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Responding to diversity in Physical Education: An
analysis of the Finnish national curriculum and the
teachers' perspective

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Abstract

The main research interest in this publication-based PhD thesis is to examine what impact the national reforms associated with the current Finnish national curriculum have had on the push for a greater emphasis on inclusivity in physical education (PE) classes. Like other countries, Finland makes inclusivity (fairness and equity) an explicit dimension of effective educational provision. At the practical level, however, the implementation of inclusive practices seems not to be in line with policy documents. Consequently, this research project focuses on the interplay between curriculum approaches and its reflections in inclusive teaching in a Finnish school context. To validate the findings, multiple types of material are gathered through different research methods. First, the current Finnish National Curriculum of PE is qualitatively content analysed to identify how the PE curricula responds to the individual abilities and needs of all children, particularly regarding students with special educational needs (SEN). Second, a case study is conducted with the intention of developing understandings on how PE teachers perceive the ways the national curriculum frames their possibilities to work inclusive in PE. The case study is based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The findings reveal that while students with SEN are addressed intensively in the general guidelines of the national core curriculum, the PE curricula provide little information that informs and structures (inclusive) teaching and learning processes. Besides, the flexibility of the Finnish curriculum seems to have a positive impact on the participants' professional practice and is regarded as an important tool to accommodate the individual needs of their students, including those with disabilities. In contrast to recent findings from other countries (e.g. England), the lack of specific detail on pedagogy and assessment rather encourages the participants to take action and engage in innovative curriculum development processes.

Zusammenfassung

Das Hauptforschungsinteresse dieser publikationsbasierten Dissertation besteht darin, zu untersuchen, welche Auswirkungen die nationalen Bildungsreformen in Finnland und der damit verbundenen Einführung des aktuellen Kerncurriculums auf das Thema Inklusion und Diversität im Sportunterricht hatten. In Finnland, wie in anderen Ländern auch, gehört die Inklusionsthematik seit längerem zu den bildungspolitischen Zielsetzungen einer chancengerechten Schule. Die Implementierung inklusiver Praktiken scheint jedoch auf der Unterrichtsebene nicht im gleichen Maße zu erfolgen, wie sie auf bildungspolitischer Ebene gefordert werden. Bisher liegen wenige Forschungsvorhaben vor, die das Zusammenspiel zwischen curricularen Vorgaben und der (inklusive) Unterrichtspraxis untersucht haben. Dabei sollten Lehrpläne den schulischen Akteuren als handlungsleitende Richtlinien für ihre Unterrichtsgestaltung und zur Legitimation ihres professionellen Handelns dienen. An diesem Forschungsdesiderat anknüpfend, beschäftigt sich das Dissertationsprojekt mit der übergeordneten Fragestellung, welchen Orientierungsrahmen das finnische Kerncurriculum den (Sport-) Lehrkräften für den Umgang mit Diversität bietet. Als Erhebungsinstrumente dienen unterschiedliche qualitative Zugänge (Dokumentenanalyse, Experteninterviews mit Lehrkräften, teilnehmende Beobachtung). Zunächst wurde mit Hilfe einer Dokumentenanalyse des finnischen Kerncurriculums untersucht, welche Rolle das Thema Diversität in den aktuell gültigen (Sport-)Lehrplänen spielt. Anschließend wurde aus der Perspektive der Lehrkräfte untersucht, wie das finnische Kerncurriculum von den befragten Lehrkräften wahrgenommen wird und welche Relevanz der Lehrplan für die (inklusive) Praxis hat. Die Analyse des finnischen Kerncurriculums zeigt auf, dass Finnland das Thema Diversität in den allgemeingültigen Richtlinien des Curriculums sehr umfangreich und wertschätzend berücksichtigt, allerdings findet das Thema Diversität auf der fachspezifischen Ebene deutlich weniger Beachtung. Weiterhin nehmen die befragten finnischen Lehrkräfte die Offenheit und Flexibilität der curricularen Vorgaben positiv wahr und schätzen ihre pädagogische Handlungsfreiheit. Im Gegensatz zu Forschungsergebnissen aus anderen Ländern (z.B. England), haben die flexiblen curricularen Vorgaben in Finnland einen positiven Einfluss auf die berufliche Praxis der Lehrkräfte und ihre Bereitschaft zur Schul- und Lehrplanentwicklung.

Introduction

Even though inclusion and diversity issues have been guiding principles of the educational policies in most countries in recent decades, there is still no common understanding of these concepts. The notion of inclusion and diversity is complex and the interpretation and meaning of both concepts vary within and between countries (Sundqvist & Hannås, 2021; Buchner & Proyer, 2020; Haug, 2017). In many cases, diversity and inclusion are used synonymously due to their similarities regarding their historical roots (Allemann-Ghionda, 2013; Keuchel, 2016). However, while both terms are related to each other, they are not synonymous and still, there is a lack of conceptual clarity demanding more in-depth, culture-specific research on understandings of these concepts (Krischler et al., 2019). As pointed out by Grindstaff (2022), being diverse means the group or community in question refers to “range of social identities representing a range of social locations/backgrounds, whereas being inclusive means that people of different backgrounds and identities feel - and are - valued members of the group who participate on equal footing” (Grindstaff, 2022, p. 28). In other words, diversity can be regarded as necessary but not sufficient to achieving inclusivity within social institutions. The concept of inclusion seems more vague because it must be interpreted and therefore depends on the subjective perception of “being included” (Vetoniemi & Kärnä, 2021; Giese et al., 2021). As previous research has shown, pupils with disabilities or special educational needs are frequently associated with inclusion, although the concept includes all children, principally those at risk of marginalisation (Graham & Slee, 2008; Haug, 2017; Nilholm, 2020). Responding to diversity is a responsibility of just societies and should be addressed on policy level. A legal framework is required to provide a basis in law for ensuring that policy makers and practitioners address issues of inclusion and diversity. Nowadays, most countries have a legal framework that is designed to ensure equal opportunities for all children as a fundamental right (UN, 2006).

Diversity issues in the PE curriculum

Due to the global inclusive education movement, diversity issues have also become an important topic in the field of PE. Regardless of the specific conceptualisation of diversity, scholars in the field of PE identified three central diversity dimensions which are in the spotlight of the present diversity discourse, both, on a policy and a practical level. Firstly, the dimension ‘(Dis-)ability’ has been identified as a significant social category in recent literature, which has been investigated from different perspectives (e.g. Smith & Green, 2004; Haycock & Smith, 2010; Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010; Hutzler et al., 2019; Giese et al., 2021). Secondly, previous literature highlighted the role of cultural diversity in PE, mainly referring to developing intercultural competence (e.g. Grimminger, 2011; Anttila, Siljamäki & Rowe, 2018; Wyant, Killick & Bowen, 2019; Tolgfors, 2020; Grimminger-Seidensticker & Möhwald, 2020).

Thirdly, recent research in the field of PE also highlighted questions related to sex and gender, such as promoting gender equity (e.g. Davis, 2003; Lentillon, Cogérino & Kaestner, 2006; Berg & Lahelma, 2010). The concept of diversity, however, is not limited to those social categories, as it basically encompasses all possible differences between people and within groups (Cunningham, 2019). When dealing with diversity issues on school level, curricula come in the spotlight as they serve as a guide for teachers (Kirk, 2014; Ennis, 2013) and simultaneously incorporate and promote the education philosophy of those in power (Penney, 2013a; Lähdemäki, 2019). When it comes to curriculum studies, it is therefore necessary to address the extent to which these educational policy guidelines become reality on a practical level in schools. It is important to keep in mind that the policy level naturally requires practical-level implementation, which “relies on the practitioners’ input, as well as being embedded in particular societal and cultural structures” (Kangas et al., 2020, p.5). Although cross-cultural studies are not unproblematic and may produce simplifying generalisations and categorisations, they can also reveal culture-specific knowledge and certain values for the further development of national educational systems and may give ideas on how these policy documents can be interpreted and implemented by educational practitioners (Kangas et al., 2020; Ruin & Stibbe, 2020; Adamson & Morris, 2007). According to previous research, the PE curriculum in many countries contains exclusionary potential for those students who are not able to participate in physical activities that focus on certain normative performances and require a “healthy body” (Webb, Quennerstedt & Öhman, 2008; Meier & Ruin, 2015; Ruin & Meier, 2017; Giese & Ruin, 2018), or for those who do not have the ability to reflect on themselves and their learning experiences (Giese & Buchner, 2019). This contrasts with the suggested inclusive values in the curricular documents in many countries emphasizing the uniqueness of each pupil (Price & Slee, 2021). If not addressed adequately, social differences between learners can be an obstacle to participation in (physical) education. In this context, intersectionality plays an important role, as it denotes the ways in which (dis-)ability, gender, interculturality, and other social markers operate not as “mutually exclusive categories but as reciprocally constituted ones that shape social experience” (Grindstaff, 2022, p.23). Consequently, it is of importance to not only identify and to know about how social markers emerge in (physical) education, but also to investigate the ways in which they relate to each other in different situations (Meier et al., 2021). Responding to diversity in practice presents challenges to PE teachers in meeting the diverse needs of all students in the classroom. However, it is well established that teachers often do not feel prepared to adequately address diversity in PE due to a lack of teaching competence (e.g. Tant & Watelain, 2016; Reuker et al., 2016; Obrusnikova, 2008). This supports the urgent need to develop innovative teaching practices and to focus on more equitable and socially just educational standards to meet the diverse needs of all students (Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2020).

In the past, considerable attention has been given to pedagogy and practice regarding the development of different practical models to better support practitioners when dealing with diversity in PE and sports (Petrie et al. 2018; Kiuppis 2018). At present, a variety of practical approaches exist that can serve as a guideline for didactic choices and the pedagogical aspects of responding to diversity in PE, such as the Australian approach TREE (Australian Sports Commission, 2006) or the Inclusion Spectrum Model (Black & Stevenson, 2017). Both approaches do not associate inclusion only with disability, but also connect its guiding principles with an “all-embracing approach allowing for ways of sport activity in heterogeneous teams without the group being imagined as divided into people with or without disabilities” (Kiuppis 2018, p. 15).

The Finnish education system as the research site

In this dissertation, I have examined the interplay between curriculum approaches and its reflections in inclusive teaching from the perspective of Finnish teachers in PE. Due to the success in PISA, the Finnish education system has received global attention in recent years. The PISA findings refer to a high degree of equality and equity in regard to the pupils’ learning outcomes in Finland (Kivirauma & Ruoho, 2007; Niemi, 2012). The well-functioning system for educational support (Kivirauma & Ruoho, 2007) and the research-based teacher education (Niemi, 2015; Vitikka et al., 2012) are considered by several authors as playing a key role in explaining the overall success of Finnish students in the PISA studies. In Finland, special education has strong cultural roots in responding to diversity in mainstream education (Paju et al., 2021). Traditionally, special education is shaped by beliefs that highlight the problem (disability) as a deficiency in the individual child and a medical view of disability (Hansen et al., 2020). In many countries, the model of special education associated with professional services for children with disabilities has undergone many changes, including Finland (Ström & Hannus- Gullmets, 2015; Pulkkinen & Jahnukainen, 2016). As stated by Hansen et al. (2020) the political goal of developing inclusive and more flexible schools challenges the traditional and categorical special educational thinking and practice. In Finland, the new three-tiered system of schooling support has been introduced in 2010–2011 (Finnish Basic Education Act, 642/2010), which resembles the ‘Response to intervention model’ in the US (Björn et al., 2016) and aims at promoting different support forms for students based on their individual needs in Finnish mainstream schools (Eklund et al., 2020; Björn et al., 2016). Due to reforms of the special educational support system in Finland and the expansion of the inclusive education movement, the work profile of special and general education teachers has nowadays become more versatile and includes collaborative practices (Takala & Head, 2017; Sirkko, Takala & Wickmann, 2018; Sundqvist, Björk-Åman & Ström, 2019). Both, general and special education teachers play a key role in implementing and developing inclusive practices

on school level and their responsibilities in meeting the needs of pupils with special educational needs have increased (Eklund et al., 2020; Paju et al., 2021). Although the number of students with SEN served in regular classrooms has increased in recent years, special instruction in small groups are still common practices in Finland (OSF, 2017). The prevalence of special education groups reserved for children with disabilities in mainstream schools is difficult to reconcile with most understandings of inclusive education (Malmquist & Nilholm, 2016).

In general, Finnish teachers are expected to be critical practitioners and to act as curriculum specialists due to their research-based teacher training (Niemi, 2015) and the trust in their professional abilities (Sahlberg, 2013). However, little is known if this educational autonomy really contributes to the development of inclusive practices at classroom level. As pointed out by several researchers (for example, Grundén, 2022) there is an *intended curriculum* for policy documents, frameworks, and guidelines that define what teachers are expected to deliver, and the *enacted curriculum* to describe what actually happens in the classroom. Previous research has shown the importance of local enactment and teachers' understanding when translating the intended curricula into pedagogical ideas and teaching practices (Tikkanen et al., 2019). Although the curricular documents suggest ways in which teachers may adapt the curriculum content and activities in PE (FNBE, 2016), there is little evidence whether these guidelines are understood and applied effectively by teachers. Besides, a more flexible curriculum framework with the intention to give teachers more pedagogical freedom may also be challenging for curriculum implementation as it relies on proactive teachers (Simmons & MacLean, 2018) and on a teacher's individual awareness and understanding of diversity concepts (Meier et al., 2021).

Main objectives and structure of this dissertation

The aim of the present dissertation is two-fold: Firstly, it attempts to identify how and to which extent the current Finnish National (PE) Curriculum addresses diversity issues, including pupils with special educational needs (SEN). Secondly, it tries to examine how PE and special educators perceive the ways the national curriculum frames their possibilities to deal with diversity in PE and to reveal pedagogical practices that different practitioners use to address the students' diversity in PE. Bernstein's (1990) analytic approach of recontextualization has been used as a theoretical framework to examine the processes of curriculum innovation and implementation. In the field of PE, Bernstein's multi-stage process has already been proven to be a suitable framework to examine the processes of curriculum development (e.g. Herold, 2020; Meier et al., 2021).

The first chapter of this dissertation introduces the reader to the research topic and provides an overview of the context in which this research is located. The second chapter presents the theoretical framework, Bernstein's concept of recontextualization, that was used for the series of studies that I conducted. The third chapter describes the main research aims and methods of this study, as well as concrete aspects each particular publication contributes to answer the research questions of this thesis. The fourth chapter presents every (peer-reviewed) publication included in the dissertation with an indication of my own contribution. The final section (chapter 5) concludes the dissertation by discussing the main results of each individual publication and its contribution to answering the main aim of the thesis and the scientific progress in the relevant field of research.

Chapter 1: Inclusive policies and the role of the PE curriculum

1.1 Designing an inclusive PE curriculum

In PE, inclusion as an educational philosophy has shaped the subject-specific discussions like in many other educational contexts, however, concerns about the inclusiveness of integrated PE classes have emerged in recent years, as they often include unchanged instructional approaches and little accommodations (Haegele, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2005). Moreover, as pointed out by Penney et al. (2018, p. 1065), PE has "repeatedly been shown to align with and reinforce particular types of hegemonic discourses that privilege a narrow group of (white, middle-class, motor-skilled, masculine) students". Globally and historically, there is a difference between the ethos of sport and the ethos of PE, especially when dealing with diversity (Kiuppis, 2018; Hakala & Kujala, 2015). In contrast to the notion of inclusion in educational settings, sport is a field in which segregated and inclusive structures are still co-existing non-hierarchically (Kiuppis, 2018). Nevertheless, aspects such as nationalism, given gender roles, self-discipline, and a traditional understanding of performance still have an impact on the ethos of sports practices and attitudes which also influence the PE curriculum and practice (Hakala & Kujala, 2015). Concerning the PE curriculum, the tendency is to rather apply certain adaptations within existing structures to accommodate a broader range of young people than radically changing curriculum content (Penney et al., 2018; Price & Slee, 2021). As exemplified by Penney et al. (2018), for instance, gender-differentiated curriculum provision is often based on unquestioned gender-specific interests defined in relation to sport-based performance criteria (for example, girls are supposed to practice dance while boys are offered football). Consequently, designing an inclusive (PE) curriculum is a much larger project than simply adapting syllabi as it requires a more expansive view of curriculum (Price & Slee, 2021). It should broaden the movement experiences that feature in PE (Penney et al. 2018)

and requires the recognition of the ways in which curriculum practices systematically exclude students with special educational needs (SEN) (Price & Slee, 2021). As previous research has shown, inclusive practices differ between countries (Paju et al., 2021) and are shaped by subject-specific discourses (Kiuppis 2018; Penney et al., 2018). In many cases, inclusive (PE) practices include flexible teaching and assessment methods, multi-professional collaboration and reflecting on one's own teaching practice (Petrie et al., 2018; Penney et al., 2018; Tant & Watelein, 2016; Overton, Wrench, & Garrett, 2017). While there are significant findings on how pupils with SEN can be included in integrated PE settings (e.g. Overton, Wrench & Garrett, 2017; Majoko 2019), there is a lack of research that focus on how inclusive learning environments involving all pupils can be created in practice. Inclusive PE incorporates curriculum modifications and the provision of necessary support to ensure every child has the same opportunities to succeed (Overton, Wrench & Garrett, 2017), which also requires a move away from deficit-based thinking about students' learning needs towards "pedagogical approaches that align with a strengths-based orientation" (Penney et al. 2018, p. 1072). As pointed out by Overton, Wrench & Garrett (2017) this suggests that justice, equity, and inclusion are manifested in the interplay of pedagogical practices and curriculum theory. Teachers' (instructional) strategies for promoting social inclusion and building up safe learning environments potentially affect the experiences of pupils with different needs in PE either positively or negatively (e.g. Majoko 2019; Overton, Wrench & Garrett, 2017; Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010). For instance – as pointed out by Petrie et al. (2018) - when PE is framed as competitive sport and games and these activities are not adapted, this can negatively impact on the experiences of learners, including those with SEN (Fitzgerald, 2005). This does not necessarily mean that competitive sport and games are always exclusionary, nevertheless, they can be for some children if adaptations are not incorporated into PE lessons. However, in many cases, little information is provided in curricular documents that informs and structures (inclusive) teaching and learning processes for practitioners. As previous research has shown, most practical implications mentioned in the PE curricula offer educational freedom, but opportunities for implementing innovative teaching and assessment approaches have either not been integrated in the curricular approaches (Herold, 2020) or remain vague (Meier et al., 2021).

