scales (see Table 4). In general, parents of the primary level children gave higher values for the scales that asked about experiences concerning equalised treatment for all students, whereas parents of the secondary level children gave higher values for the scales that asked about experiences concerning individualised treatment.

The scales Attentiveness to the child's opinion and *Written individualised educational plans* were experienced more positively at the secondary level, whereas school's equal treatment of all children and teachers' teaching skills were experienced more positively at the primary level.

Neighbourhood school participation: A paired comparison showed that children who were integrated into the neighbourhood school ($M = 3.94$) had statistically significantly higher ($F = 6.91$, $p = 0.009$, $\eta^2 = 0.62$) ratings in the category of *child's self-worth* values than schoolmates ($M = 3.35$) whose study place was located elsewhere.

Parents with successful and unsuccessful experiences

To examine the responses to the study questions number three and four, parents' answers on the integration experience scale, *integration has been successful,* were divided into two categories: parents whose scale values were between 1 and 3 ($n = 45$) were categorised as having unsuccessful experiences; those who had values 3 and above ($n = 166$) were categorised as having successful experiences.

To determine if there were direct effects from the background variables to the above-mentioned categorical variables, regression analyses (Binary logistic) were conducted using all four IVs of the study as predictors, excluding the child's SEN classification. The analyses did not show any significant prediction in this regard. Additionally, cross-tabulation was carried out with the child's SEN classification and success of integration. Statistical analyses showed this to be statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 13.99$, df = 8, $p = 0.05$). Additionally, residual analysis showed that the SEN category emotional and behavioural disorders (EBDs) had deviant standardised residuals (3.0 = unsuccessful and −3.0 = successful), indicating that this particular SEN class made a strong contribution to the overall association. It showed that parents of EBD children more often had unsuccessful integration experiences.

Importance statements and success of integration: To study the effect of success of integration classification (1 = unsuccessful experiences, 2 = successful experiences) for importance ratings Mann–Whiteney U test was used. There were no statistically significant differences between the groups.

Integration experiences and success of integration: The Success of integration classification (1 = unsuccessful experiences, 2 = successful experiences) was entered into a MANOVA test with log-transformed integration experience scales. IVs shown to have statistically significant main effect (child's grade level and neighbourhood school participation) were used as a covariate. Multivariate tests showed a statistically significant effect (*Wilks' Lambda* = 0.27, $F = 25.01$, $p = 0.000$) for integration experiences. Statistically significant differences were found on 11 scales that are shown in descending order according to the strength of the effect in Table 5.

Table 5 shows that parents having 'unsuccessful' integration experiences experienced clear failure in relation to the important aspects of integration. This was especially true within the scales that were more directly attributable to the school's duties related to integration (sufficient SEN support after integration; co-operation; openness; individualised materials, tasks, and instructions; improved learning outcomes; preparations; etc.) It is noteworthy that, simultaneously, there were smaller

Table 5. Integration experiences by success of integration groups.

Experience scales	Success of integration	*M*	SD	F^a	*P*	η^2
Sufficient SEN support after integration	1.00	2.34	0.73	109.13	0.000	−1.84
	2.00	3.81	0.82			
Co-operation	1.00	2.64	1.23	100.07	0.000	−1.60
	2.00	4.21	0.90			
Openness	1.00	2.72	0.93	97.32	0.000	−1.79
	2.00	4.10	0.72			
Individualised materials, tasks, and instructions	1.00	2.11	0.95	81.15	0.000	−1.51
	2.00	3.63	1.03			
Improved learning outcomes	1.00	2.69	0.68	78.34	0.000	−1.49
	2.00	3.69	0.61			
Preparations	1.00	2.66	0.74	77.59	0.000	−1.32
	2.00	3.74	0.68			
Teachers' teaching skills	1.00	2.77	0.87	75.25	0.000	−1.49
	2.00	4.04	0.85			
Written individualised educational plans	1.00	2.68	0.96	41.35	0.000	−1.11
	2.00	3.74	0.95			
School's equal treatment of all students	1.00	3.09	0.99	33.22	0.000	−0.88
	2.00	3.93	0.83			
Economic resources	1.00	2.86	0.92	20.03	0.000	−0.74
	2.00	3.56	0.96			
Child's opinion when preparing for integration	1.00	2.95	0.89	14.96	0.000	−0.61
	2.00	3.53	0.95			
Improved social relations	1.00	3.61	1.18	5.15	0.025	−0.55
	2.00	4.19	1.02			

Note: 1 = unsuccessful experiences, 2 = successful experiences.

[a]Statistical analyses were performed with log-transformed values.

differences between groups within those statements that were related to a child's well-being (e.g. school's equal treatment of all students, child's opinion when preparing for integration, improved social relations, etc.) and, accordingly, there was no difference between groups concerning the category child's self-worth.

Discussion

Parents' importance ratings and experiences of integration were studied as well as parents' views of successful integration. The data were gathered from 219 parents in the Helsinki Metropolitan area. The aspects of integration studied were considered important and were mostly experienced positively, as has been found also in other studies (e.g. de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert 2010). Being included in the neighbourhood school was valuable for the SEN child's self-worth, which is a strong argument for inclusion.

Differences on parents' importance statements emerged depending on a child's grade level. Results show that parents of children at the primary level wish more that their children are treated equally despite their SEN status than do parents of secondary level children, and, simultaneously, parents of secondary level children had higher ratings for the importance statements related to individualised treatment. Similarly, parents of children at the primary level felt more strongly about the relevance of co-operation than parents of secondary level children. These findings can be interpreted in various ways: (a) at the primary level parents are more concerned about stigmatisation, (b) parents may hope that the situation (SEN status) will change over time and with good co-operation, and (c) parents of secondary level children are more able to see benefits of the individualised treatment for their child over time. We had no chance to study if the students of secondary level would have a longer SEN status background than those children at the primary level. However, it is probable that over time parents become less concerned about their child's SEN status and related stigmatisation, and become more aware of individualised support services, how well they have been arranged, and how they affect the well-being of their child.

