

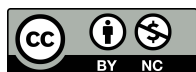
BEATRICE PARTOUCHE

SPECIAL EDUCATION IN NORWAY AND IN FINLAND:
EQUAL PARTICIPATION OR EQUAL RESULTS?

EDUCAZIONE SPECIALE IN NORVEGIA E IN FINLANDIA:
EQUA PARTECIPAZIONE O EGUALI RISULTATI?

International research carried out by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), through the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), has shown that the Finnish school system is the most successful in Europe and has been ranked among the best in the world since 2000. A review of the academic literature, websites, interviews and documentaries suggests that the key to success of the Finnish educational system lies in the lack of negative school evaluation, in encouraging students to make the most of the improvements they have achieved, rather than in the use of standardized evaluation. Moreover, students spend much time outdoors engaging in practical activities, the burden of study is balanced with their personal arrangements, and there is little homework. Though these features are all common to both the Finnish and Norwegian school systems, the educational performance of Norwegian students is not as good. This article suggests, taking into account the analyses of Finnish and Norwegian teachers and pedagogues, that the determinant element of the Finnish educational system's success is special education, i.e. the timely use of school support for students in need. According to data released by the national statistical offices in Finland, 31% of pupils in compulsory education receive school support to the extent deemed necessary, while in Norway only 8% do. This is little known and little debated although, in our opinion, it seems to be central to a real understanding of the Finnish model. We will try to describe and motivate the choices of these two countries, which for a large number of features, are suitable for comparison, in terms of school policies.

La ricerca internazionale condotta dall'Organizzazione per la cooperazione e lo sviluppo economico (OCSE), attraverso il Programma per la valutazione internazionale degli studenti (PISA), ha dimostrato che il sistema scolastico finlandese è il più efficiente in Europa ed è stato classificato tra i migliori al mondo dal 2000. Una revisione della letteratura accademica, dei siti web, delle interviste e dei documentari suggerisce che la chiave del successo del sistema educativo finlandese risiede nella mancanza di una valutazione negativa nella scuola, incoraggiando gli studenti a sfruttare al meglio i miglioramenti che hanno raggiunto piuttosto che nell'uso della valutazione standardizzata. Inoltre, gli studenti trascorrono molto tempo all'aria aperta impegnandosi in attività pratiche, il peso dello studio è bilanciato con le loro disposizioni personali, e ci sono pochi compiti a casa. Anche se queste caratteristiche sono comuni ai sistemi scolastici finlandese e norvegese, le prestazioni educative degli studenti norvegesi non sono altrettanto buone. Questo articolo suggerisce, tenendo conto delle analisi degli insegnanti e dei pedagogisti finlandesi e norvegesi, che l'elemento determinante del successo del sistema educativo finlandese sia l'educazione speciale, ossia l'uso tempestivo del sostegno scolastico per gli studenti bisognosi. Secondo i dati diffusi dagli istituti nazionali di statistica in Finlandia, il 31% degli alunni dell'istruzione obbligatoria riceve il sostegno scolastico nella misura ritenuta necessaria, mentre in Norvegia solo l'8% lo fa. Questo è poco conosciuto e poco dibattuto anche se, a nostro avviso, sembra essere centrale per una reale comprensione del modello finlandese. Cercheremo di descrivere e motivare le scelte di questi due paesi, che per un gran numero di caratteristiche, sono adatti per il confronto, in termini di politiche scolastiche.



Key words: Special education; equality; PISA; school drop-out; inclusivism.

Parole chiave: educazione special; uguaglianza; PISA; disagio scolastico; inclusione.

Does PISA really represent school effectiveness?

In the year 2000, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) established an international assessment study, which is administered to a representative sample of 15-year-old students from the countries taking part in the project. This test is held every three years, and measures mainly students' reading, mathematical and science skills. Each three-year cycle focuses more on one of these three educational issues: in the year 2000 the focus was on reading. Data collection and analysis took a great amount of work and time and was released only in December 2001.

As expected, the results of this study put the educational policies of many countries under the spotlight, highlighting both negative and positive outcomes (Fladmoe, 2011). It is certainly stimulating to be confronted with others' work, but sometimes the cultural, economic and geographical differences are such that it is not possible to make a real comparison (Le Thanh Khoi 1983), but rather only to observe phenomena. With this in mind, according to Østerud (2016), the first International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) initiatives were conceived in 1958: the educational systems were viewed as separate units, characterized by their own historical uniqueness; they were relatively closed systems and there was no intention of comparison.

However, as Arnesen and Lundahl (2006) argue, in recent decades, social and economic policies have been increasingly influenced by market logic and economic motivations have become increasingly more important, leading to an attitude of greater competition¹.