1.2 Background: The Finnish national curriculum and teacher autonomy

The following section provides a background to the reform and design of the Finnish National Core Curriculum, in order to provide the context in which this research is located. The national curriculum in Finland is a document published by the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) that guides schools in developing a school culture and implementing a school-specific

curriculum that values diversity, and also provides teachers with core contents and evaluation criteria for each school subject (FNBE, 2016). The most recent reform of the national curriculum in 2016 was driven by inclusive policies with an emphasis on equal opportunities for all and collaborative ways of working in the classrooms (FNBE, 2016). However, municipalities, schools and teachers traditionally have strong autonomy in organizing educational support and choosing teaching practices (Haapaniemi et al., 2020; Paju et al., 2021). In the Finnish context, the current curriculum provides guidance on how to respond to diversity in the classroom (FNBE, 2016) to facilitate the implementation of inclusive practices at school level. The curriculum advocates that all learners should be valued, and that the curricular guidelines should be adapted at local school level to meet the individual needs of all pupils in the classroom (FNBE, 2016). For instance, the FNBE states that: “Each pupil is unique and valuable just as he or she is. Each pupil has the right to grow into his or her full potential as a human being and a member of society” (FNBE 2016, p. 25). In doing so, each pupil needs encouragement, individual support, and experiences of being heard and valued in the school community (FNBE 2016, p. 25). Consequently, the curriculum requires teachers to identify and respond to students’ different needs which requires pedagogical expertise and cross-sectoral cooperation between teachers and other professionals for “assessing the need for support and planning and implementing support measures” (FNBE 2016, p. 108). However, there seems to be a discrepancy between the philosophy of inclusion promoted in the general framework of the Finnish national curriculum and the subject-specific part of the PE curriculum. The tensions between the general and subject-specific part of the curriculum can be traced back to the historically evolved traditions and values of a homogeneous Finnish society and sports culture (Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Hakala & Kujala, 2015). As pointed out by Berg and Lahelma (2010), gender segregation in PE has a long tradition in Finland. In the current curriculum, teachers are not advised whether to organize PE in either coeducation or single-gender groups. However, in most Finnish secondary schools PE is still mainly gender segregated (Yli-Piipari, 2014; Berg & Lahelma, 2010). In fact, male teachers usually teach boys and female teachers teach girls in single-sex groups (Berg & Lahelma, 2010). Regarding gender-related issues, the general curriculum framework highlights the importance of questioning the role models determined by gender (FNBE, 2016), however, it remains unclear how they should be recognised and dealt with in PE. In PE, the curricular documents attempt to address how teachers may differentiate the content and assessment criteria and propose how to make the teaching environment suitable to all learners, including multiple ways of instructions and activity modifications (FNBE, 2016). In addition to inclusive instructional strategies, flexible assessment methods are important so that each student will have the opportunity to demonstrate his or her strengths in the assessment process (FNBE, 2016). Different forms of student assessment such as portfolios and learning diaries may support

students' ability to reflect on their learning process. Nevertheless, the curricular guidelines are broad and require that teachers are able to adapt the guidelines to the specific school contexts. While in the South African context, for example, it is not clear whether teachers understand how to implement the policy instructions following limited sessions of training in the area (Ayaya, Makoele & van der Merwe, 2020), the Finnish (PE) teachers are expected to play an important role in developing schools and the curriculum due to their specific teacher training (Niemi, 2015; Sahlberg, 2013). Regarding students with SEN, there has been an increasing trend to educate more pupils with disabilities in general education classroom settings in Finland (OSF, 2017). The educational support of the children is organised according to a three-tiered support model which is defined in the curricular documents (FNBE, 2016). It consists of general support, intensified support and special support. General support is a form of support which is a natural part of everyday teaching and the learning process, while intensified and special support forms are based on individual assessment and long-term planning in multiprofessional teams for each student (FNBE, 2016; Vetoniemi & Kärnä, 2021). In 2016, 8.1 % of Finnish students received special support. Most students with special support (90,4%) visit mainstream schools in Finland, either in general education groups or in special groups within mainstream schools (OSF, 2017). Only 9,6 % of all students with special support are taught in special schools. However, only 19.7 % of all students with special support received teaching entirely in a general education class (OSF, 2017). The most common option (42,4 %) is partial teaching in general education groups and special classes located in mainstream schools. Although the number of students with SEN served in regular classrooms has increased in recent years, special instruction in small groups in full-time are still common practices in Finland. A total of 28,3 % of students with special support received teaching fully in a special group within a mainstream school (OSF, 2017). In other words, being physically integrated into a mainstream school does not necessarily means that full participation of students with SEN is ensured. Although the legislative reform regarding educational support was adopted in 2011 to re-organise the traditional two-tiered education system, there is still the option that the education of students with SEN can be organised in special education classes or schools (FNBE, 2017; Vetoniemi and Kärnä, 2020).

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework: Bernstein's concept of recontextualization

The influential work of Bernstein (1990) provides as a theoretical framework for this series of studies. As previous research has demonstrated, Bernstein's framework has been applied successfully to investigate the different processes of production, recontextualization and reproduction of pedagogic discourse in the field of PE (MacPhail, 2007; Penney, 2013b; Herold, 2020; Meier et al., 2021). By drawing on Bernstein's concept of recontextualization, this thesis tries to investigate how new knowledge is created, interpreted and adapted on the different stages, until it finally becomes "the subject of the pedagogical encounter between teachers and pupils in schools" (Herold, 2020; p. 2).

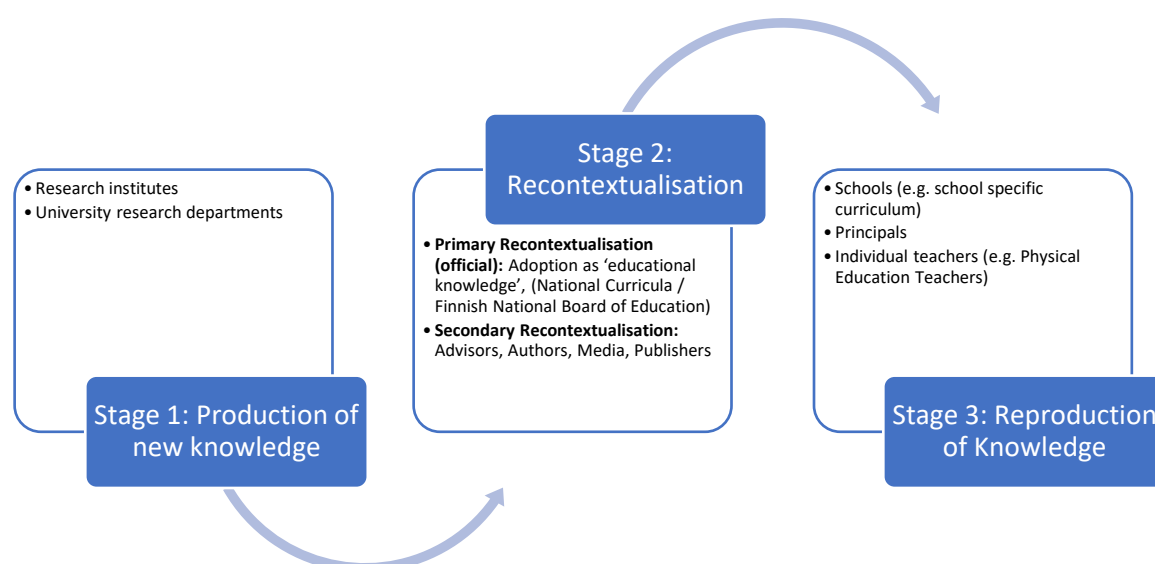


Figure 1. The different stages for the production, recontextualising and reproduction of pedagogic discourse (based on Bernstein, 1990; adapted by MacPhail, 2007; Herold, 2020)

Bernstein's (1990) approach consists of a multi-stage process, which relies on the interaction of the different main stages (see Figure 1) and finally discusses the relationships between the fields. The first stage of this process refers to the production level: This stage could be understood as the 'intellectual field' of the education system (MacPhail, 2007), where new knowledge is generated through scientific innovation in universities or research departments (Herold, 2020). The second stage of this process involves the 'recontextualising' of knowledge, which relies on the transformation of non-pedagogical knowledge to pedagogical knowledge. As pointed out by Herold (2020), new knowledge is integrated into an existing body of education knowledge and adapted for official curriculum framework during the stage of primary

recontextualization. In the recontextualization stage, Bernstein (1990) distinguishes between two distinct 'recontextualisation fields': First, the official recontextualisation field ('Primary Recontextualisation'), including educational authorities and the government. This field involves those responsible for the educational programmes, i.e. in Finland, the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE). Second, it involves the pedagogical recontextualisation field ('Secondary Recontextualisation'), which may involve authors, educational publishers and companies and other agents who have an interest in the interpretation of the official curriculum texts (Herold, 2020). A previous study conducted by Meier et al. (2021) could illustrate that there may be obstacles in the recontextualization process when knowledge concerning diversity issues has been recontextualised in the curricular texts. In their study in an Austrian context, Meier et al. (2021) concluded that there was no clear agenda for diversity-sensitive teaching between the three analysed curricular documents and the complex notion of diversity got somehow lost in the process of recontextualization.

Finally, at the third stage, schools and individual teachers engage in the actual implementation of the curriculum, "mediating the original curriculum intentions through their pedagogical acting" (Herold, 2020; p. 4). While a flexible curriculum framework that can be adapted to the needs for all learners seems essential to implement inclusive practices on the classroom level, findings from previous studies still highlighted certain challenges due to the lack of specific detail on pedagogy and assessment. The lack of a more detailed information on pedagogy did not inspire teacher action at the reproduction level (Herold, 2020; Simmons & MacLean, 2018). If the curricular documents provide few details on how to structure learning and assessment processes, it is important that teachers are empowered and supported to engage in developing the school-specific curricula.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Aims and description of the studies

As there seems to be a gap between formulations and realisations of inclusive education in many countries (Haug, 2017), this dissertation is interested in examining the interplay between curriculum theory and its reflections by practitioners. In doing so, multiple types of material were gathered through different research methods which will be presented in the next subchapter (3.2). The Finnish case has been chosen in this thesis, because the Finnish educational system has been considered by many countries as a shining example after it was the top overall performer among OECD countries in the PISA studies (Sahlberg, 2013). On the other hand, Finland has done well to ensure that learning opportunities do not unfairly favour particular socioeconomic groups (Schraad-Tischler & Schiller, 2016). In Finland, education is regarded as a fundamental right for all citizens, regardless of their ethnic origin,

gender and (dis-)ability, which is also a central vision of inclusion. As pointed out by Ruin & Stibbe (2020), there is a need for further international curriculum studies which examine the ideas and concepts of PE in a comparative perspective. Taking the Finnish perspective into account seems promising because Finland has created educational structures that prevent exclusion, and the present study contributes to the research gap in the international scientific community by systematically examining inclusive approaches from an international perspective, taking the country-specific conditions into account. The studies of this thesis can contribute to provide us with a critical lens through which we may examine the social, political and cultural values of the time, when the (Finnish) curriculum was created (Kilborn et al., 2016).

The research questions have been realised respectively in the three publications. The thesis is guided by the following main research question: *How does the Finnish Nation Curriculum frame the teachers' opportunities to respond to diversity in PE?*

To address the overall research question, I conducted three studies with the specific research questions presented below.

Research questions in *publication I*

- *What are the mandated objectives, contents and assessment criteria of PE according to the syllabus?*
- *How does the Finnish national curriculum respond to dealing with diversity in PE?*

At the beginning, an understanding was needed how the Finnish PE curriculum responds to the individual needs of all children, especially concerning the conceptualisation of PE, the aims and assessment criteria. Therefore, the exclusionary potential of the current national curriculum in Finland has been analysed through the lens of ableism. The first paper draws attention to the mandated aims and contents of the subject, and guidelines for dealing with diversity by employing qualitative content analysis.

Research questions in *publication II*

- *How is 'inclusion' interpreted within the official Finnish curriculum framework?*
- *How does the current Finnish (PE) curriculum address the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN)?*

In publication II, the analysis tries to gain insights into the understanding of 'inclusion' within the context of (PE) policy in Finland and particularly focuses on the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN). Like in the first publication, the theoretical perspective of ableism was used to explore if the curricular approaches contain exclusionary potentials and

hidden barriers to inclusion (Giese & Ruin, 2018). The article describes tensions between the curricular approaches for including students with SEN in PE and the role of traditional sports. While students with SEN are addressed intensively in the general guidelines of the national curriculum, the PE curricula provide little information that informs and structures (inclusive) teaching and learning processes.

Research question in *publication III*

- *What are teachers' perceptions of the ways the Finnish national curriculum frames their possibilities to deal with diversity (including students with disabilities) in PE?*

Publication III explored how the study participants perceive the ways the national curriculum frames their possibilities to work inclusive in PE. By drawing on the interview data and participant observations, the study offers deep insights into the perspectives of in-service teachers of PE about their perceptions on how the national curriculum impacts on their pedagogical autonomy and responsibility for developing their individual schools. The study also describes the tensions between the educative and physical dimensions of PE that can be found in the Finnish national curriculum and resulted in the participants' reflections concerning the perspectives on the nature and objectives of PE.

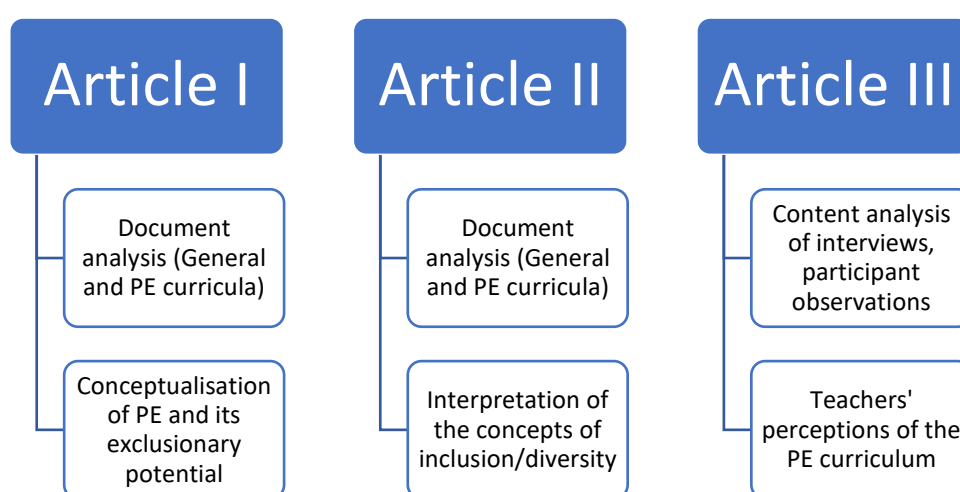


Figure 2. A summary of the use of data sources and the main research aims in articles I-III.

3.2 Research process and methods

In this series of studies, different qualitative approaches were used to answer the overall research question. First, the current Finnish National Curriculum of PE was qualitatively content analysed to identify how the PE curricula responds to the individual abilities and needs of all children, particularly regarding the objectives of PE, understanding of performance, possible adaptations of physical activities and methods of student assessment. Besides, an important aim of this curriculum analysis was to gain insights into the understanding of

‘inclusion’ within the context of PE policy in Finland, particularly focusing on the inclusion of students with SEN. For the document analysis, the Finnish national core curriculum (FNBE, 2016) served as the main source which included the first chapters of the general guidelines (total of 172 pages) and the subject syllabus of PE (total of 16 pages) concerning grades 1-2, 3-6 and 7-9 (see Figure 1).

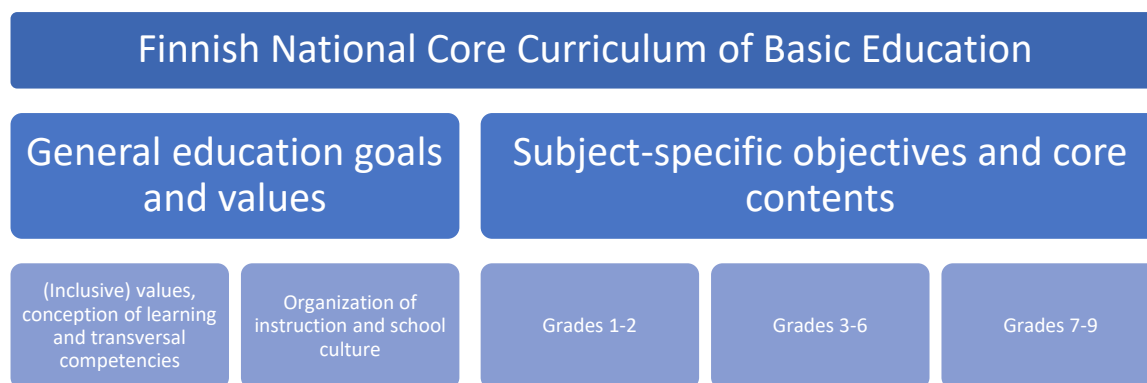


Figure.3 Structure of the Finnish National Core Curriculum of Basic Education

Second, a case study was conducted with the intention of developing understandings about inclusive pedagogies for PE from the perspective of PE teachers and how the curriculum frames the teachers’ possibilities to work inclusive. This study is based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

Data collection

Data were collected at each school separately, following similar steps in collecting the research data. First, observations of PE classes in comprehensive schools and one special school, 1-6 th (pupils aged 7–12) and 7-9th grades (pupils aged 13–16) over a period of six months were conducted. Second, eight individual interviews with the teachers responsible for the observed classes were carried out after the teaching observations. The focus on different practitioners (PE teachers and special education teachers) aimed to capture the insights and experiences from various professional perspectives.

A guideline with predetermined categories was used to conduct the observations in a structured manner. The observations focused on inclusive pedagogies and adaptive teaching strategies such as content and activity modifications (Black & Stevenson, 2017). Throughout the observation process, short notes were taken and were further described after each observed lesson. The interview questions covered four different categories related to the teacher’s experiences concerning the understanding of inclusion, (inclusive) teaching in the field of PE, the curriculum and the school environment.