In our study, parents of children at the primary level experienced that primary level teachers had more knowledge and teaching skills regarding special needs than teachers at the secondary level. In the Finnish school system, the classroom teacher usually follows an age-cohort from first to second grade and then from third to sixth grade. Within this primary school frame, the integrated SEN student is primarily in a class with a skilful, experienced teacher. The same arrangement is not possible at the secondary level where various subject teachers are responsible for teaching, and students move between different classes all day. It is quite common that teachers at the secondary level discuss more with their students and encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning. At the same time, students and their parents meet teachers who have varying levels of skills; these discrepancies may cause the perceived differences.

Interestingly, integration placement away from a neighbourhood school has a clear effect on a parent's rating of the child's self-worth. The data do not reveal if those children placed outside of neighbourhood schools had more severe difficulties in the first place; if that were the case, it could partly explain parents' lowered perceptions. Similar results have been found when comparing children who have been chronically ill and not able to either study or join regular school-day activities (Fottland 2000). Alternatively, the families themselves may have voluntarily applied to non-neighbourhood schools, for example, due to special classes (e.g. music, athletics) or special curriculum

activities, but this should not be related to the differences found. Additional research is needed to explain this finding. Nevertheless, this new result is clear evidence for the importance of neighbourhood school placement of SEN students.

Most parents experienced integration positively, but at the same time as approximately four-fifths of the parents had successful experiences, one-fifth experienced integration somewhat negatively. This result indicates, first, that not only those parents having positive experiences have responded, but also, and more importantly, that those other parents are also concerned about their child's integration and probably struggle with their child's integration process.

When reflecting on the two categories of success to both IVs of the study and importance ratings, no differences were found. This shows that parents of the SEN children are a very heterogeneous group and those having unsuccessful integration experiences do not have any deviant characteristics. In fact, they shared the very same views concerning important aspects of integration as the parents having successful experiences. However, when studying the reported experiences of these groups, we found that parents among the unsuccessful integration group rated their experiences almost systematically on a lower level than parents of the successful integration group did. This was especially true for the scales that were more directly attributable to the school's duties related to integration (sufficient SEN support after integration; co-operation; openness; individualised materials, tasks, and instructions; improved learning outcomes; preparations; etc.). According to Zetlin, Padron, and Wilson (1996), some parents can feel that they were not included in the core processes of SEN, such as making decisions about integration and the IEP. In Underwood's (2010) study, some parents wanted to be actively engaged in developing an IEP and some preferred to be only slightly involved. Parents ($N = 31$) were mainly informed by teachers of the school programme, more as passive receivers, but that seemed to satisfy them (Underwood 2010). In the study by Zetlin, Padron, and Wilson (1996), half of the parents reported that educators made decisions before parents came to meetings. Unsuccessful integration experiences seem to result from both restricted communication between parents and school personnel and perceived insufficient individualised support for the child.

When focusing on the relationship between the background variables and success of integration, the only finding was that parents of the children with EBD were over-represented among those who viewed integration as unsuccessful. As the study of Crawford and Simonoff (2003) showed, parents of EBD children are afraid of labelling of their child and themselves. In the case of EBD, the cause of the child's problem is more often likely to be connected to parent and family dysfunction than for other types of children's problems (Kazdin 1995). This may cause tension in discussions between the parents of EBD children and school personnel and can create additional pressures that need to be managed.

Finally, this study showed evidence for the SeDPIE framework. The overall success of integration seemed to be related to parents' experiences on the domains of perceived importance. If experiences on domains important to the parents were more positive, the parents were more likely to be satisfied. This is in line with the formulated theory. We did not go deeper into the data to study if success or its absence is correlated differently among the single responses as Harter's theory suggests. However, our findings have direct implications for teachers' meetings and discussions with the parents. It is essential that teachers and school personnel ask parents to rate the issues that they consider as important for successful integration. However, it is just as important that parents are

asked to rate how they have experienced success of integration on the very same scale. According to this theory, possible discrepancies between the importance of the statements and their actual experiences clearly indicate those areas where improvement should be targeted.

This study has limitations. Only one city was involved, the response rate was 35%, and the subgroups of the students and parents were rather small. However, the number of SEN students in our data accurately represents the data demographic for all of Finland, with the exception of differences in proportions between grade levels. Our questionnaire suffered from some deficits by showing that the four scales did not produce the needed reliabilities, and responses to the questionnaire were positively skewed. Furthermore, the researchers also did not allow the parents to report on what they thought was important; they were forced to choose from given options. In addition, students' opinions were not included.

The new inclusion policy in Finland recommends that all support should be offered in mainstream education (Amendments in the Basic Educational Act 642/2010; Ministry of Education 2007). This means that there will be more and more inclusion in the future, and effective discussions with parents as partners will be necessary to implement it successfully.

It seems that open communication and strong connections are extremely important for creating a strong committed organisation for an inclusive class (Stivers, LaTonya, and Straus 2008). To make integration or inclusion succeed, the opinions of all partners, parents as well as teachers (see also Hodkinson 2010), must be accommodated.

Notes on contributors

Risto Hotulainen, PhD, is working as lecturer at the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences, Department of Teacher Education – Special Education, University of Helsinki, Finland. Currently (2011–2014) he is working in the project 'Think Science and Math' funded by the Finnish the Ministry of Education and Culture.

Marjatta Takala works now as a professor of special education at the University of Oulu. She has done research related to, for example, educational policy in the Nordic countries. Her homepage is http://blogs.helsinki.fi/umtakala/.

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