When the scores were published, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and the public opinion's reaction was called PISA-shock (Haugsbakk 2013; Østerud 2016) and immediately the performance was perceived as a failure (Hausstätter and Sarromaa 2008a). The national results were on average (OECD 2002), but expectations had been much higher. For this reason, the government tried to address this failure by making new reforms (Wiborg 2013) and introducing a new national evaluation system² that could help teachers and schools to track the annual results of their students (Tveit 2013).

While Norway tried to understand the reasons for such disappointing results,

¹ "Opprinnelig var OECD en tankesmie med oppmerksomheten rettet mot det særegne ved nasjonale utdanningstradisjoner. OECDs avdeling for evaluering av utdanning, IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), som ble opprettet i 1958 under ledelse av den svenske pedagogen Torsten Husen, var opptatt av nasjonale utdanningssystemer som selvstendige, historiske enheter. De var «naturlige», relativt lukkede systemer med en organisk struktur, og det hadde liten eller ingen hensikt å sammenligne dem."

² The Nasjonalt kvalitetsvurderingssystem (NKVS) was created in 2004.

neighboring Finland ranked first in reading, fourth in mathematics and third in science (OECD 2002). Among the reactions that have been observed in peer reviews and in the press is the denial of the validity of such tests and the belief that an undue emphasis on its results can only harm the school system, as the data collected indicate only some aspects of the educational system and describe only partial phenomena (Fladmoe 2011). For example, external elements, such as reliance on private tutoring or the provision of cultural services at home or in the neighborhood, are not identified. Moreover, these data are used in a manipulative way to make fast and superficial political reforms. The results of international comparative studies are used by political actors as a grading table rather than as a tool for reflection that could lead to observing the underlying national characteristics that mainly determine the results in question (Sahlberg 2007). At the same time, educational policies are being excessively influenced by the needs of the global economic market and the true objective of education is being forgotten (Østerud 2016). This has especially been the case in Norway, where a number of important changes have been in the pipeline since 2005, radically transforming the traditional structure of the educational system (Imsen, Blossing, and Moos 2017).

Even if we accept the criticism of the international standardized tests and therefore avoid taking into account the results of the OECD assessments, there are significant elements that lead us to conclude that the Finnish educational system is achieving more satisfactory and more effective results. We will try to highlight the weaknesses of the Norwegian school system and the significant differences that exist between these two countries' educational policies, although in many ways they have made very similar choices.

Overview of the educational system in Norway and Finland

An account of the fascinating historical differences in the development of each country's educational system is beyond the scope of this article. For this purpose, I invite you to refer to other more specific and very interesting readings (Arnold Barton 2006; Sahlberg 2015; Nokkentved and Rust 1991; Hausstätter and Takala 2008), and I will limit myself here to provide a quick and schematic view of the two systems in comparison.

In Norway, students are entitled to free and public primary and secondary education. Formal education begins in the calendar year in which children turn 6. Families cannot be asked to cover any costs related to education, such as teaching materials, transport during school hours, accommodation in school camps, excursions or other activities related to education.

Tab. 1 - School features in Norway and Finland.

Norway	Finland
Free schooling at all levels of education including tertiary education	
Public expenditure 7.7% GDP ¹	Public expenditure 7.2% GDP
The school system is mainly state-funded and the administration is decentralized	
Guaranteed early childhood education	
Pre-school attendance in 2015, by age group: 1 year old 69 % 3 years old 95 % 5 years old 97%	Pre-school attendance in 2015, by age group: 1 year old 30% 3 years old 45 % 6 years old 98%
For early childhood education, families are charged with a monthly kindergarten fee, equal for all and at low price	Early childhood education is free of charge
Compulsory schooling starts the year children turn 6 and lasts 10 years.	Compulsory schooling starts the year children turn 7 and lasts 9 years, with the possibility of extending for one year whereas the student feels the need to improve his or her skills before entering upper secondary education.
Comprehensive school created between 1960s and 1970s with the aim of building a more equitable society, principle of equality and equity, removal of inequalities.	
Statutory right to upper secondary education and training in general studies or vocational education	
Three year general studies and four year vocational and training (2 years at school and 2 years apprenticeship)	Modular structure of school subject into courses lasting 6-7 weeks each, with attendance at the student's choice. The separation of students by years of age was abolished in the 1990s.
Universities and non-tertiary higher education have access dependent on requirements	

¹ World Bank 2014.

The school is mainly state-owned, and the administrative management is decentralized (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2016).