The interview questions were designed so that the teachers could freely describe the aspects they consider important regarding their pedagogical practices in PE and the perception of the Finnish core curriculum. The aim of these interviews was to reveal the teachers' interpretations of the processes of inclusion and exclusion in PE (Munk & Agergaard, 2015) and to collect knowledge concerning the teachers' perceptions of their pedagogical practice and the relationship to their pedagogical assignment. The interviews lasted between 30 and 50 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Study Participants

Participants were four PE teachers and four special education teachers who met the key requirement of having previous experience in teaching PE to students with SEN. A purposeful sampling approach using the strategy of criterion sampling was used to recruit the participants (Creswell, 2014). The focus on different practitioners (PE teachers and special education teachers) aimed to capture the insights and experiences from various professional perspectives. Their ages varied from 30 to 60 years, and their pedagogical work experience ranged from 4 to almost 30 years. As a language barrier existed between the researcher and the participants of the study, interviews have been conducted in English. Therefore, participants have been chosen based on their language proficiency in English. The language proficiency levels of all interviewees were sufficient to express their thoughts and opinions. Data collection took place in three public comprehensive schools and one special school in Southern Finland. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants. Additional demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of Participants (n=8)

Pseudonym	male/ female	Age (years)	school, class level	teaching experience (years)	description
Matti	Male	30	Special school, grades 1-9	4	subject teacher, PE
Vilho	Male	48	Comprehensive school, grades 7-9	21	subject teacher, PE
Tuomas	Male	51	Comprehensive school, grades 7-9	22	subject teacher, PE
Iina	Female	40	Comprehensive school, grades 1-6	9	PE/class teacher
Julia	Female	32	Comprehensive school, grades 1-6	4	Special educator
Suvi	Female	44	Comprehensive school, grades 1-9	13	Special educator
Janika	Female	41	Comprehensive school, grades 1-9	11	Special educator
Satu	Female	60	Special school, grades 1-6	29	Special educator

Data analysis

In publication I and II, different parts of the Finnish national curriculum were selected for the document analysis in line with the research aims, which included the general part of the curriculum and the teaching guidelines for the subject PE. The documents have been qualitatively content analysed adopting a deductive-inductive approach. The starting point was a coding frame with deductively formed codes derived from the current state of research and the subsequent inductive coding of the data coded within a specific main category (Kuckartz, 2019). A detailed description on how the documents were analysed can be found in the respective publication. In publication III, the interview data served as the main source of data analysis as the focus of both articles lies on the teachers' perspective. In publication III, the interview data were qualitatively content analysed by adopting the inductive content analysis method (Mayring, 2010). Additionally, observational data was used to clarify understanding about teachers' interactions and responses in the interviews.

Ethical considerations

The data collection took place during a research stay as a visiting doctoral student at the University of Helsinki from September of 2016 to July of 2017. The research procedures followed the "Ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioural sciences" of the *Finnish National Board on Research Integrity* (<http://www.tenk.fi/en>). These guidelines include procedures for handling misconduct and fraud in science, which is primarily the responsibility of each individual researcher. Participant consent was obtained from all the teachers who voluntarily participated in the interviews and the purpose of the study was explained before each interview began. Following the completion of the interview process, transcriptions of the interviews were emailed to the participants upon request to ensure that none of the data collected was misinterpreted. Any participant identification has been removed from the data and replaced by alternative identifiers. The interview transcripts have been stored as described in the data management plan.

Chapter 4: Synopsis of the Publications

One of the three publications in the dissertation has been co-authored. Publication II was written in collaboration with my supervisor, Ass. – Prof. Dr. Stefan Meier. I carried out the data collection and wrote the first draft of the paper, while Stefan Meier contributed in the conceptualisation and analysis of the paper. I am therefore first author and principally responsible for the result.

4.1 Publication I (status: published)

*Towards inclusive education? An analysis of the
current physical education curriculum in Finland
from the perspective of ableism*

AUTHOR: CHRISTOPHER MIHAJLOVIC

PUBLISHED IN: *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION*, 56
(4), 29-40

KEY FINDINGS:

Publication I analyses the **current physical education curriculum in Finland from the perspective of ableism**. The results of this study show that – at first glance - the Finnish curricular approaches seem to support inclusion due to their emphasis on diversity issues and inclusive values. However, by applying the theoretical perspective of ableism I could identify that the PE curriculum harbours some exclusionary potential which mainly refers to the fundamental anthropological assumptions that all individuals have the capacity to reflect on themselves, which may also exclude those individuals that are not able to do so. Although standardized competencies exist in the Finnish curricular approaches, these performance expectations have a less normative character than in other countries (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Ruin & Meier, 2017; Haycock & Smith, 2010).

4.2 Publication II (status: published)

*Including students with special educational needs
in Physical Education: An analysis of the current
Finnish National Core Curriculum*

AUTHOR: CHRISTOPHER MIHAJLOVIC & STEFAN MEIER

PUBLISHED IN: THE CURRICULUM JOURNAL, 33 (2), 279– 296.

KEY FINDINGS:

The curriculum analysis in publication II focuses on **the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN)**. The results of this study indicate that, the general part of the Finnish national curriculum addresses the concept of inclusion in a broad and comprehensive way. However, the PE curricula mainly reduce the concept of inclusion to the dimensions of '(dis-)ability'. By drawing on the theoretical perspective of ableism, the analysis shows that the curricular documents do not 'label' students with SEN by highlighting that every pupil has the right to receive educational support at some point, not only students with certain disabilities. Compared to the curricular documents from other countries, normative performance expectations and body ideals are not in the focus of the analysed curricula in Finland. As the Finnish national curriculum in PE is rather short on content, it leaves decisions on content and teaching methods to individual teachers and schools.

4.3 Publication III (status: published)

Teachers' perceptions of the Finnish national curriculum and inclusive practices of physical education

AUTHOR: CHRISTOPHER MIHAJLOVIC

*PUBLISHED IN: CURRICULUM STUDIES IN HEALTH AND PHYSICAL
EDUCATION, 10 (3), 247-261*

KEY FINDINGS:

Publication III draws upon the **teachers' perceptions of the Finnish national curriculum and inclusive practices of physical education**. The results of this study confirm the need for a flexible curriculum that can be adapted to the needs for all learners. The flexibility of the curriculum seems to have a positive impact on the participants' professional practice. Most participants feel morally responsible for developing their schools. Moreover, for most participants, PE should promote lifelong participation in physical activity.

A differentiated and reflected understanding of assessing student achievement in PE seems important to accommodate the individual needs of their students with disabilities. The participants of the study also mentioned the importance of encouraging interaction with their students and reflecting on one's own teaching practice. Implementations of inclusive practices, however, varied immensely between the different schools in this study. Taking the different professional backgrounds of the study participants into account, both teacher professions – PE and special educators – mentioned similar strategies when adapting the physical activities to the individual needs of their learners in PE. Participants highlighted the importance of activity modifications involving the equipment, the rules and the learning environment when attempting to meet the needs of all pupils in PE.

Chapter 5: Concluding discussion

The main research question of this thesis was to investigate how the Finnish national curriculum frames the teachers' possibilities to respond to diversity in PE. This thesis therefore explored the respective curricular documents and teachers' perceptions of the curriculum and its influence on their teaching and assessment practices when dealing with diversity.

One of the main findings of this study indicates that the national curriculum builds upon a broad understanding of inclusion, capturing any group of students and as a way of responding to diversity among learners and is thus not limited solely on children with disabilities. However, while the general part of the Finnish national curriculum addresses diversity issues in a specific and comprehensive way, the PE curriculum mainly reduces the concept of diversity to the dimensions of '(dis-)ability' and 'cultural diversity'. This may be traced back to the fact that special education has strong cultural roots in responding to diversity in mainstream education in Finland (Jahnukainen & Itkonen, 2016; Paju et al., 2021). Besides, I conclude that the subject of PE seems to be unique in the narrowness of its conceptualisation of inclusion due to the prominent role of sports and particularly the 'ethos of sport' in constructing the subject of PE (Kujala & Hakala, 2015; Hakala & Kujala, 2021). The theoretical perspective of ableism has been proven to provide a good starting point for identifying and understanding normative performance expectations and body ideals in the curricular documents. The theory has been of help in raising awareness of normative problems in PE, such as certain achievement standards that are linked to the ability to reproduce normative motor skills and the learners' ability of self-reflection. More precisely, individuals with multiple or more severe impairments may perceive barriers to participate in physical activities due to their physical disposition and may therefore be excluded from PE. Although the Finnish curricular approaches harbour some hidden barriers to inclusion, efforts are made to achieve an inclusive environment by providing equal access to education for everyone and supporting every student's learning and well-being. In terms of PE, the Finnish national curriculum highlights the importance of recognising the pupils' personal strengths and considering the pupil's state of health and special needs in the instruction and assessment. In the process of planning lessons and setting learning objectives, pupils are expected to actively take part in developing suitable learning environments. This indicates that justice, equity and inclusion involve an interplay of pedagogical practices and the curriculum (Overton et al., 2016). Having a flexible curriculum that is open to teaching different movement forms (apart from traditional sports) and adapted physical activities can be regarded as an important precondition for helping teachers in dealing with the increasingly diverse student population in PE.

Taking the main research question into account, an important finding of this study is that the curriculum seems to have a positive impact on the participants' professional practice. Most of the study participants appreciated the flexibility of the curriculum, which requires more responsibility and creativity on the part of teachers. While the teaching staff receives a great amount of educational autonomy, participants still feel morally responsible and committed to their work and (inclusive) school development. Moreover, a relative consensus among the participants on the general purpose of the subject was evident: According to most participants, PE aims at preparing students for a lifetime of physical activity (McEvoy et al., 2015). Helping students find something they like and want to pursue in the future is a formally stated purpose of PE in Finland and was a common opinion among most participants. In line with previous qualitative research (McEvoy et al., 2015), the framing of this shared purpose differed between participants, reflecting a range of perspectives on the nature of their subject. Participants in this study either emphasised the role of PE as an educational subject or the physical nature of PE.

In Finland, the national curriculum provides teachers with a flexible framework for teaching. Within this relatively loose framework, teachers have the autonomy to plan their teaching independently. However, the teaching that students meet in the classroom results from a dynamic non-linear process in which different actors interpret, negotiate, and translate curriculum (Grundén, 2022; Alvunger et al., 2021). The interplay between the curricular documents and the pedagogical practices are framed by the specific institutional context of the individual school and its surroundings. Consequently, there is a discrepancy between what decision-makers in charge of schooling consider desirable and what happens in the classroom. The results of the present studies indicate that the difference between the *intended curricula* and *enacted curricula* often occurs when selecting the curriculum contents and planning the lessons, which also can be regarded as a planned curriculum (Grundén, 2022). In the interviews, the teachers hardly explicitly mentioned the guidelines that constitute the intended curriculum. However, the participants referred to the curriculum framework and values that guide them in the process of developing the teaching practices when dealing with diversity. The most frequent explicit reference to the national curriculum was when the teachers mentioned the different opportunities of assessment in PE, including children with disabilities. At the micro level, participants independently decide what teaching (teaching) materials they would like to use and are responsible for developing a specific curriculum on school level. In relation to Bernstein (1990), the findings of this thesis demonstrate how specific educational approaches and values have found their way into the curricular documents that are currently framing PE in Finland. As described by Meier et al. (2021) in an Austrian context, these different approaches to diversity in the general part and the PE

curriculum in Finland may have consequences on the reproduction level, where PE teachers recontextualise the curriculum's intentions when acting in an educational context. In investigating the process of curriculum development, the present research was able to illustrate the relationship between the Finnish national curriculum (similar to Bernstein's recontextualising context) and school level (reproduction context) and also the challenges involved in the process. A previous study from England could demonstrate that a flexible curriculum which leaves the responsibility to individual teachers to interpret the meaning of the curriculum can be problematic as decisions are made in line with their individual and professional values (Herold, 2020). In fact, this also provides the opportunity to continue with already established curricular practices as there is no need to change anything. As the results of the third publication of this thesis demonstrate, this does not seem to be the case in Finland as the lack of specific detail on pedagogy and assessment in the curricular documents rather encourages the participants to take action and engage in innovative curriculum development processes. It could be argued that the research-based teacher education and the trust in the teachers' professional abilities may support the engagement of Finnish teachers in developing their schools (Niemi, 2015; Vitikka et al., 2012). The thesis concludes that giving curricular freedom to teachers does not necessarily lead to innovative practices on the classroom level and may also act as a barrier in its function to serve as a systematic guide or framework for teachers (Kirk, 2014; Ennis, 2013). Consequently, as pointed out by Herold (2020), if official curriculum documents provide a minimalist guidance, increased attention should be paid to the recontextualisation processes that empower teachers to identify opportunities for innovative practice.

5.1 Reflections on methodology

In line with the main research question of this thesis, the research methods were selected accordingly. In this thesis, the main research interest lies in the interplay between curriculum approaches and its reflections in inclusive teaching from the teachers' perspective. Although teaching observations were also carried out and used in the research process, the curricular document analysis and interview transcripts served as the main source of data analysis. Observational data was mainly used to clarify understandings about teachers' interactions and responses in the interviews. Consequently, curricular documents and interviews were used as main data collection tools as the studies mainly focused on the understanding of the concepts of inclusion/diversity in the PE policy documents and how it frames the teachers' opportunities to work inclusive. Moreover, a combination of different qualitative research methods was considered useful. Combining multiple qualitative methods that complemented one another gave a better understanding of the processes related to curriculum theory and practice in a

complex educational context of inclusive practices (Creswell, 2014). In addition, using results from several methods contributed to generate new insights from several perspectives.

The interview studies faced certain methodological limitations concerning data collection and analysis. First, given the small sample group, the qualitative approach has certain limitations for its generalisability, and it is not applicable in widely dispersed settings. Second, a broader focus on different practitioners (e.g. principals, other teaching professions) could have provided a more in-depth and broader understanding of the perceptions of the curriculum and teaching practice. Third, as I was not familiar with the local language (Finnish), the interviews were conducted in English, which is not the native language for participants and researcher. During the data analysis process, the language barrier became more significant. Some of the quotations in English required time-consuming clarifications about what the interviewees actually meant. Follow-up e-mail correspondence with the participants was utilized to supplement interview data when clarifications or further explanations were needed (Meho, 2006). E-mail correspondence was useful for returning the interview transcripts to the respective participants for verification.

5.2 Perspectives

Although the focus of the thesis was the subject of PE in the Finnish context, the findings refer to similar trends in educational policy on an international level, as I identified the strong necessity to better align the conceptual frameworks of curricular documents towards responding to diversity and to create a uniform guideline for teachers in their subjects. In this respect, it seems interesting, that the inclusive statements in the FNBE (2016) still use 'his and her' to define young people and do not make use of a more inclusive language. Regarding the exclusion of students identifying as non-binary in the curricular documents, there is a risk that teachers do not take into consideration the existence and needs of transgender people (Mihajlovic & Meier, 2022). This may suggest that there are systemic challenges that need to be addressed in future work with teachers, policy makers and teacher educators.

Moreover, there is a need for more qualitative research to complement the knowledge created by the present studies on inclusive strategies in PE (Petrie et al. 2018; Wilson et al., 2020), especially concerning pedagogies with an all-embracing approach that go beyond the inclusion of pupils with SEN. Future research should also take into account the perspectives of different professionals as it may contribute to a more comprehensive perspective on diversity and inclusive teaching strategies. In this respect, observational data of PE lessons could help to gain insight into the complex field of pedagogical practices that inform processes of inclusion and exclusion.

At present, there is an ongoing debate on how the concepts of diversity and inclusion are understood, facing various challenges, such as “how social markers emerge, how many of them are significant and how and why they relate to each other in different situations” (Meier et al., 2021). As pointed out by Meier et al. (2021), some scholars promote a more categorical way of thinking about difference, while others aim for a more fluid conceptualisation of diversity covering any possibility of difference among humans, such as the approach of intersectionality (McCall, 2005), which addresses the complexity of interrelatedness of social differences. In PE and sports, the approach of intersectionality is gaining more importance, specifically concerning the intersections of race and gender and the related discourses on racial stereotypes and gender labelling (Sutherland, 2017; Bartsch & Rulofs, 2020). While research focused on individual categories such as gender or race as for a long time, there is a “growing recognition that it is important to understand how gender and race interact to address prejudices and inequalities of opportunity in sports” (Barsch & Rulofs, 2020, p.4). Consequently, there is a need for more research taking into account the concept of intersectionality addressing the ongoing negotiation processes and possible ways of interrelatedness of social differences (Carastathis, 2016), which may be helpful to understand the complexity of different diversity dimensions.

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Appendix

List of original publications

This dissertation is based on following peer-reviewed publications, which are referred to in the text by Roman numerals (I-III). The original publications are reprinted with the kind permission of the copyright holders.

Publication I:	Mihajlovic, C. (2019). Towards inclusive education? An analysis of the current physical education curriculum in Finland from the perspective of ableism. <i>International Journal of Physical Education</i> , 56(4), 29-40
Publication II:	Mihajlovic, C. & Meier, S. (2022). Including students with special educational needs in Physical Education: An analysis of the current Finnish National Core Curriculum. <i>The Curriculum Journal</i> , 33(2), 279–296. https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.156
Publication III:	Mihajlovic, C. (2019). Teachers' perceptions of the Finnish national curriculum and inclusive practices of physical education. <i>Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education</i> , 10(3), 247-261, DOI:10.1080/25742981.2019.1627670

Additional publications (in German)

Additionally, the following articles related to the PhD project have been published in German:

Mihajlovic, C. (2022). Vielfalt im Sportunterricht. *German Journal of Exercise and Sport Research*, 52 (1), 135-147. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12662-021-00743-5>

Mihajlovic, C. (2021). Lernen von Finnland. Leitlinien für die Entwicklung inklusiver Schulen. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Meri, M. & Mihajlovic, C. (2019). Phänomene statt Schulfächer? Aktuelle Entwicklungen im finnischen Kerncurriculum unter einer „inklusiven Brille“. *Gemeinsam Lernen*, 5 (2), 50-54

Mihajlovic, C. (2018). Ansprüche an ein inklusives Kerncurriculum: Umsetzungsmöglichkeiten am Beispiel Finnlands. *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Heilpädagogik*, 24 (4), 46-53

Mihajlovic, C. (2018, Januar 1). Zwischen PISA und Inklusion: Die Rolle des sonderpädagogischen Fördersystems in Finnland. *Zeitschrift Für Inklusion*, (1). Abgerufen von <https://www.inklusion-online.net/index.php/inklusion-online/article/view/412>

Mihajlovic, C. (2018). Inklusiv gestaltete Spiele aus einer internationalen Perspektive: Das Beispiel „Pesäpallo“ aus Finnland. *sportunterricht* 67 (3), 105-109.

Mihajlovic, C. (2017). "Adapted Physical Activity" (APA) als internationales Forschungsfeld im Inklusionsdiskurs: Die finnische Perspektive. *Zeitschrift für Heilpädagogik* 68 (9), 415–424.