Compulsory schooling is guaranteed to all students up to 16 years of age and no student repeats the same school grade twice: the basic school's license diploma is therefore guaranteed to all students. Of all young students, 98% enroll in upper secondary education (Markussen, Frøseth, and Sandberg 2011), more or less equally distributed between general studies and vocational education (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2016). Admission to tertiary studies is not open, but rather conditioned upon the possession of requirements acquired during upper secondary school; in lack of such requirements, it is possible to undertake additional studies or to benefit from the acceptance of prior work experience as a qualification criterion. Information material with general indications are not to be found, as universities are autonomous institu-

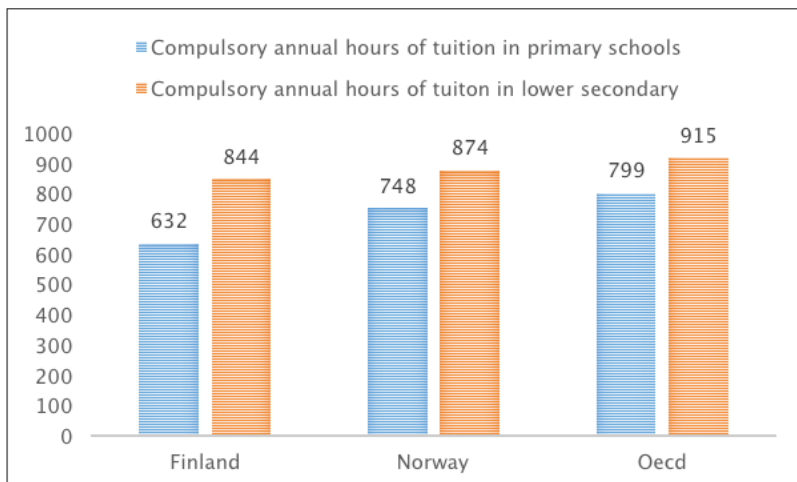
tions with their own regulations. Each institute sets out its own criteria for admission.

The school structure in Finland is very similar, with some differences: for example, children start first grade at 7 and the normal compulsory schooling period is 9 years. Grade repetition is not forbidden, but there is very limited use of this provision and only if agreed with the students and their families (Halinen 2008).

It is possible to extend compulsory schooling by one year for students who do not feel ready for upper secondary education or for foreign students in need of extra support (Basic Education Act 1998).

What generally arouses more curiosity among foreign observers (Robert 2009; Butler 2016) are a number of features that these two countries share in their school organization and teaching methodology. First, the school days are very short, especially in the early years of primary school, where there are rarely more than 4 hours of school attendance. Lessons are interrupted every 40-90 minutes, depending on schools and the age of the students, to allow all children to go out in the schoolyard and regain more easily their concentration after a 15-minute break. For the mid-morning meal, a longer break of about 30-40 minutes is foreseen. Considerable attention is given to school subjects that involve the use of creativity such as music, art, manipulative activities, and to disciplines that raise environmental awareness. There are many outdoor activities, regardless of the weather. As already mentioned in Norway, students never experience grade repetition and in Finland, only in rare circumstances. Grades have an essentially encouraging function and, in Norway, they are not used in mainstream teaching until the beginning of lower secondary school.

The amount of hours children are expected to spend on homework is limited compared to other European countries and the OECD average (2015).



Source: OECD 2015

Fig. 1 - Compulsory annual hours of tuition in primary and lower secondary schools.

Finnish students are not subject to any standardized national tests or examinations until their Matriculation. The same was true in Norway before the 2006 Kunnskapsløftet³ school reform, which introduced a national tracking system of student achievement in basic school, through a set of standardized tests.

What is the purpose of education?

«The purpose of education [...] is to support pupils' growth into humanity and into ethically responsible membership of society and to provide them with knowledge and skills needed in life. Furthermore, the aim of pre-primary education, as part of early childhood education, is to improve children's capacity for learning. Education shall promote civilization and equality in society and pupils' prerequisites for participating in education and otherwise developing themselves during their lives. The aim of education shall further be to secure adequate equity in education throughout the country» (Basic Education Act, 1998, sec. 2).

«Education and training shall be based on fundamental values in Christian and humanist heritage and traditions, such as respect for human dignity and nature, on intellectual freedom, charity, forgiveness, equality and solidarity, values that also appear in different religions and beliefs and are rooted in human rights.

Education and training shall help increase the knowledge and understanding of the national cultural heritage and our common international cultural traditions.

Education and training shall provide insight into cultural diversity and show respect for the individual's convictions. They are to promote democracy, equality and scientific thinking.

The pupils and apprentices shall develop knowledge, skills and attitudes so that they can master their lives and can take part in working life and society. They shall have the opportunity to be creative, committed and inquisitive.

The pupils and apprentices shall learn to think critically and act ethically and with environmental awareness. They shall have joint responsibility and the right to participate» (Education Act, 1998, sec. 2.3).