Publication I

Mihajlovic, C. (2019). Towards inclusive education? An analysis of the current physical education curriculum in Finland from the perspective of ableism. *International Journal of Physical Education*, 56(4), 29-40

Towards inclusive education? An analysis of the current physical education curriculum in Finland from the perspective of ableism

C. Mihajlovic (Marburg, Germany)

1	Introduction
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Abstract

While in many countries education reforms have recently focused on increased standardization of education, Finnish reforms have emphasized school autonomy and the empowerment of teachers through school curriculum development. The purpose of this article is to analyse the current national curriculum in Finland through the lens of (inclusive) physical education (PE). The paper draws attention to the mandated aims and contents of the subject, and guidelines for dealing with diversity by employing qualitative content analysis. Although the Finnish PE curriculum is open to teaching different movement forms (apart from traditional sports), it also contains some exclusionary potential for those students who are not able to participate in physical activities that focus on certain normative performances, or who do not have the ability to reflect on themselves and their learning experiences. This article therefore recommends that curricula should provide a holistic understanding of the body and performance to deal with the increasing diversity in the context of inclusion.

Key words: inclusion, physical education, ableism, curriculum

1 Introduction

Although the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has nowadays been ratified by over 100 countries, including Finland, the extent to which these rights are implemented in reality remains open (Mittler, 2012). Inclusive education requires – alongside the important inclusive policies – an accessible curriculum, positive attitudes towards diversity, as well as teachers whose professional training has prepared them to meet the needs of all children, including those with disabilities (Tant & Watelein, 2016; Qi & Ha, 2012).

In Finland, the high quality of teacher education is considered by several Finnish authors as one of the main reasons for the successful performance in the recent international comparative studies on academic performance (Malinen, Väisänen &

Savolainen, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011). At the same time, Finnish education policy has done well to ensure that all citizens of Finland, regardless of their ethnic origin, gender and financial situation have free access to education (Kansanen & Meri, 2006). In the current Finnish national curriculum, diversity is explicitly regarded as a strength and asset, while former curriculum versions rather referred to the acceptance of diversity (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016).

What is of interest for this paper is the way the Finnish curriculum approaches the increasingly diverse student population in physical education (PE) classes. Particularly, this paper draws attention to the implementation of the new core curriculum in Finland which has been progressively introduced at school level since August 2016. The recent curriculum reform in Finland was drawn up by the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) in 2014 and focuses on transversal competences and collaborative classroom practices, where pupils may work simultaneously during periods of phenomenon-based project studies (FNBE, 2016). To support the development of transversal competencies, an emphasis lies on a student-based view of teaching and the support of collaborative learning methods. PE, as an important part of the national curriculum, potentially contributes to this new learning approach.

Research niche and purpose of this paper. Internationally, previous research has shown that teachers were extrinsically motivated to follow inclusive educational policies (Sato & Hodge, 2009). However, several articles revealed a discrepancy between the ideology of inclusive education policies and the curriculum content and assessment in PE. The criteria in the PE curriculum referred to a certain performance in PE and were only reachable by a limited number of pupils (Haycock & Smith, 2010). The study by Ruin & Meier (2017) also reveals that a standardized understanding of performance (and a kind of traditional assessment) still exists – for example when a certain distance is to be run in a given time. For teachers with this traditional perception of performance, homogeneity would be the real ideal.

Teachers with experience of inclusive teaching, however, seem to have a more differentiated and reflected understanding regarding body and performance (Ruin & Meier, 2017). The literature review by Tant & Watelein (2016) demonstrates that curricula requirements and certifications are often inadequate with regard to the principles of inclusion. In the past, students with disabilities were often excluded from the class's sports activities because the curriculum was dominated by competitive activities with an emphasis on performance and technical skills (Smith & Green, 2004; Morley et al., 2005). These studies showed that the curriculum contents seemed to have reduced the opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in the same activities as their peers without disabilities (Tant & Watelein, 2016).

Consequently, having a flexible curriculum that is open to teaching different content types and adapted physical activities seems necessary to ensure every student is provided with opportunities to meaningfully participate in PE.

For a small country like Finland, the curriculum is an important tool which guides the nation's entire education system by defining the values and objectives for all Finnish schools. During the process of curriculum development which lasted two and a half years, 30 working groups and steering groups from each municipality in Finland contributed to the final version of the document (Lähdemäki, 2019). The main objectives and principles for Finnish basic education (grades 1-9) in general and for each specific subject are defined in this document, consisting of 500+ pages. It is not my intention here to present a detailed analysis of the Finnish National Curriculum of PE. Rather, I draw attention to the mandated aims and contents of the subject, and guidelines for dealing with diversity through quotes from the national Finnish PE

syllabus. Previous research on the current Finnish curriculum mainly focused on exploring the phenomenon-based approaches in teaching and learning (Symeonidis & Schwarz, 2016), the factors behind the curriculum process (Lähdemäki, 2019) and more general goals and guidelines of the extensive curriculum reform (Halinen, 2018). To my knowledge, the current Finnish national curriculum has not been analysed through the lens of (inclusive) PE.

In order to fill this gap, the main purpose of this analysis is to investigate how the PE curriculum responds to the different needs of all learners, including those with disabilities. In other words, this paper aims at revealing how the national curriculum frames the PE teachers' possibilities to work inclusive in their schools regarding the mandated aims, contents and assessment criteria of the subject.

In this paper, the author will first give a short introduction to the Finnish school system by reviewing the general values defined in the Finnish national curriculum (FNBE, 2016) and the organization of educational support by drawing on recent literature.

To understand the importance of local school autonomy in Finland, this brief overview finally addresses the role of Finnish teachers in curriculum development and implementation.

The author will then draw upon the conceptual framework that was used for the interpretation of the key themes identified in the area of interest. The theoretical perspective of ableism was used to explore whether current curricular approaches contain exclusionary potential and hidden barriers to inclusion (Giese & Ruin, 2018). The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and the future vision of curriculum development in Finland and internationally.

2 Introduction to the Finnish school system

The compulsory education in Finland consists of a nine-year comprehensive school from 1st to 9th grade. Education is regarded as a fundamental right for all citizens and is free at all levels: During pre-primary education and compulsory education ("basic education") teaching materials, the transportation to school and the daily lunch are free of charge for all pupils. Children in Finland usually start "basic education" in the year they turn seven. The Finnish compulsory education consists of a six-year primary school education followed by a three-year middle school education. The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education is responsible for the arrangement of education for all children from seven to 16 years (Halinen, Harmainen & Mattila, 2015). During the first six years (primary school), instruction is normally given by the same class teacher in most subjects, while subject teachers are usually responsible for teaching their subjects in the last three years.

System of educational support. Finland has a high number of students receiving special educational services (OSF, 2016), but it also has a well-functioning system for educational support (Kivirauma & Ruoho, 2007). A multi-tiered framework of educational support was introduced in 2010 which resembles the Response to Intervention (RTI) model in the U.S. (Björn et al., 2016). Nowadays, special educational support is mainly integrated into mainstream schools. The Finnish school system seems to be at least partly inclusive: "This is because the child has easy access to special education, no formal decisions are needed, no special status is given to the child, and the child attends special education for a limited period of time," (Takala, Pirttimaa & Törmänen 2009, p. 169).

According to Malinen et al. (2012), on the other hand, inclusive education in Finland has been generally regarded more as a pedagogical than an ideological question and it

usually refers only to educating students with special educational needs in mainstream settings.

Finnish teachers as curriculum specialists. Teacher education in Finland is among the most desired academic programs at universities and based on a strong research orientation (Niemi, 2015; Sahlberg, 2011). As university-based teacher education emphasizes the development of a research-oriented attitude among students, there is a focus on knowledge creation and scientific critical thinking in all teacher study programs and phases. During their phases of practical teacher training, for instance, experienced teachers supervise pre-service teachers in university teacher training schools. The objective is to encourage pre-service teachers to be reflective and critical practitioners (Niemi, 2015).

This approach to reflective and critical knowledge creation is also considered important for in-service training. Due to their research-related initial teacher education, in-service teachers are expected to be able to critically reflect on their own work and act as curriculum specialists (Niemi, 2015). Teachers are trusted educational professionals who play a key role in curriculum development (Vitikka et al., 2012; Sahlberg, 2011). The educational institutions of the country have - at all levels - a high degree of autonomy. Although the municipalities have the formal responsibility for teaching objectives and (PE) activities in local educational institutions, the municipalities usually delegate these tasks to the respective schools or institutions (Heikinaro-Johansson et al., 2014). The local authorities decide how much autonomy they want to cede to the schools, in most cases the schools are autonomous for administrative tasks such as employing school staff, and school management is mainly responsible for the school budget (FNBE, 2016). Finnish teachers and their principals are usually responsible for designing the school-based curriculum in their local schools. Another example of the high level of confidence in the Finnish education system lies in the fact that school inspections were abolished nationwide in the early 1990s (FNBE, 2016).

3 Conceptual framework

The concept of ableism as one of the pillars in the field of disability studies was used as a conceptual framework for this article. Ableism has been proven to be a useful tool to reflect and deconstruct hidden barriers to inclusion (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Giese & Buchner, 2019). From the perspective of ableism, people are assigned certain abilities, skills, or other character traits. Often, these stereotypes associated with certain disabilities serve as a justification for ableist practices and underpin negative attitudes towards people with disabilities. In professional sports, ableism is evident. Athletes with disabilities are frequently portrayed (in the media) to be inferior (DePauw, 1997).

The main focus of this analysis was the area of PE in Finnish basic education. The concept of ableism has been frequently used in the field of PE in informing people for mistaken attributions of ability. In Germany, previous research in PE focused on revealing hidden ability attributions concerning the body and performance (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Ruin & Giese, 2018) and curriculum recommendations in regard to the contents of PE, which are often based on unquestioned societal assumptions about body ideals (Giese & Buchner, 2019). Imperfect bodies seem to be ignored in these curricular considerations. This is problematic for students whose bodies deviate from the norm. Those students often do not possess the expected normative skills and they consequently will be denied the chance to succeed in such educational settings (Giese & Ruin, 2018). This analysis draws attention to discriminatory potential in the current Finnish curriculum of PE. In PE, students are often expected to achieve certain normative performances that may exclude individuals due to their physical or cognitive

dispositions. Drawing on the concept of ableism, the mandated aims and assessment criteria of the subject will be discussed and reflected in this paper.

4 Methods

The main research questions explored in this study were:

- What are the mandated objectives, contents and assessment criteria of PE according to the syllabus?
- How does the Finnish national curriculum respond to dealing with diversity in PE?

Drawing on the research questions, the current Finnish National Curriculum of PE was qualitatively content-analysed adopting an inductive approach of category formation (Mayring, 2014). According to Mayring (2014), the aim of inductive category formation is to arrive at summarizing categories directly, which result from the material itself, not from theoretical considerations. Inductive content analysis of documents was used to identify how the PE curricula responds to the individual abilities and needs of all children, particularly regarding the objectives of PE, understanding of the body and performance, possible adaptations of physical activities and methods of student assessment. The material was worked through line by line taking in account the typical steps of inductive category development (Mayring, 2014). A revision of categories and rules took place after having analysed 50% of the documents. Once all the data had been grouped, final themes were developed until saturation was reached.

The Finnish National Curriculum was retrieved from the official FNBE website and consists of more than 500 pages. As suggested by Mayring (2014), not all material has been regarded for analysis. Only those parts relevant for the specific research questions have been considered. The official documents that served the main source of this analysis were the first chapters of the curriculum that consist of values and general goals and principles of Finnish basic education and the subject syllabus of PE concerning grades 1-2, 3-6 and 7-9. In addition, recent literature has been reviewed that has examined Finnish physical education programs in the past.

The results of this analysis from the perspective of ableism will be presented in the next chapter.

5 PE in Finland - Results of the curriculum analysis

5.1 Conceptualisation of Finnish PE

Finnish PE goes back to a health-related concept that remains a fundamental factor legitimizing the place of PE in the school curriculum (Heikinaro-Johansson et al., 2014; Richter, 2007). In the current version of the curriculum, physical and health education are divided into separate subjects. The focus of PE lies in the development of a wide variety of motor skills, health education is founded on a multidisciplinary foundation of knowledge.

As stated in the Finnish curriculum, PE nowadays has two main goals: Guiding the pupils in adopting a physically active lifestyle and educating them through physical activities (FNBE, 2016). Internationally, this view is also shared by most educators regarding the purposes of PE in schools (McEvoy, Heikinaro-Johansson & MacPhail, 2015). In Germany, for instance, the concept of “Educational” PE has the double mission of educating for and educating by sports and physical activity (McEvoy et al., 2015; Giese & Ruin, 2018). In achieving a lifelong participation in physical activity, equal importance is afforded to the various goal areas of PE. The goal areas of PE outlined in the national core curriculum are made up of physical, social and psychological functional capacities, which should contribute to the holistic physical education of the child (FNBE, 2016). The physical functional capacity for basic

education level (grades 1–9) emphasizes that PE should develop pupils' basic motor skills, sport-specific and movement skills, and should also offer pupils a variety of experiences in fundamental indoor and outdoor activities (Heikinaro-Johansson et al., 2014). The social functional capacities refer to enjoyment, responsible behaviour, cooperation, self-respect and respect for others. The psychological functional capacity emphasizes that pupils should learn how to be physically active in a safe way, to understand the connection between exercise and health, and to be familiar with a variety of physical activities and opportunities for leisure-time activity (FNBE, 2016; Heikinaro-Johansson et al., 2014).

5.2 *Content*

Traditionally, the Finnish national core curriculum in PE is rather short on content (Yli-Piipari, 2014). In comparison to the previous version of the curriculum, the content in the current curriculum explicitly refers to the following three areas: physical, social and psychological functional capacity.

The curriculum recommends that PE should consist of a broad range of different physical activities which are related to the three key content areas of PE in grades 1-2, 3-6 and 7–9. In all grades, PE should include safe assignments (e.g. playful exercises and ball games), aesthetic exercises (music, gymnastic and dance) as well as swimming and water sports. The syllabus refers to a broad content area and also includes culturally-based physical activities. Typical physical activities representative of the Nordic culture, such as exercise on ice, in snow or in nature are emphasized in the PE programs (FNBE, 2016; Yli-Piipari, 2014).

In order to develop the students' social functional capacity, teaching and learning contains different kinds of pair and group assignments and games where the students learn to take others into consideration as well as to help and assist others (FNBE, 2016). It is noticeable that the national curriculum in Finland leaves decisions on activity selections and forms of instructions to individual teachers and schools, at least in lower grades. On secondary school level (7th-9th grade) when numerical grades are mandatory, however, it is expected that PE also includes more standardized assignments that help the pupils evaluate, maintain, and develop their physical functional capacity:

“Teaching and learning includes assignments that aim at supporting the pupils in improving their strength, speed, endurance, and flexibility,”
(FNBE, 2016, p. 693).

Drawing on the concept of ableism, students with health issues might be excluded from these activities as they are possibly not able to improve their physical functional capacity due to physical restrictions.

As previous research from Germany has shown, PE curricula often emphasize the dominance of certain movement forms and desired corporeality (Giese & Ruin, 2018). It seems clear that a functional view of the body and performance leads to problems when dealing with the individual needs of all children, including those with disabilities (Ruin, 2017). In general, a holistic understanding of the body is supported by the Finnish curriculum, as the pupils are encouraged to appreciate and use “their whole body to express emotions, opinions, thoughts, and ideas” (FNBE, 2016, p. 270). A holistic understanding of the body is further characterized in the curriculum recommendations for grades 7-9. PE has to “ensure that the pupils have enough positive experiences of their own body, self-efficacy, and togetherness,” (FNBE, 2016, p. 450).

Although the Finnish PE curriculum seems open to teaching different movement forms (apart from traditional sports), it also contains some exclusionary potential for those students who are not able to participate in physical activities that focus on improving

their motor skills due to unquestioned societal assumptions about body ideals (Giese & Buchner, 2019).

5.3 Objectives and assessment criteria

The national curriculum explains the criteria for determining performance levels in the final assessments of basic education. Each student's progress is reported at the end of a school year. In the first seven years of basic education, the assessment report can be either a written description of the student's progress or a numerical grade (Yli-Piipari, 2014; FNBE, 2016). After 7th grade, the report must include a numerical grade that is accompanied by written comments. It is expected that students should be able to master the assessment criteria for physical education at the end of the school year and score an 8 (numerical grade describing good knowledge/skills).

In general, PE aims at influencing the pupils' well-being by supporting their physical, social and psychological functional capacity and a positive body image (FNBE, 2016). The assessment of physical education is based on the objectives of physical, social, and psychological functional capacity. An example for the assessment criteria for PE at the end of grade 9 (conclusion of the syllabus) is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Excerpt from final assessment criteria for good knowledge and skills in physical education (numerical grade 8) at the conclusion of the syllabus (FNBE, 2016, p. 696)

Objective of instruction	Content areas	Assessment targets in the subject	Knowledge and skills for the grade 8
Physical functional capacity			
To encourage the pupil in being physically active, trying different forms of exercise, and practising while giving his or her best effort.	C1	Working and making an effort	The pupil usually tries and practises actively different types of exercise assignments when participating in physical education lessons.
Social functional capacity			
To guide the pupil to work together with everyone and to regulate his or her actions and emotional expression in exercise situations, taking others into account	C2	Interaction and working skills	The pupil knows how to act in different situations of physical activity according to agreed rules.
Psychological functional capacity			
To encourage the pupil to take responsibility for his or her actions and to support the pupil's skills in working independently	C3	Working skills	The pupil is usually able to work responsibly and independently.

In regard to the students' physical functional capacity, the objectives for good knowledge and skills in PE (numerical grade 8) at the conclusion of the syllabus highlight the students' willingness to "try out" different forms of physical activities. The priority of students enjoying physical activities while giving his or her best effort is regarded as more important than learning certain sport techniques. The objectives for instruction and assessment criteria are mostly defined in an open manner which leaves

space for interpretation and modification. Assessment of student learning is based on the pupil's state of health and individual needs rather than on standardized tests (FNBE, 2016). According to Yli-Piipari (2014) it is not unusual for teachers to view fitness tests as opportunities for learning and not as a traditional form of assessing student achievement.

However, as the following quotation reveals, a standardized understanding of performance also exists in the current PE curriculum in Finland. The assessment criteria for good knowledge and skills in PE with regard to swimming skills at the end of grade 6 (FNBE, 2016, p. 453) refer to the following standardized abilities:

“The pupil has basic swimming skills (The pupil is able to swim 50 metres using two different strokes).”

As this quotation shows, the pupils are expected to swim a certain distance using at least two techniques (different strokes). From the perspective of ableism, this may exclude those pupils who are not able to achieve these normative performance expectations due to their physical restrictions.

5.4 *The role of self-reflection*

The current national curriculum regards learning as a guided process in which students have an active and self-regulatory role (Symeonidis & Schwarz, 2016). From the perspective of ableism, however, educational achievement is linked to a highly developed capacity for abstraction and reflection (Giese & Ruin, 2018).

As the following quotation shows, methods of assessing student performance should also foster self-assessment and self-reflection:

“Versatile methods are used in the assessment to provide the pupils with an opportunity to demonstrate their best skills. The pupils are guided to self-assessment,” (FNBE, 2016, p. 649).

According to the curriculum, pupils are guided to self-assessment which implies the ability to reflect on one's own learning which can be understood as a hidden barrier to inclusion. The following quotation highlights the ability to reflect as a precondition to acquire new knowledge and skills:

“While acquiring new knowledge and skills, the pupils learn to reflect on their learning, experiences and emotions,” (FNBE, 2016, p. 28).

Drawing on the concept of ableism, the ability to be educated seems to be connected with the ability to reflect. Because of this, persons with more severe disabilities might be excluded as they are possibly not able to reflect on themselves and their learning experiences.

The FNBE (2016) therefore suggests that the instructions of students who are unable to study according to the individual syllabi of subjects should be arranged by activity areas. The instruction by activity areas instead of subjects is prescribed in a decision of special support, which means that the pupil receives the strongest form of support and follows an individual educational plan (FNBE 2016, p. 126). The objectives of instruction arranged by activity areas is to provide the pupils with knowledge and skills that allow them to cope in their lives as independently as possible as described in their individual educational plan (FNBE, 2016). The activity areas focus on motor skills, language and communication, social skills, skills in activities of daily living, and cognitive skills which do not follow the curricular standards (FNBE, 2016).

6 Conclusion

“A national curriculum is a deeply national and cultural interpretation of knowledge, learning and education and as such cannot be transferred to another cultural context,” (Vitikka et al., 2012, p. 93).

As this quote shows, curricula are founded on the country’s national educational policy, cultural identity and traditions and thus cannot be taken out of the national context it is applied to. The purpose of this article was to analyse the current national curriculum in Finland through the lens of (inclusive) physical education (PE). The paper reviewed the mandated aims, assessment criteria and contents of the subject, and how the national curriculum frames the PE teachers’ possibilities for dealing with diversity.

Although standardized competencies exist in the Finnish curricular approaches, these performance expectations have a less normative character than in other countries. While in Germany, for instance, education reforms have focused at increased standardization of education, Finnish reforms have emphasized school autonomy and the empowerment of teachers through school curriculum development (Erss, Kalmus & Autio, 2016).

The theoretical perspective of ableism was used to reveal that current curricular approaches in Finland also harbour some exclusionary potential. On the surface, the Finnish curricular approaches seem to be suitable to support inclusion due to their emphasis on diversity and inclusive values (FNBE, 2016; Mihajlovic, 2018). However, as stated by Giese & Ruin (2018), these approaches are – similar to the German case – based on the fundamental anthropological assumptions that all individuals have the capacity to reflect on themselves, which also may exclude those people who are not able to do so (due to psychological or cognitive dispositions). Other individuals may not be able to achieve the intended level of basic motor skills according to standardized assessment criteria in regard to certain swimming skills (FNBE, 2016, p. 453) due to their physical restrictions. A holistic understanding of the body and performance (in PE curricula) is crucial, as curricular approaches may influence processes of inclusion and exclusion produced through the daily interactions of students and teachers in schools.

In order to deal with the individual abilities of children with more severe developmental disabilities, the FNBE (2016) proposes alternative and more flexible pedagogical approaches. Decisions on special support and the formulation of an individual educational plan (IEP) is justified by considering the pupil’s state of health and specific pedagogical needs (FNBE, 2016). As stated in the Finnish Curriculum (2016), instruction for children with severe disabilities may also be organised by activity areas rather than by subjects.

Although the Finnish curricular approaches harbour some hidden barriers to inclusion, efforts are made to achieve an inclusive environment by providing equal access to education for everyone and supporting every student’s learning and well-being (Halinen, 2018). In terms of PE, the Finnish national curriculum highlights the importance of promoting gender equality and considering the pupil’s state of health and special needs in the instruction and assessment. In the process of planning lessons and setting learning objectives, pupils should actively take part in developing suitable learning environments. This indicates that justice, equity and inclusion involve an “interplay of pedagogical practices and curriculum,” (Overton et al., 2016). Having a flexible curriculum that is open to teaching different movement forms (apart from traditional sports) and adapted physical activities can be regarded as an important precondition for helping teachers in dealing with the increasingly diverse student population in PE.

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Including students with special educational needs in physical education: An analysis of the current Finnish national core curriculum

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Abstract

The present article draws attention to the latest curriculum reform in Finland, which came into effect in August 2016 and promoted a shift towards a competency-based curriculum which highlights diversity as a positive resource. The main aim of this study was to gain insights into the understanding of 'inclusion' within the context of PE policy in Finland and particularly focuses on the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN). This research focuses on PE, because the subject is still shaped by underlying sentiments representing traditional values such as nationalism and given gender roles which seem to contrast with the conceptualization of inclusion. Therefore, the current Finnish NCC (of PE) has been qualitatively content analysed adopting a deductive-inductive approach. The findings demonstrate that the official documents build upon a broad understanding of inclusion and diversity, which is not only restricted to students with disabilities. However, the PE curricula provide few practical implications for teaching in diverse classes which may stem from inconsistency across the analysed documents in considering diversity issues. We conclude that the Finnish curriculum leaves room for teachers' pedagogical

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autonomy, but further research is needed to explore how it frames their possibilities to work inclusively in practice.

KEY WORDS

diversity, inclusion, physical education, special educational needs

INTRODUCTION

With the demand for inclusive education for children with disabilities within a general educational setting (UN, 2006), equitable education as a fundamental right has become an important topic on the political agenda in Finland and internationally. The realization of inclusive education, however, differs from country to country reflecting its social, cultural and historical contexts (Hardman, 2008). According to previous research, this stems from inconsistency across policy documents in considering how to operationalize definitions of inclusive education, such as different priorities of groups of students which should be in focus (Haug, 2017; Nilholm, 2020).

Like in other subjects taught in schools, inclusion as an educational philosophy has shaped the subject-specific discussions of physical education (PE). However, concerns about the inclusiveness of integrated PE classes have emerged recently, as they often lack appropriate instructional strategies and accommodations (Fitzgerald, 2005; Haegele, 2019). Especially, when PE is framed as competitive sport and games and these activities are not adapted, this can have a negative influence on the experiences of learners, including those with SEN (Fitzgerald, 2005; Petrie et al., 2018).

In this respect, curricula come in the spotlight as they serve as a guide for teachers (Kirk, 2014) and simultaneously incorporate and promote the education philosophy of those in power (Penney, 2013). The PE curriculum in many countries contains exclusionary potential for those students who are not able to participate in physical activities that focus on certain normative performances or for those who do not have the ability to reflect on themselves and their learning experiences (Giese & Buchner, 2019; Meier et al., 2021). In addition, research from Germany with a special focus on health has shown that it is conceptualized in a narrow, objectifying manner in the analysed curricula, defining how bodies should be shaped in the PE class (Ruin & Stibbe, 2020). This contrasts with the suggested inclusive values in the curricular documents in many countries emphasizing the uniqueness of each pupil (Price & Slee, 2021).

In Finland, the PE curriculum seems to lag behind in the development of interculturality and other diversity issues due to the traditional ideas of a homogenous Finnish society and (sports) culture (Hakala & Kujala, 2021). Hakala and Kujala (2015) therefore suggest that teachers should be conscious of the ethos of sport behind lesson planning to counteract its force. Since it is the central role of the curriculum to act as a fundamental guide for teachers (Ennis, 2013; Kirk, 2014), it is of particular interest of this study to analyse the interplay between the implementation of an integrative approach to teaching in the new NCC (FNBE, 2016) and the subject based approaches in the Finnish curriculum traditions.

Taking PE as an example, this paper tries to analyse how the Finnish National Curriculum of PE responds to the diverse needs of students with SEN. The theoretical perspective of ableism has been used to analyse to what extent the current NCC of PE harbours exclusive potential for those children. Although the context is PE, the

perspective of ableism is applicable to other subjects across multiple disciplines and helps educators to reflect on hidden exclusive curriculum contents when teaching students with SEN in their professional practice (Buchner et al., 2015; Campbell, 2009; Giese & Ruin, 2018). The paper begins by examining the interpretations of inclusion in the current literature and the Finnish curriculum theory. The article then turns to look critically at the tensions between the curricular approaches for including students with SEN in PE and the role of traditional sports.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHYSICAL EDUCATION, SPORT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

As stated by Bailey (2005) there is a close relationship between physical education and sport, but they are not synonymous. Drawing on this broad definition (Bailey, 2005), 'sport' refers to a range of activities and 'physical education' refers to an area of the school curriculum concerned with physical activities and the development of physical competence. PE, in contrast to sport, not only refers to a range of physical activities; it also takes into account the curriculum areas and associated educational outcomes (Bailey, 2005).

Still, there is a lack of evidence which supports that sport and PE may effectively contribute to social inclusion (Dagkas, 2018). Besides, PE has "repeatedly been shown to align with and reinforce particular types of hegemonic discourses that privilege a narrow group of (white, middle-class, motor-skilled, masculine) students" (Penney et al., 2018, p. 1065). From a historical point of view, sport has often been a field where (white) male individuals have the most power and which excludes women and non-white men (Bartsch & Rulofs, 2020; Sutherland, 2017). Drawing on a recent literature review by Carter-Francique and Flowers (2013), (young) women from ethnically marginalized groups are still underrepresented as participants and professional sports leaders in sports organizations. According to an interview study considering teachers' perspectives on young people from refugee backgrounds conducted by Bartsch and Rulofs (2020), gendered and racialized perceptions of threat and vulnerability dominate the participants' mindsets on this group of students. Other studies dealing with the specific setting of PE reveal similar problems as the school subject of PE is informed by the structures and values of the extracurricular sports system (Bartsch & Rulofs, 2020; Hakala & Kujala, 2021).

Several studies from the perspective of PE teachers revealed tensions between the educative and physical dimensions of PE in Finland (Mihajlovic, 2019) and Australia (Pill & Stolz, 2015), which often stem from personal sport experiences from out-of-school settings. In line with these findings, recent studies from England and Austria confirm the PE teachers' dilemma between a more traditional view of sports and the educative dimensions of PE in the curricular approaches (Herold, 2020; Meier et al., 2021).

As previous research has revealed, only a so-called narrow understanding of bodies—idealized through heterosexuality, binary gender and certain body ideals—are recognized as normal and healthy in PE (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Webb et al., 2008). Ambivalent positions regarding the educative dimensions of PE and the traditional view of sports can be found in the Finnish national curriculum (Kujala & Hakala, 2015) and other international curricular approaches (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Meier et al., 2021). The physical dimensions of PE are often related to a more traditional understanding of the aims of PE and student assessment which are not supportive when addressing student diversity in PE. For students with SEN, a generally accepted aim when addressing inclusion in PE is that these students should participate in physical activities and feel like a legitimate participant in the lessons (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010).

UNDERSTANDING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

A narrow definition versus a broad definition

The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) has been signed by most countries worldwide. The concept of inclusive education has consequently become a global policy vision. Despite the expanding international support for the idea of inclusion, the concept encompasses various definitions and has been interpreted differently in different national contexts (Haug, 2017; Magnússon et al., 2019; Nilholm, 2020). The recent literature on inclusive education often distinguishes between two definitions: To put it in a nutshell, a narrow definition and a broad definition of inclusive education. The broad definition of inclusion refers to all individuals and marginalized groups and is not restricted to those with disabilities (Haug, 2017; Thomas, 2013). This definition is in line with the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) and the 'Education for All' approach as a global movement to provide basic education for everyone regardless of their special needs, gender or cultural backgrounds (Haug, 2017). This broad understanding of inclusion incorporates a shift from the field of disability to discourses of diversity, with a focus on a variety of diversity dimensions.

The basic premises of special education, on the other hand, is that pupils can be categorized into different deficit groups (such as learning disabilities or intellectual disabilities) and that special education is a rational response to the specific needs of those pupils (Nilholm, 2020). Unlike in many other countries, special educational needs are not categorized in different deficit groups in the Finnish context. With the implementation of a national strategy consisting of a three-tiered support system in 2011, three forms of support were introduced: General, intensified and special support. As noted in the Finnish Basic Education Act (642/2010), the educational support is not reserved for pupils with disabilities exclusively, as all pupils are entitled to receive support if needed. The form of support is based on the intensity of support and pedagogical arrangements such as guidance, differentiation, teacher collaboration, part-time special education or support from the teacher's assistant (Eklund et al., 2020).

However, some authors worry that there is a risk that the interests of those with disabilities might be ignored when focusing on other diversity aspects such as the social background or ethnicity (Miles & Singal, 2010; Norwich, 2014). The narrow definition of inclusion therefore deals solely with students with disabilities. As the literature review conducted by Norwich (2014) shows, there is a dominant use of the term inclusion in relation to special education and disability. This can be traced back to the role of integration as 'the organizational principle for special education during the 1960s' (Haug, 2017, p. 208) which is closely connected to discourses of inclusion.

THE FINNISH CASE

Inclusive education in Finland

In Finland, normalisation was a strong statement in launching the comprehensive school in 1972 and supported the integration of pupils with special needs in general education classroom settings. In 1998, the new Basic Education Act (628/1998) focused on equal rights to education for all, no matter of the school or municipality (Ekstam et al., 2015). This has been regarded as an important legal step towards inclusive education. In Finland, almost 91% of all students with special support attend mainstream schools, however, only 21% of all students with special support are taught fully in a general education class (OSF, 2019).

The most common option (43%) is partial teaching in general education groups and special classes located in mainstream schools. Overall, 27% of all students with special support are taught full-time in special classes in mainstream schools (OSF, 2019). The prevalence of special education groups for children with disabilities in mainstream schools is difficult to reconcile with the ideal understanding of inclusive education (Malmquist & Nilholm, 2016).

In Finland, a multi-tiered framework of educational support was introduced in 2010 which resembles the Response to Intervention (RTI) model in the U.S. (Björn et al., 2016). According to Official Statistics of Finland (OSF, 2016) segregating methods for special instruction in special groups are common practices in schools. This contrasts with the notion of inclusion that has been supported by inclusive education policies, such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). The increase of pupils with special needs in general education classrooms in Finland has mostly resulted from the overall growth in the identification of pupils with special support (Pulkkinen & Jahnukainen, 2016). Finland still has a high number of students receiving special educational services compared to other European countries (OSF, 2016).

Curriculum design in Finland

Official texts like curricula are read within certain settings which are framed by each country's unique curriculum tradition (Autio, 2017; Haapaniemi et al., 2020), cultural and policy contexts (Penney, 2013). From a historical point of view, the Finnish curriculum tradition is mainly influenced by the two curriculum approaches of Anglo-American Curriculum theory and the German 'Lehrplan' and its conceptualization of 'Bildung/Didaktik'. The Scandinavian tradition of Bildung-centred Didaktik—as defined by Klafki and others—can be described as a process of character-formation that refers to the ability to recognize and follow one's own interests in society and to behave within society as a responsible citizen (Sjöström & Eilks, 2020).

In the tradition of 'Lehrplan' and 'Bildung/Didaktik', the Finnish curriculum has always been strongly subject-based. However, the structure of the curriculum document has gradually changed from subject content to more general objectives (Haapaniemi et al., 2020; Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Lähdemäki, 2019). While the 2004 curriculum version still stressed the role of subjects, the latest curriculum (FNBE, 2016) consists of two equal main parts: The first part consists of general and broader education goals, transversal competencies and values in contemporary times including the conception of learning and diversity issues. The second part presents the objectives, core contents and evaluation criteria for each school subject (see Figure 1). Thus, the first part serves the function of providing a general framework to inform the more subject-specific part.

While the ideal of 'Bildung' dominated in Finland in the first half of the twentieth century, Finland has been influenced by educational ideas from the United States after second world war (Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Vitikka et al., 2012). At that time, teacher autonomy became more important and the idea of the teacher as a researcher emerged (Hakala & Kujala, 2021). Teacher autonomy has been supported by a research-based teacher education in Finnish universities. As teachers play a central role in delivering the curriculum content to their students, understanding their perceptions of the curriculum as a framework for their teaching is important (Ennis, 2013; Haapaniemi et al., 2020). In Finland, the newest curriculum reform emphasizes the teachers' didactic autonomy and building on the teachers' professionalism (Haapaniemi et al., 2020; Sahlberg, 2013). Teachers play a central role in converting the curriculum content into meaningful lessons and therefore have a high responsibility for their students' learning progress (Haapaniemi et al., 2020). Several studies indicate that teachers in Finland have didactical autonomy as long as the content of their

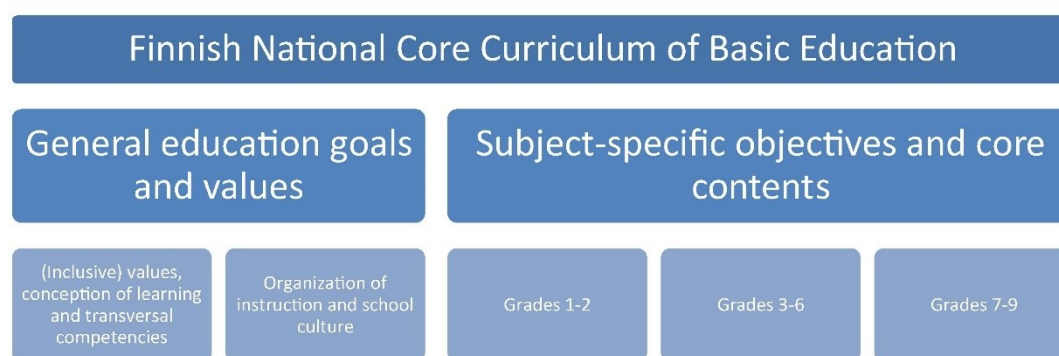


FIGURE 1 Structure of the Finnish national core curriculum of basic education

teaching follows the basic principles of the national curriculum, serving as a framework for their teaching (Haapaniemi et al., 2020; Mihajlovic, 2019).

Although various interest groups were officially involved in the curriculum design process of the latest curriculum, they did not play a significant role developing the final version of the NCC (Säily et al., 2020). This strongly controlled design process accompanied by global neoliberal influencers has been criticized by some scholars (Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Säily et al., 2020), arguing that the process may not have included the voices of young people sufficiently.

Finnish PE

As pointed out by Hakala and Kujala (2015, 2021), the subject PE is traditionally committed to the idea of a homogenous Finnish society and culture, which is in contrast to the values mentioned in the current core curriculum. The historical roots of this situation can be traced back to the traditional values in the (Finnish) sports culture which are based on nationalism, given gender roles and achievement orientation, and thus restrain alternative discourses in PE curricula (Hakala & Kujala, 2021). Besides, there seems to be a gap between the understanding of inclusive education in the curriculum and the realizations of inclusive practices on school level. In former curriculum versions, PE content was divided between girls and boys and even today, PE classes are mainly organized separated in the secondary level, although there is no legal basis for this (Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Yli-Piipari, 2014).

A CURRICULUM FOR STUDENTS WITH SEN—THE PERSPECTIVE OF ABLEISM

As stated by Price and Slee (2021), reforming the curriculum for students with disability is a much larger project than simply adapting syllabi. It requires a much more expansive view of curriculum, and it requires the recognition of the ways in which curriculum practices systematically exclude students with disability (Price & Slee, 2021).

In this study, the theoretical perspective of ableism can help to reflect and deconstruct hidden barriers to inclusion. As pointed out by Giese and Ruin (2018, p. 8), 'curricula for PE classes document the institutional standards against the backdrop of the zeitgeist in educational policy, sport pedagogy and society as a whole'.

Thus, if we seek to understand the emergence of any particular curriculum version, the complex histories that characterize how a school or a subject function must also be understood (Brady & Kennedy, 1999). As previous research has shown, the desired curricular goal in PE is to shape the students' bodies to conform to the requirements of particular sports, which goes back to the strong role of extracurricular sports in the past (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Hakala & Kujala, 2021). Until emphasizing the educational goals of PE in the current curricular shift in Finland (FNBE, 2016) and internationally, normative expectation of a healthy and functioning body capable of performing at a high level has been idealized in curriculum documents (Giese & Ruin, 2018). Still today, PE curricula with normative performance expectations are currently in use in many countries, especially if the curricula are designed output/competency orientated (Meier et al., 2021; Paveling et al., 2019).

Through the lens of ableism, romanticized body images and a normative understanding of performance are problematic when dealing with diverse learners in the PE class (Giese & Ruin, 2018). In many cases, children with disabilities are regarded as something different from the norm and stereotypical representations still exist in school curricula: 'Much like the missing contributions of women and people of colour in school curricula of years past, so it remains for people with disabilities. Just as girls and children of color once saw few and/or stereotypical representations of themselves in school curricula, so it remains for children with disabilities' (Valle & Connor, 2011, p. 195). From the perspective of ableism, curricular documents should question the assumption that a person's disability refers to certain characteristics, which may have discriminatory and exclusionary potential. For instance, stereotypes which are associated with specific disabilities include the presumption that children with visual impairments automatically refer to the inability of the person to see objects as clearly as a healthy person. However, vision impairments are heterogeneous due to the complex nature of the visual system and therefore, children with vision impairment usually require diverse adaptations or technologies to have access to mainstream education.

Numerous studies have shown that PE curricula are often dominated by competitive activities that stem from traditional sport culture (Meier et al., 2021; Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Haycock & Smith, 2010; Giese & Ruin, 2018; Smith & Green, 2004). The curriculum content therefore reduces the opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in PE (Tant & Watelein, 2016).

Other studies show that a broader and more holistic understanding of performance and flexible evaluation criteria are important to accommodate the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities (e.g., Ruin & Meier, 2017). Moreover, the success of learning is often strongly connected to the ability of self-reflection. This may also exclude those children who are not able to do so due to their intellectual disability (Giese & Buchner, 2019). A current curriculum analysis revealed that the Finnish core curriculum of PE harbours at least some exclusive potential for those students, who do not have the ability to reflect on themselves and their learning experiences (Mihajlovic, 2019). However, a more systematic analysis is needed to explore the interplay between the general conception of the curriculum and the subject-specific issues of PE.

METHODS

Study design

The analysis of the documents was guided by the two following research aims:

- First, the analysis tries to gain insights into the understanding of 'inclusion' within the context of PE policy in Finland and how 'inclusion' is defined within the official curriculum framework.

- Second, the main purpose of this study is to investigate how the current Finnish (PE) curriculum addresses the inclusion of students with SEN.

Different parts of the Finnish NCC were selected for this analysis in line with the research aims, which included the general part of the curriculum and the teaching guidelines for the subject PE. The data analysis was conducted in English, as the data source—the Finnish national core curriculum—was available in English language. Therefore, no translations of the documents into English were necessary. Using the perspective of ‘ableism’ as a theoretical background, the specific aim of this analysis is to examine to what extent the current curricular approaches harbour exclusive potential.

Data material

The official documents that served the main source of this analysis were the first chapters of the curriculum that consist of values and general goals and principles of Finnish basic education and the subject syllabus of PE concerning grades 1–2, 3–6 and 7–9. Beforehand, as part of a literature review, former curriculum studies on Finnish PE programs have been reviewed.

The general part of the curriculum also includes chapters on the conception of learning, the development of an (inclusive) school culture, the role of transversal competences, and general assessment criteria.

The subject-specific part of the curriculum defines objectives, core contents and assessment criteria for each subject. Regarding PE, the objectives refer to certain key content areas (physical, social and psychological functional capacity). Besides, connections between the transversal competencies and the content areas of each subject are defined in the subject-specific part of the Finnish NCC. The different parts of the curriculum that have been analysed in this study are displayed in Table 1.

Data analysis

The current Finnish NCC (of PE) was qualitatively content analysed adopting a deductive-inductive approach combining ‘emerging and predetermined codes’ (Creswell, 2014, p. 199). The data analysis followed the guidelines of the qualitative content analysis (QCA) by Kuckartz (2019). The starting point was a coding frame with deductively formed codes which related to the two main research aims. Theory-based concepts were first

TABLE 1 Analysed data material

General part of the curriculum	Subject syllabus of PE
Analysed Chapters: 1 The significance of local curricula and the local curriculum process 2 Basic education as the foundation of general knowledge and ability 3 Mission and general goals of basic education 4 Operating culture of comprehensive basic education 5 Organization of school work aiming to promote learning and wellbeing 6 Assessment 7 Support in learning and school attendance 8 Pupil welfare 9 Special questions of language and culture 10 Bilingual education	Analysed Chapters: 13 Grades 1–2 13.4.11 Physical education 14 Grades 3–6 14.4.13 Physical education 15 Grades 7–9 15.4.17 Physical education

TABLE 2 Sub-categories of the main category “responding to students with SEN in PE”

Sub-category	Examples (Quotes)
Individualized educational support (contents referring to forms of support and pedagogical arrangements such as guidance, differentiation, teacher collaboration, part-time special education)	‘The need for special aids may be associated with vision, hearing, mobility or other physical needs. It may also be related to special learning needs. For example, various information technology applications, audio books, tools for illustrating mathematics or aids that support concentration may be used’. (FNBE, 2016, p. 131)
Positive body image (contents referring to the construction of the body and health such as questioning the body ideal of a ‘healthy and fit body’)	‘In grades 7–9, it is particularly important to strengthen the pupil’s positive self-image and acceptance of his or her developing body’. (FNBE, 2016, S. 691).
Assessment criteria (contents referring the student assessment and specifically addressing the individual needs of students with SEN)	‘The aim of assessment is to recognize the pupils’ personal strengths and development needs and to support them. The pupil’s state of health and special needs shall be taken into account in the instruction and assessment of physical education’. (FNBE, 2016, p. 264)

translated into a general framework of codes. The coding system was then differentiated in more detail and thus revealed specific themes and patterns within the data (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015).

For the purpose of the analysis in this paper, these main categories were translated into a category system for deductive coding. First, the two main categories—‘Understanding inclusive education’ and ‘Responding to students with SEN in PE’—were chosen based on a thorough review of literature in the field of sports and PE. Second, each category was differentiated within the coding system while specific themes emerged in an inductive way during the data analysis. Following the six steps of QCA a proposed by Kuckartz (2019), the text material was first prepared and read through several times. Secondly, main categories corresponding to the current literature were formed (see Table 2). In the third phase of the analysis, the corresponding text segments were coded with the two main categories. In the following fourth phase of the analysis, the coding frame was developed further by creating subcodes directly in relation to this data (data-driven creation of sub-categories). For instance, the main category ‘Responding to students with SEN in PE’ coded the text segments in the documents regarding how the PE curriculum meets the needs of students with SEN. Examples for each sub-category that refer to this main category are displayed in Table 2.

First, all text passages to which this category was assigned were compiled. Then each of these text passages was coded a second time. This was done based on the procedure similar to that of inductive category development by Mayring (2010). In the fifth phase, the sub-categories were revised carefully, checked for reliability and finally used to present the results. In the final phase, the category-based presentation of the results was reported and documented with illustrative quotes from the original material.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In each of the following sections, an overview of the most significant results will be provided, and some key passages are quoted from the analysed documents to exemplify the findings.

Understanding inclusion

The general part of the Finnish National Core Curriculum builds upon a broad understanding of inclusion, capturing any group of students, not solely children with disabilities. Referring to the legal framework of the Finnish Constitution and the Non-Discrimination Act (21/2004), 'nobody may be discriminated against on the basis of gender, age, ethnic or national origin, nationality, language, religion, belief, opinion, sexual orientation, health, disability or other personal characteristics' (FNBE, 2016, p. 22). In the general part of the curriculum, the accessibility to education for all students has been associated with the principle of inclusion and should be achieved by supporting the pupils' well-being in cooperation with the homes (FNBE, 2016, p. 31). More precisely, schools and families should work together to support students' learning and development. However, the term 'inclusion' is mentioned for the first time in the current Finnish national curriculum. In the underlying values of basic education, it is stated that the 'development of basic education is guided by the inclusion principle' (FNBE, 2016, p. 19). Consequently, diversity is recognized and appreciated as an asset in the curricular documents. Further on, social exclusion is regarded as a violation of human rights and a threat to the child's personal development:

Exclusion from learning means that a child's educational rights are not implemented and is a threat to his or her healthy growth and development. (FNBE, 2016, p. 25)

While in many countries, inclusive education is often reduced to special needs education in policy documents, the Finnish curriculum seems to see (inclusive) education as a 'social movement against educational exclusion' (Slee & Allan, 2001, p. 177). As a tool for social justice, the curriculum may help schools in overcoming processes of exclusion (Slee & Allan, 2001).

Exclusionary practices should be avoided by offering flexible support forms for learning that are based on the pupil's individual needs:

The support received by the pupil must be flexible, based on long-term planning, and adjustable as the pupil's needs for support change. Support is provided for as long as necessary, and at the level and in the form indicated by the pupil's needs. (FNBE, 2016, p. 108)

Forms of educational support are not only restricted to students with disabilities and include other dimensions of diversity such as linguistic diversity. As the analysis shows, recognising and respecting diversity is an important aspect of the underlying values of the current curriculum. In contrast to the inclusive values highlighted in the general part of the curricula, however, diversity issues seem to play a minor role in the PE curricula and are mainly reduced to the diversity dimension '(dis-)ability'. Cultural diversity and gender equality are promoted for the first time in the current PE curriculum, as stated above (FNBE, 2016). As pointed out by Hakala and Kujala (2021), previous Finnish PE curricula entirely excluded cultural diversity until 2014.

Responding to SEN in PE

While the general part of the Finnish NCC addresses the concept of inclusion in a broad and comprehensive way, the PE curricula mainly reduce the concept of inclusion to the dimensions of '(dis-)ability'. Differences among pupils concerning gender-related questions are not mentioned at all in the PE curricula. When referring to diversity issues, however, the PE curriculum hardly gives guidance that could be useful for practitioners on school level. In general,

there remains freedom for individual schools and teachers to interpret the curriculum as they wish, as suggested in the chapter 5.6 'Issues subject to local decisions' (FNBE, 2016, p. 77).

Individualized educational support

As stated in the general guidelines of the Finnish NCC, every pupil has the right to receive educational services and special aids he or she needs to participate in education. These special aids are free of charge and available at all levels of support (FNBE, 2016, p. 131). As the following quote illustrates, the need for special aids may be associated with different educational needs:

The need for special aids may be associated with vision, hearing, mobility or other physical needs. It may also be related to special learning needs. For example, various information technology applications, audio books, tools for illustrating mathematics or aids that support concentration may be used. (FNBE, 2016, p. 131)

In this regard, the teacher's task is to plan, instruct and assess the learning approach of the individual student with SEN and the entire group, if necessary, in collaboration with an assistant or other school staff members (FNBE, 2016, p. 131).

Drawing on the theoretical concept of ableism, the curricular documents do not 'label' students with SEN by highlighting that every pupil has the possibility to receive educational support at some point, not only students with certain disabilities.

Students who are unable to study according to the individual syllabi of subjects receive instruction organized by activity areas rather than by subjects, to provide the pupils with knowledge and skills that allow them to manage their lives as independently as possible (FNBE, 2016, p. 126).

As stated in the curriculum, the arrangement of instruction by activity areas mostly refers to pupils with more severe developmental disabilities which requires the decision of special support (the strongest form of support) and an individual education plan (FNBE, 2016, p. 126). The support forms may be either organized in remedial teaching or part-time special needs education (FNBE, 2016, p. 129), which often take place in segregated placements (OSF, 2016). Remedial teaching may be used as a precautionary measure to prevent (learning) difficulties. In PE, the aim is to identify developmental delays and difficulties in learning motor skills at an early stage and to provide timely support:

In grades 1–2, it is important to recognize difficulties in learning motor skills that may also be connected to other learning difficulties. (FNBE, 2016, p. 263)

Overall, the curriculum expects teachers to identify and respond to the individual needs of their students which requires pedagogical expertise and cross-sectoral cooperation between teachers and other professionals for 'assessing the need for support and planning and implementing support measures' (FNBE, 2016, p. 108). However, segregating methods for special instruction in special groups are still common practices in Finnish schools (OSF, 2016).

Body image

Throughout the document, the task of PE to ensure that the students have enough positive experiences of their own body is mentioned several times (FNBE, 2016, p. 260, p. 262,

p. 454). The following quotation illustrates the importance of supporting a positive body image and the acceptance of the own body in grades 7–9:

In grades 7–9, it is particularly important to strengthen the pupil's positive self-image and acceptance of his or her developing body. (FNBE, 2016, p. 691)

Furthermore, in both sections of the curriculum, the general education section and the PE section, the binary of 'he' and 'she' offers a 'simple' interpretation of gender, but it excludes those with different identities. Regarding the exclusion of students identifying as non-binary in the curricular documents, there is a risk that teachers do not take into consideration the existence and needs of transgender people. In doing so, it may prevent teaching gender in a more complex way.

Besides, one focus of PE is obviously on maintaining or increasing individual physical performance. In the assessment criteria at the end of grade 6, it is stated that: 'The pupil knows how to assess his or her physical fitness and to improve his or her speed, flexibility, endurance, and strength by exercise' (FNBE, 2016, p. 453).

For this purpose, body experiences are to be used to align with the supposedly 'normal' development of a 'fit' body and to improve the individual fitness level in a process of accepting his or her developing body. In line with findings from Germany, the pupils are mainly supposed to take responsibility for their own body and thus, also for their own health (Ruin & Stibbe, 2020). In contrast to the German findings, however, the Finnish PE curricula rather seem to build upon a salutogenic understanding of health, in which the focus is not on short-term fitness promotion, but on "strengthening personal resources and a stable self-esteem, which also accepts weaknesses of the individual" (Ruin & Stibbe, 2020, p. 12).

From the perspective of ableism, the construction of the body and health in the current Finnish NCC seems to be problematic at some point, as performance expectations are relativized at a surface level, but nevertheless the PE curriculum exhibits a potential for discrimination for persons with disabilities: As pointed out by Giese and Ruin (2018) there is a 'fundamental unspoken assumption that the individual is able to move autonomously and purposefully and that he or she can, at will, access a functioning body that is largely unrestricted in its ability to move'.

As the following sub-theme shows, there is some exclusionary potential related to students with disabilities who are unable to reproduce normative motor skills due to their body composition.

Assessment criteria

Regarding students with SEN, the PE curriculum for grades 1–2 highlights the importance of meeting the individual needs of all students concerning the instruction and assessment of PE. The following quote illustrates this:

The aim of assessment is to recognize the pupils' personal strengths and development needs and to support them. The pupil's state of health and special needs shall be taken into account in the instruction and assessment of physical education. (FNBE, 2016, p. 264)

In many passages, the curriculum highlights the importance of meeting the individual needs of all students in the assessment and instruction. In some cases, the current PE curriculum falls short for students with disability through the normative, expected achievement standards in some assessment criteria. For instance, 'the pupil has basic

swimming skills if he/she is able to swim 50 metres using two different strokes' (FNBE, 2016, p. 453). The ableistic view on this assessment criteria indicates that the expected achievements are linked to the ability to be able to reproduce normative motor skills. However, there are individuals (with disabilities) who do not possess these skills, and they will be denied the chance to succeed in such educational settings (Giese & Buchner, 2019; Giese & Ruin, 2018).

From the perspective of ableism, the current Finnish NCC harbours some exclusive potential which is related to the learners' ability of self-reflection. Although the inclusion of critical thinking and self-reflection within the curriculum can be interpreted as a support for strengthening the educative dimensions of PE, there is little information on how students with more severe disabilities may achieve these expected achievement standards. There are several passages in the Finnish PE curriculum in which educational achievement refers to a highly developed capacity for abstraction and reflection. As stated in the assessment criteria for PE at the end of grade 6, for instance, pupils should possess the ability to reflect as a precondition to acquire new knowledge and skills:

While acquiring new knowledge and skills, the pupils learn to reflect on their learning, experiences and emotions. (FNBE, 2016, p. 28)

In other words, the ability to be educated seems to be closely related to the ability of reflection. Drawing on the concept of ableism, individuals with intellectual disabilities or a behavioural disorder, for instance, might not be able to engage the processes of self-reflection as expected in the curricular documents and therefore be overlooked and excluded (Buchner et al., 2015; Giese & Ruin, 2018). The FNBE (2016) therefore suggests that the instruction and assessment of students with severe disabilities be arranged by activity areas which do not necessarily imply full participation of the students with SEN in a mainstream class. When studying by activity areas, verbal assessments are used for all grades instead of numerical grades (FNBE, 2016, p. 99). In this regard, there are tensions between certain notions of inclusive education supporting the understanding that individuals with disabilities should be entitled to full membership in regular classes (Haug, 2017) and the (educational) goals in PE, which do not seem to be fully aligned to this particular notion of inclusive education.

The tensions between the educative and physical dimensions of PE also become visible in PE teachers' reflections concerning the perspectives on the nature and objectives of PE (e.g., Pill & Stolz, 2015). When addressing inclusion in PE, teachers in recent studies highlighted the priority of students having fun or enjoying physical activities as most important to teaching PE (Mihajlovic, 2019; Tant & Watelein, 2016). These findings are in line with previous research conducted by Pill and Stolz (2015) in Australia and mirror the PE as PA perspective. Other teachers, on the other hand, show a rather standardized understanding of performance (and a kind of traditional assessment) based on the physical fitness level, which contrasts with the suggested flexible assessment criteria of many curricular documents (FNBE, 2016; Herold, 2020). Drawing on previous work by Hay and Penney (2012), teachers need to be knowledgeable and skilled in assessing their students in order for assessment to be positively influential in PE. Moreover, PE teachers should be committed to enhancing students' own knowledge and skills in this area (Hay & Penney, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The intention in undertaking this research was to portray the understanding of inclusion in the current Finnish NC for PE and particularly focusing on the inclusion of students with SEN. The Finnish national curriculum addresses inclusion in a comprehensive manner,

referring to various diversity dimensions and (inclusive) values which are associated with fundamental human rights. However, the extent to which inclusion is addressed varies considerably between the general part and the subject-specific part for PE. While the general part of the Finnish NCC addresses diversity issues in a specific and comprehensive way, the PE curriculum mainly reduces the concept of diversity to the dimensions of '(dis-)ability' and 'cultural diversity'.

Differences among pupils concerning gender-related questions are not mentioned at all in the PE curricula. A PE teacher may read the general part in terms of general issues (such as a general understanding of diversity), and the subject-specific part in order to know how to specify the content and learning outcomes for e.g., PE-teaching. Thus, a uniform understanding of diversity-related intentions between the two parts of the Finnish NCC is missing. From the teachers' perspective, it is their task to mediate issues of diversity between the two parts of the document. Or in other words, the NCC provides teachers with inconsistent guidance for teaching.

In line with recent findings from Austria (Meier et al., 2021), the PE curriculum in Finland mainly scratches the surface and provides few implications for teaching and learning in diverse classes. Compared to the curricular documents from other countries, however, normative performance expectations and body ideals are not in the focus of the analysed curricula in Finland. Although standardized competencies exist in the Finnish curricular approaches, these performance expectations have a less normative character than in other countries (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Haycock & Smith, 2010; Ruin & Meier, 2017). As the Finnish national core curriculum in PE is rather short on content, it leaves decisions on content and teaching methods to individual teachers and schools. Due to the flexibility of the curriculum, teachers in schools are likely to choose certain sports and physical activities based on their individual interests that are not explicitly mentioned in the curriculum. In the spirit of *Bildung*, there is a culture of trust in Finnish teachers and their professional ethics emphasizing the childrens' individual growth (Haapaniemi et al., 2020; Hakala & Kujala, 2021).

The findings of the present study support the need for practitioners to challenge normative perceptions and resist seeing diversity as a deficit, instead recognizing diversity as a strength and an asset. Still, there seems to be a discrepancy between the curriculum and the reality in schools due to country specific traditions of separating boys and girls in Finnish PE (Annerstedt, 2008; Yli-Piipari, 2014) and the role of traditional sports in PE (Hakala & Kujala, 2015). As pointed out by Kujala and Hakala (2015), the ethos of sport can still be regarded as a 'silent partner' in PE curricula.

We conclude that the subject of PE seems to be unique in the narrowness of its conceptualization of inclusion due to the prominent role of sports and particularly the 'ethos of sport' in constructing the subject of PE (Kujala & Hakala, 2015; Hakala & Kujala, 2021). The unique narrowness does not only refer to the Finnish PE curriculum, but—more general—for PE curricula in many countries. Compared to the curricular documents from German-speaking countries (Giese & Ruin, 2018; Ruin & Stibbe, 2020), for instance, ability expectations of neoliberal societies that follow the production of fit and healthy subjects are less in the focus of the analysed curricula in Finland.

Further on, as stated by Hakala and Kujala (2021, p. 12), "these issues restrain alternative discourses in PE curricula even today and, simultaneously, not only alienate students from their bodies but also prevent their self-understanding and their growth in moral subjects". Consequently, it is important for teachers to understand the historical foundations of the subject as well as the current unethical discourses influencing PE (Englund & Quennerstedt, 2008; Hakala & Kujala, 2021). Research from the (PE) teachers' perspective on the aims of the subject reveals that PE teachers struggle with the tensions between educative dimensions of PE and its traditional role (Mihajlovic, 2019; Pill & Stolz, 2015).

We identify the necessity to coordinate the conceptual frameworks of curricular documents in order to avoid contradictory and confusing messages, as it has already been suggested by other scholars (Meier et al., 2021). When it comes to curriculum studies, it is therefore necessary to question the extent to which these educational policy guidelines may become reality on a practical level in schools. It is important to keep in mind that the practical-level implementation 'relies on the practitioners' input, as well as being embedded in particular societal and cultural structures' (Kangas et al., 2020, p. 5). In Finland, teachers are expected to be critical practitioners and to act as curriculum specialists, however, little is known if this educational autonomy contributes to the development of inclusive practices on the classroom level.

As part of a larger research project, a qualitative interview study with (PE) teachers is underway to build on this curriculum analysis and to explore the interplay between curriculum theory and its reflections in inclusive teaching. Further research is needed to systematically examine the exclusive potential of current curricular approaches from an international or comparative perspective as curricular documents provide teachers with a compulsory framework for teaching in their subjects (Meier et al., 2021).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study followed the general ethical standards according to the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2016).

DATA DEPOSITION

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [CM], upon reasonable request.

GEOLOCATION INFORMATION

The data was collected in 2016/17 during a one-year stay of the corresponding author as a visiting doctoral student and researcher at Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [CM], upon reasonable request.

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Publication III

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Teachers' perceptions of the Finnish national curriculum and inclusive practices of physical education

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the relationship between the Finnish national curriculum and inclusive practices of physical education (PE) from the viewpoint of teachers from Finland. Case studies were conducted with the intention of developing understandings of the teacher's perspective on the current PE curricula at the time of transition to a new curriculum. The present qualitative study was carried out over a period of six months through weekly observations of PE classes and semi-structured interviews with teachers ($n = 8$) in four different schools in Southern Finland. Data were analysed through content analysis. Themes identified were 'Pedagogical autonomy and flexibility of the curriculum', 'Commitment and responsibility' and 'Conceptualisation of PE'. Findings revealed that the flexibility of the curriculum seems to have a positive impact on the participants' professional practice. Several participants feel morally responsible for developing their schools. Moreover, for most participants, PE should promote lifelong participation in physical activity. A differentiated and reflected understanding of assessing student achievement in PE seems important to accommodate the individual needs of their students with disabilities.

KEYWORDS

Inclusion; physical education; pedagogy; curriculum

Introduction

In recent decades, critical approaches have been a part of the educational thinking that has influenced curriculum development in physical education (PE) and health education (HE) in many countries, such as Australia (Leahy, O'Flynn, & Wright, 2013; Wright, 2004; Alfrey, O'Connor, & Jeanes, 2017) and New Zealand (Penney, 2013; Culpan & Bruce, 2007). As stated by Leahy et al. (2013), two major approaches have shaped the field of PE and HE: The approach of critical thinking, which is connected to processes of problem-solving; and socio-critical approaches, which take into account social and cultural contexts. The literature also reveals that perceptions of 'critical' in PE are diverse, as these approaches stem from 'different epistemological and theoretical understandings of education, (health) knowledge, the individual and society' (Leahy et al., 2013, p. 176).

By drawing on the complexity of curriculum implementation, Penney (2013) highlights the fact, that official texts are read within particular settings such as institutional, social,

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cultural and broader policy contexts. Consequently, the meanings generated from an official document such as the national curriculum are related to specific settings and individuals and can be understood as ‘settlements’, ‘bringing history, politics and professional differences into play’ (Penney, 2013, p.191). Curricula are founded on the country’s national educational policy, cultural identity and traditions and thus cannot be taken out of the national context it is applied to (Vitikka et al., 2012).

This paper draws attention to the implementation of the new core curriculum in Finland which has been progressively introduced on school level since August 2016. Due to the success in PISA, the Finnish education system has received global attention in recent years. The PISA findings refer to a high degree of equality and equity in regard to the pupils’ learning outcomes in Finland (Kivirauma & Ruoho, 2007). Due to the expansion of the inclusive education movement in Finland and internationally, there has been an increasing trend to educate more pupils with special needs in general education classroom settings. The inclusion of students with disabilities presents challenges to (PE) teachers who must attempt to meet the diverse needs of all students. Internationally, previous research has shown that teachers were extrinsically motivated to follow inclusive educational policies (Sato & Hodge, 2009). However, several articles revealed a discrepancy between the ideology of inclusive education policies and the curriculum content (teaching activities) and assessment in PE. The criteria in the PE curriculum referred to a certain performance in PE and were only reachable by a limited number of pupils (Smith & Green, 2004).

The well-functioning system for educational support (Kivirauma & Ruoho, 2007) and the research-based teacher education (Niemi, 2015; Vitikka et al., 2012) are considered by several authors as playing a key role in explaining the overall success of Finnish students in the PISA studies. Both, in pre-service and in-service time a questioning and critical inquiry approach is seen essential to empowering teachers to take responsibility for their professional learning and school development (Livingston & Shiach, 2010; Niemi, 2015). In Finland, teachers are encouraged to be critical practitioners and are expected to have a ‘thorough understanding of the teaching and learning process needed to act as a curriculum specialist’ (Niemi, 2015, p. 291).

However, little research in Finland and internationally has dealt with teachers’ perceptions of using critical inquiry approaches and how it figures in the lesson planning, assessments and classroom practices of PE teachers, particularly regarding inclusive practices. The participatory action research study conducted by Alfrey, O’Connor and Jeanes (2017) highlights the importance of contextual factors such as the structural support for teachers and learners. Niemi (2015) also emphasises the role of school-based structures that encourage reflective thinking and cooperation with other teachers. In order to fill this gap, the main purpose of this study is to investigate the teacher’s perception concerning the relationship between their pedagogical practice and their pedagogical assignment in PE.

This study offers deep insights into the perspectives of in-service teachers of PE about their perceptions on how the national curriculum frames their possibilities to work inclusive. Given this small sample group, the present study makes no claims for generalisability, but the findings could help practitioners and teacher educators understand the perspectives of in-service teachers towards their understanding of the nature and purpose of their subject (Pill & Stolz, 2015), and could justify the need for a curriculum that leaves room for pedagogical autonomy and flexibility to deal with different learners, including those with disabilities.

In this paper, I will first give a brief overview of the role of (inclusive) PE in the current Finnish national curriculum (FNBE, 2016). It is not my intention here to present a detailed analysis on the Finnish National Curriculum of PE. Rather, I draw attention to the mandated aims of the subject, that are expressed through quotes from the national Finnish PE syllabus. I will then describe the research design and procedure, data collection and analysis. Finally, data will be presented and discussed through the themes of ‘Pedagogical autonomy and flexibility of the curriculum’, ‘commitment and responsibility’ and ‘Conceptualisation of PE’.

The current state of PE in Finland

The subject ‘*liikunta*’, although it cannot be directly translated into English, includes physical activity, sports, and movement (Heikinaro-Johansson et al., 2014). According to the current Finnish Curriculum, PE has two main goals: Guiding the pupils in adopting a physically active lifestyle and to educate them through physical activities (FNBE, 2016). Internationally, this view is also shared by most educators regarding the purposes of PE in schools (McEvoy, Heikinaro-Johansson & MacPhail, 2015). According to the Finnish national curriculum, the focus of PE lies in the development of basic and specific motor skills during different seasons and in versatile learning environments. In this aspect, the Australian Curriculum as a whole seems to resemble the Finnish Curriculum, as there is an emphasis on ‘inherent flexibility and contextually responsive potential’ (Penny, 2013, p. 191). The following quote from the Finnish national curriculum of PE particularly refers to the local school conditions:

Physical education is safe and based on opportunities provided by different seasons and local conditions. School premises, local sports facilities, and nature are utilised diversely in teaching and learning. The pupils are guided in committing to a safe and ethically sustainable activity and learning atmosphere. (FNBE, 2016, p. 260)

The intent of the instruction is to promote their pupils’ competence regarding health, well-being and safety. In Finland, the PE subject is based on a health concept that remains a central factor legitimising the place of PE in the school curriculum (Annerstedt, 2008; Heikinaro-Johansson et al., 2014). The Finnish PE curriculum has been divided into physical and health education, both taught as separate subjects. However, both subjects are closely linked to each other in terms of goals and content. While the focus of PE lies in the development of a wide variety of motor skills, health education is based on a multidisciplinary foundation of knowledge. The activities in Finnish PE are closely connected to preparing children and youth for a lifetime of physical activity through joy in movement, social acceptance and knowledge (Annerstedt, 2008; Yli-Piipari, 2014). In achieving a life-long participation in physical activity, equal importance is afforded to the various goal areas of PE, including the development of psychomotor, cognitive, affective and behavioural skills (Heikinaro-Johansson et al., 2014).

Objectives of PE in the Finnish national curriculum

The objectives of the syllabus in PE are divided into three units consisting of grades 1–2, 3–6 and 7–9. In grades 1–9, the main emphasis is on learning and diversifying a wide variety

of motor skills. The assessment of PE is based on the objectives of physical, social, and psychological functional capacity. The following quotation shows how the various goal areas of PE are integrated in the curriculum:

In grades 1–2, physical education emphasises learning perceptual motor skills and fundamental movement skills, working together, developing social skills, and reinforcing positive experiences of physical activity. (FNBE, 2016, p.261)

As the next quotation shows, the emphasis in grades 3–6 is on learning fundamental movement skills and to enhance the students' social skills:

In grades 3–6, the main emphasis of physical education is on establishing and diversifying fundamental movement skills and enhancing social skills. (FNBE, 2016, p.449).

Moreover, the pupils in grades 3–6 should also be encouraged to participate in the planning, development, and responsible execution of the activities according to their developmental stage. In grades 7–9 the focus lies on adopting a healthy and physically active lifestyle and acquiring an understanding of different sports and physical activities:

In grades 7–9, the main emphasis is on versatile application of fundamental movement skills and improving physical capabilities by exercise with the help of different sports and other forms of physical activity (FNBE, 2016, p.691).

Although ball games seem to dominate the teaching content in Finland (Heikinaro-Johansson & Telama, 2005), the national curriculum recommends that PE should consist of a broad range of different physical activities. It includes various sports and activities that focus more on joy in movement and a physically active lifestyle than on competition and performance (FNBE, 2016). Finnish PE, however, also emphasises typical physical activities representative of the Nordic culture, such as skiing, skating, orienteering and outdoor education (Annerstedt, 2008; Yli-Piipari, 2014).

The role of diversity in Finnish curricula

In the current curriculum, diversity is explicitly regarded as a strength and asset, while former curriculum versions highlighted only the acceptance of diversity. The students' uniqueness is not mentioned particularly as a value in the former curriculum version. It has been added to the current curriculum as the following quotation shows:

Each pupil is unique and valuable just as he or she is. Each pupil has the right to grow into his or her full potential as a human being and a member of society. To achieve this, the pupils need encouragement and individual support as well as experiences of being heard and valued in the school community. (FNBE, 2016, p.25)

Recognising and respecting diversity seems to be an important aspect of the underlying values of the curriculum. However, this quotation also highlights the responsibility of the school community for achieving this. In terms of PE, the Finnish national curriculum highlights the importance of promoting gender equality and considering the pupil's state of health and special needs in the instruction and assessment (FNBE, 2016). Although inclusive values and especially gender related issues seem to play an important role in general in the curriculum guidelines, there seems to be a discrepancy between the policy documents and the reality due to country specific traditions of separating boys and

girls in PE (Heikinaro-Johansson et al., 2014; Yli-Piipari, 2014). In elementary school grades, girls and boys typically participate in coeducational PE. In middle school grades, however, single-gender classes are the norm (Yli-Piipari, 2014). Gender separation in PE is legitimated in the curriculum as a way to deal with the different needs of boys and girls at this stage of development, as well as the pupils' differences in growth and development (FNBE, 2016; Yli-Piipari, 2014).

Methods

Description of the study

The purpose of this study was to reveal how the participants perceive the ways the national curriculum frames their possibilities to work inclusive in PE. The case study data reported in this paper were collected within the context of a larger research project. The conceptual framework for the research was derived from existing literature.

Participants were three subject teachers in PE (all male), four special education teachers (all female) and one female class teacher who met the key requirement of having previous experience in teaching PE to students with special needs. As a language barrier existed between the researcher and the participants of the study, interviews were conducted in English. Therefore, participants were also chosen based on their language proficiency in English. The language proficiency levels of all interviewees were sufficient to express their thoughts and opinions.

All participants had the possibility of withdrawal at any time and without giving any reason. Purposeful sampling strategies (Patton, 2002) were used to recruit the participants. Participants were selected based on the assumption that they possess knowledge and experience with the phenomenon of interest, and thus could participate in in-depth interviews. A sampling of heterogeneous variation aimed to capture the insights and experiences from participants with diverse characteristics. The target group consisted of different practitioners (subject teacher, class teacher and special education teacher). Their ages varied from 30 to 60 years, and their pedagogical work experience ranged from 4 to over 30 years. Data collection took place in three public comprehensive schools and one special school in Southern Finland. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants. Additional demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Design and data collection

The study consists of a qualitative approach. Data were collected at each school separately, following similar steps in collecting the research data. To validate the findings, multiple types of material were gathered through different research methods (Munk & Agergaard, 2015). This research is based on semi-structured interviews, field notes and participant observation (Mayring, 2010).

First, observations of PE classes in comprehensive schools and one special school, 1–6th (pupils aged 7–12) and 7–9th grades (pupils aged 13–16) over a period of six months were conducted. Second, eight individual interviews with the teachers responsible for the observed classes were carried out after the teaching observations. A

Table 1 . Description of participants ($n = 8$)

Pseudonym	Male/ female	Age (years)	School, class level	Teaching experience (years)	Description
Matti	Male	30	Special school, grades 1–9	4	Subject teacher, PE
Vilho	Male	48	Comprehensive school, grades 7–9	21	Subject teacher, PE
Tuomas	Male	51	Comprehensive school, grades 7–9	22	Subject teacher, PE
Iina	Female	40	Comprehensive school, grades 1–6	9	Class teacher
Julia	Female	32	Comprehensive school, grades 1–6	4	Special education teacher
Suvi	Female	44	Comprehensive school, grades 1–9	13	Special class teacher
Janika	Female	41	Comprehensive school, grades 1–9	11	Special class teacher
Satu	Female	60	Special school, grades 1–6	29	Special class teacher

guideline with predetermined categories was used to conduct the observations in a structured manner. The observations focused on the variety in pupils' participation and non-participation, and to relations between pupils and the teaching staff and the content and assessment methods of PE (Munk & Agergaard, 2015). Throughout the observation process, short notes were taken and were further described after each observed lesson.

The interview questions covered four different categories related to the teacher's experiences concerning inclusion, teaching in the field of PE, the curriculum and the school environment. The study was guided by the following question: What are teachers' perceptions of the ways the Finnish Nation Curriculum frames their possibilities to deal with diversity (including students with disabilities) in PE?

The interview questions were designed so that the teachers could freely describe the aspects they consider important regarding their pedagogical practices in PE and the perception of the Finnish core curriculum. The aim of these interviews was to reveal the teachers' interpretations of the processes of inclusion and exclusion in PE (Munk & Agergaard, 2015) and to collect knowledge concerning the teachers' perceptions of their pedagogical practice and the relationship to their pedagogical assignment. The interviews lasted between 30 and 50 min and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. After each interview, the author recorded reflective field notes. The field notes included the researcher's individual insights and served as a reminder of the interview during the process of data analysis, and verification of data interpretations (Patton, 2002).

The research procedures followed the guidelines of the national research ethics committee (Academy of Finland, 2003). These guidelines include procedures for handling misconduct and fraud in science, which is primarily the responsibility of each individual researcher. Participant consent was obtained from all the teachers who voluntarily participated in the interviews and the purpose of the study was explained before each interview began. Following the completion of the interview process, transcriptions of the interviews were emailed to the participants upon request to ensure that none of the data collected was misinterpreted. Any participant identification has been removed from the data and replaced by alternative identifiers.

Data analysis

The interview data were qualitatively content analysed by adopting the inductive content analysis method (Mayring, 2010). Following the step model of inductive category development (Mayring, 2010), a criterion is first defined based on the research question, in order to identify the relevant aspects of the interview transcripts. Following this criterion, each transcript is worked through line by line and broad inductive categories are gradually defined out of the material. After 10-50% of the material, the categories are revised, reduced to main categories and verified in regard to their reliability (Mayring, 2010). This method was used to explore the similarities and differences regarding teachers' perceptions of the curriculum and the role of pedagogical practices via labelling and coding of the data. Once all the data had been grouped, themes were developed until saturation was reached and no new data were emerging.

The themes developed from the data analysis are: 'Pedagogical autonomy and flexibility of the curriculum', 'commitment and responsibility' and 'Conceptualisation of PE'. The participant's quotes are used to illuminate discussions about discourses drawn on and to make connections between previous research.

Observational data was used to clarify understanding about teachers' interactions and responses in the interviews. Observations were coded for type of (physical) activity and pupil's participation, as well as the interviewees' interaction in their PE classes. Observational and interview data were checked to identify whether the participants' reports of their actions in class and their experience seemed represented in the observation (Blagrove, 2017). No discrepancies between the reports and the observations for any of the participants could be identified in this study.

In addition, the current Finnish National Curriculum of PE was qualitatively content analysed early in the research process. Content analysis of documents was used to identify how the PE curricula responds to the individual abilities and needs of all children, particularly regarding the objectives of PE, understanding of performance, possible adaptations of physical activities and methods of student assessment.

The trustworthiness of this study was ensured in various ways. Credibility was achieved by triangulating the data between the types of data collection (interviews, observation of lessons, field notes). Data collection took place during a one-year stay as a visiting doctoral student and researcher in Finland. A considerable time was spent at each school (overall six months) so that trust was built with the participants. As suggested by Tracy (2010), the longer researchers are present, the more likely they are able to understand culture's values. Interviews were conducted until saturation of the questions was realised. Observation of teachers in the classroom and in the school environment contributed to the validation of information collected through interviews. Member checks were used to affirm validity by having participants review their interview transcripts and the interpretation of the categories presented (Blagrove, 2017).

Results

Pedagogical autonomy and flexibility of the curriculum

Several studies (e.g. Smith & Green, 2004) agree that the curriculum focused too broadly on competitive sport activities. As a result, students with disabilities were excluded from

many of the class's sports activities, as the teachers did not consider the official curriculum amenable to inclusion. The FNBE (2016) seems to provide a national curriculum for PE that is open to adapted physical activities and participation in sports for all individuals.

Iina and Tuomas value the autonomy that the Finnish national curriculum gives them. Iina commented: 'It (the curriculum) guides us, but is not restricting us. It is quite open so it leaves us teacher enough room to adapt the curriculum to the needs of the children in this school.' Tuomas reported that, 'it is good that the national curriculum is quite open concerning the aims and competences. It is not so concrete; it leaves the teacher more freedom.' A common view amongst interviewees was that they appreciated the flexibility of the curriculum, which requires more responsibility and creativity on the part of teachers.

In their professional practice, teachers can also independently decide what kind of sports they would like to teach in their PE lessons. Matti maintained that: 'The curriculum defines general aims and contents but I think that we have a lot of freedom and flexibility on what kind of physical activity we want to teach on school level and how to do it'.

In this context, Matti refers to the flexibility that teachers can choose certain sports and physical activities that are not explicitly mentioned in the curriculum. As the Finnish national core curriculum in PE is rather short on content, it leaves decisions on content and teaching methods to individual teachers and schools (Yli-Piipari, 2014). Most participants indicated that the curriculum content could easily be adapted to provide access to all students, including those with disabilities. The following comment by Tuomas describes the possibility of adapting the assessment criteria in PE classes by using different evaluation methods that are suitable for students with physical disabilities:

The curriculum nowadays allows us to adapt the evaluation criteria to the needs of each individual child. So if there is a child in a wheel-chair, he or she has the chance to show knowledge and skills in a special way, such as oral presentations or things like that.

Matti, on the other hand, regards the curriculum as an important tool to justify his decisions on giving grades, while he still appreciates the pedagogical autonomy:

The curriculum gives me guidelines on how I could give my grades. I can do my own decisions on that, but if some parents ask me why I gave his child this certain grade, I have to give them information about that. That's why it is very important to have the curriculum.

Some teachers also discussed the interplay between the flexibility of the curriculum and the perceived autonomy of creating innovative ideas on school level, such as Janika:

The new curricula gives the teacher even more freedom and autonomy. It has always been like that, as far as I work here, that the curriculum gives you guidelines but teachers actually can create their own ideas on the school level.

As the national curriculum in Finland provides schools with general guidelines, individual schools and their teachers have a strong impact on devising their own school-specific curriculum: 'Cooperation in the preparation of the curriculum and annual plan promotes commitment to shared goals and the coherence of instruction and education' (FNBE, 2016, 10). The flexibility of the curriculum seemed to facilitate the possibility to meet the needs of all children, including those with special needs.

Commitment and responsibility

According to Niemi (2012), Finnish society regards teachers to be professionals who are morally responsible for their work. Some participants discussed the responsibility for developing a specific curriculum on school level and strategies for teaching students with a disability, such as Janika:

We are all responsible for the school specific curriculum. It means that the teachers have responsibility but also a lot of freedom in teaching. I think this is very unique in Finland.
(Janika)

Janika also reported that ‘each school has an own curriculum based on the national curriculum.’ She went on to say that, ‘I think that this gives the unified quality to all schools.’ Both, teachers and pupils, are expected to have an active role in the current curriculum: According to the national curriculum, the teacher is responsible of selecting working methods in interaction with the pupils and, in particular, guides the pupils in the use of new working methods, strengthening their ability for self-regulation (FNBE, 2016). Due to their specific teacher training, teachers in Finland should also be able to take an active role in evaluating and developing their schools (Niemi, 2012).

Some interviewees, such as Janika, argued that teachers could benefit from the flexibility of the national curriculum and thus create their own ideas on school level, while Julia questioned how these working methods could meet the individual needs of her students with disabilities:

Many of my students need a very structured plan how to advance and to know what to do. I am not sure what happens with them if we only have project-based learning approaches. This is the other side of the coin.

Julia criticises the current curriculum development and seems to take responsibility of her students’ learning and participation in the school community. Throughout the observation process, most teachers attempted to create a supportive learning environment by implementing inclusive practices such as differentiated learning experiences in small groups and physical exercises adapted to the individual needs of all children. A common view amongst interviewees was that the curriculum emphasises the students’ use of critical thinking skills, considering that knowledge should be questioned (such as truth claims made about health). Moreover, several teachers involved pupils in decision-making about their own learning. Students’ critical and creative thinking skills were developed through learning experiences that encouraged them to seek solutions to problem-based learning. Janika and Matti encouraged pupils to choose activities based on their individual interests, such as goalball. In this context, goalball was used as a strategy to increase participation. The implementation of ‘reverse inclusion’ by using a sport usually reserved for people with disabilities aimed at foster empathy for the special needs of the blind children in this class. The curriculum highlights the importance of providing a safe learning environment in relation to mental health and wellbeing. Previous research has shown that encouragement and differentiated learning experiences have a positive impact on creating a supportive learning environment in PE (Beamish & Saggars, 2014). It becomes evident that shared responsibilities of the classroom environment and student learning are important conditions to build up safe learning environments and achieve equal opportunities for all students. In the next theme, the paper

will focus on how the participants interpreted the purpose of their subject and their understanding of performance.

Conceptualisation of PE: teachers' views regarding the purpose of their subject and understanding of performance

The findings from the interviews indicate that for most participants, PE should contribute to the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes that promote lifelong participation in physical activity. It is also generally accepted among the participants, that PE should contribute to the students' fitness. Physical health and a developing a healthy lifestyle were objectives emphasised by most participants:

I think that the main idea of PE is indeed to activate the students (...) so that everyone can learn physical exercises as a part of their lifestyle. (Matti)

The main goal for me is to support the kids to find a sport that they can keep up after school and motivates them to develop a healthy lifestyle. This is the goal from my point of view and also the official purpose of PE in Finland. (Tuomas)

The problem-solving approach of learning through movement which is a central aspect of the national 'Schools on the Move' programme (FNBE, 2016) seems not to be understood by several participants. Some participants emphasised the importance of the physical nature of PE and mainly reduced the purpose of their subject to developing the students' physical fitness.

Other participants, however, framed their views within a context of the holistic development of their students and regard physical activities as having a huge impact on developing the whole person. As stated by those participants, the objectives of PE go beyond motivating students for a healthy and physical active lifestyle and include the development of cognitive, affective and behavioural skills (Heikinaro-Johansson et al., 2014). A positive association between physical activities and cognitive health has been mentioned by several participants. In general, the role of physical activities has mostly been connected to improving the students' concentration. The comment by Satu, for instance, reveals that physical activities may have a positive influence on the student's concentration and should also be included during recess:

Physical activity is very important as far as concentration is concerned. I always try to include periods of movement in my lessons and in school breaks.

Participants also highlighted the priority of students having fun or enjoying physical activities as most important to teaching PE. These findings are in line with previous research conducted by Pill & Stolz (2015) in Australia and mirror the PE as PA perspective. For students with special needs, a generally accepted aim is that these students can participate in physical activities and feel like a legitimate participant in PE lessons (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010). According to my teaching observations, particularly teachers at primary (1st–6th grade) and special school were choosing and modifying sport activities in a way that all students could participate successfully. Those teachers also included movement-based instruction inside and outside their classrooms. According to my observations, 'learning through movement' involved students creating movement in response to music, in group puzzles and role-playing.

As stated by Pill & Stolz (2015), participants in this study either emphasised the physical nature of PE (fitness and physical activity), or stressed the educational context of the subject in the curriculum (personal and social development, thinking and understanding). The tension between the educative and physical dimensions of PE can also be found in the national PE curriculum in Finland, particularly in the assessment criteria (FNBE, 2016). Tuomas articulated the importance of the physical nature of PE in the process of assessment, closely mirroring the opinion of the majority of the participants, stating:

You also give them grades on how they behave in the classes, but in PE, the focus of assessment is based on the development of basic motor skills.

Appreciating the significance of a more differentiated and reflected understanding regarding performance (Ruin & Meier, 2017) seems evident for equal learning experiences for all pupils. Vilho shows a positive attitude towards the assessment model of the national curriculum. However, his comment reveals that a gap still exists between curriculum theory and teaching practice:

At least when we think about assessment it will change the practice, and that is something I think will be a good thing for students with special needs because they have more options to – of course we have this already now in theory – but we would have more different ways to assess what they know.

Appreciating different opportunities of assessment in PE, including children with disabilities, is evident in the comment from Vilho. In line with the assessment criteria of the national curriculum, the participants showed willingness to recognise the pupils' personal strengths and development needs in the assessment process.

In Finland, the national core curriculum defines specific assessment criteria, which emphasise the importance of the pedagogy of assessment rather than defined standards for learning outcomes (Vitikka et al., 2012). The curriculum guidelines support the use of indirect methods of assessment that ask students to reflect on their learning in PE rather than direct methods of assessing the performance of physical fitness levels. According to my observations, portfolios and reflective essays have been used as an assessment method, especially by teachers on primary school level. A comment by Matti reveals that:

Nowadays it is a lot more about the learning progress and how they improve themselves. For example, the results of the Cooper test should not have an impact on the student's grades.

In Finland, standardised tests are usually used as a diagnostic tool and have no implications for individual students (Vitikka, Krokfors & Hurmerinta, 2012).

Nevertheless, Matti also commented that some of his colleagues hold negative views regarding inclusion because they focus on traditional assessment methods based on the physical fitness level. There seem to be tendencies of functional and more traditional views on performance, as the following comment by Matti reveals:

The new curriculum offers a big chance for PE teachers to change their attitudes. Of course, I give my students also a grade for their motor skills, but according to the new curriculum, you are not allowed to give them grades based on their physical fitness level. For some colleagues this is not easy to understand.

Traditional fitness tests to measure the fitness levels of students (such as the Cooper test) seem inappropriate to ensure every student is provided with equal opportunities of

assessment in PE. Matti's comment reveals that a standardised understanding of performance (and a kind of traditional assessment) still exists among his colleagues, particularly on secondary school level (7th–9th grade) when schooling becomes more subject-based and numerical grades are mandatory.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to investigate (PE) teachers' perceptions of the ways the Finnish national curriculum frames their possibilities to work inclusive. The results of this study confirm the need for a flexible curriculum that can be adapted to the needs for all learners. The flexibility of the curriculum seems to have a positive impact on the participants' professional practice. Most of the participants appreciated the flexibility of the curriculum, which requires more responsibility and creativity on the part of teachers.

The findings seem to confirm, that teachers in Finland receive a great amount of educational autonomy. On the other hand, participants feel morally responsible and committed for their work and school development. As the national curriculum in Finland provides the schools with general guidelines, the individual schools and their teachers have a huge impact on making their own school-specific curriculum (Niemi, 2012). In their professional practice, participants independently decide what teaching materials they would like to use and are responsible for developing a specific curriculum on school level.

Moreover, a relative consensus among the participants on the general purpose of the subject was evident: According to most participants, PE aims at preparing students for a lifetime of physical activity (McEvoy et al., 2015). Helping students find something they like and want to pursue in the future is a formally stated purpose of PE in Finland and was a common opinion among most participants. In line with previous qualitative research (McEvoy et al., 2015), the framing of this shared purpose differed between participants, reflecting a range of perspectives on the nature of their subject. Participants in this study either emphasised the role of PE as an educational subject or the physical nature of PE.

Participants also mentioned the importance of inclusive practices, such as flexible teaching and assessment methods, encouraging interaction and reflecting on one's own teaching practice. Implementations of inclusive practices, however, vary immensely between the different schools in this study. According to my observations, PE lessons at the primary school level (1st–6th grade) contained a variety of assessment methods and different activities that were adapted to the needs of the students through modification of the rules and number of players. In other schools, however, traditional forms of assessment still seem to play a significant role in teachers' pedagogical practices. This is in contrast to the suggested assessment criteria in professional recommendations and policy documents (FNBE, 2016). Consequently, one might assume that a gap still exists between curriculum theory and teaching practice.

Conclusion

It is obvious that national curricula cannot simply be replicated from other countries, but there are certain elements of the Finnish core curriculum – such as inclusive values, the understanding of performance and flexible assessment criteria – that may serve as a

guideline for other countries. This analysis of the data highlighted a number of significant findings. Due to the limitations by space restrictions in this analysis, I would like to highlight the tensions between the educative and physical dimensions of PE that can be found in the Finnish national curriculum (FNBE, 2016) and resulted in the participants' reflections concerning the perspectives on the nature and objectives of PE. Some of these perspectives ranged from teachers believing PE should principally develop the basic motor skills of their students, while other participants showed a differentiated and more holistic view concerning the purposes of PE. In addition, most teachers showed a reflected understanding regarding performance, which is a precondition to take into account the pupils' personal strengths and development needs in the assessment process, including children with disabilities.

Moreover, if we want to understand how the potential of a critical inquiry approach might be realised in practice, various factors have to be taken into consideration, such as teacher education and professional learning opportunities (Leahy, O'Flynn & Wright, 2013). As stated by Tirri (2018), the goal of Finnish teacher education is to educate ethical professionals who have both freedom and responsibility to make pedagogical decisions in the interest of their students. Teachers should therefore be able to critically reflect on the educational dimensions of their teaching and help their students to find a purpose in their lives (Tirri, 2018).

Limitations

The findings in this study are subject to at least three limitations. First, given this small sample group, the results of the study make no claims for generalisability and thus cannot be applied to a larger context. Second, the research focused on teachers with different educational backgrounds (subject teacher in PE, special educators and class teacher). However, only one participant was a class teacher. Future qualitative studies should include an equal number of participants from different fields. Third, as the researcher was not familiar with the local language (Finnish), the interviews were conducted in English, which is not the native language for participants and researcher. Qualitative approaches highlight the importance of reflexivity in the research process, which can be challenging in cross-language research (Temple & Young, 2004). Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used, in order to find study participants with a sufficient proficiency in English and thus were able to participate in in-depth interviews and reflect their experiences in a foreign language. This, however, lead to an unequal selection of interviewees regarding their professional backgrounds. Future research may consider the use of translator or interpreter in cross-cultural qualitative interview studies (Temple & Young, 2004).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Christopher Mihajlovic is a physical education teacher and PhD candidate at the Faculty of Education, Department of Sports Science and Motology, Philipps University of Marburg, Germany.

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