The first citation is from the Finnish Basic Education Act of 1998. It is worth noting the importance given to the word "equity", which is repeated twice in just a few lines. The same can be said about the second quotation, which is taken from the Norwegian Education Act of the same year.

Moving from legislation to implementation, we must ask, how can equity, participation, learning and human development and knowledge be provided in school?

Norway puts great emphasis on the concept of the equal right to participation and adapts education to each student's needs. Finland, on the other hand, focuses on the quality of learning and on early intervention to help students improve their ability to

³ The Knowledge promotion.

learn: the quality of outcomes is seen as a guarantee for the economic growth of the country (Simola 2005). According to Hausstätter and Sarromaa (2008a), the school is a means to achieve the development of national human capital in order to secure the future of the nation. In other words, school is to a large extent a means for the development of the state and national unity and, to a lesser extent, an offer of services to the individual, while in Norway free, equal and inclusive access to collective participation and social equality has historically been considered a priority: an objective that the welfare state has tried to achieve also through the educational system (Skarpenes and Saksliind 2010). Starting in the 1920s, the establishment of a common school for all became a guiding principle (Halvorsrud 2017). For this reason, acquisition of competences seems to be less of a priority than the collective possibility of participation and social equality. The government-funded global educational system reflects, perhaps more clearly, the influence received by the Nordic welfare model by avoiding selecting, tracking and labeling students during their years in education (Markussen et al. 2010).

The feature that has most highlighted the different interpretations of equity in school policies over the past 40 years has been the strategy with which these two countries have relied on special education.

Special Education

From the end of the 1970s, there has been a shift in Norway from segregated schooling in special schools or special classes to inclusive education for disadvantaged children. That is to say, every child in compulsory school age was entitled to attend the neighborhood school (Hausstätter and Thuen 2014) and no longer to be grouped according to their pathology so as to be placed in a specialized context that most of the time was not really suitable for the educational task it was intended to be fulfill. The inclusion of all students in regular classes had not been programmed with a clear framework and unfortunately, when special schools and special classes were suppressed, the term “inclusion” often meant merely a strategy for organizing special education differently (Halinen 2008).

Moreover, there was no adequate preparation to face this challenge and the new government provisions seemed, more than anything, to create a condition in which schoolchildren were only physically in a new context without actually benefiting from the educational opportunities offered (Haug 2014). This was also due to a lack of teacher training which, until 1961, did not have any kind of preparatory program providing the knowledge necessary to support students with disabilities. Until then, teachers basically proceed by trial and error and by exchanging good practices between colleagues (Hausstätter and Thuen 2014).

With the most recent reform, the Education Act aims to adapt education to the student's needs (Education Act 1998): only students who are unable to benefit from ordinary education will be guaranteed special education, regardless of their disabili-

ties, social disadvantage or behavioral difficulties. This opens the door to two possible interpretations when special education is provided: 1) the school is not up to the task and therefore does not guarantee equity to its students, 2) the student is too difficult to be integrated. In both cases a failure of inclusion occurs and the student bears the burden of isolation.

A Norwegian student in need for school support must submit a specific request to this effect, undergo specialist examinations in order to confirm the actual requirements and to authorize the school to provide the special education additional service (Education Act 1998). In case the school notifies the student and his or her family of a learning difficulty and suggests that special education may be a solution, the latter must agree, and may oppose the school's request (Haug 2014). Generally, there is a time delay both in the identification of school difficulties and in the subsequent diagnosis. Teachers usually prefer to "wait and see" (Tveit 2013) and in addition, the time elapsing between the activation of the request procedure and the actual provision of the support service can take months.

This exposes students to waiting times that leave them in a situation of difficulties (Skrtic 1991) and creates a situation of delay in intervention that can, sometimes, further intensify the initial problem, especially behavioral problems caused by frustration due to school difficulties (Frostad, Pijl, and Mjaavatn 2015; Haug 2014). Moreover, having a proved disadvantage does not automatically lead to a form of intervention by the school; in fact only 78% of the students followed by the counselling service are included in a special education program. It should be added that the analysis of school difficulties does not focus only on the students but also takes into account the effectiveness of the teacher's work (Haug 2014), so essentially also teachers are evaluated.

In Norway there are no standardized remedial strategies, but each student who is identified as having an educational disadvantage must obtain an Individualized Education Plan. According to Haug (2014), there is little attention given to the training of special education staff who are often unskilled assistants (Flem and Keller 2000). Probably the scarce attention to the training of specialized teachers is because in 2004 the Government released a White Paper (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2004) that basically asked for a further reduction of the measures that distinguished students by assigning them to minority groups, including special education. Nonetheless, the rate of 5.5% of children taken on as students with special needs that year increased to about 8.2% in 2011-12. This was because of two reasons: the first is due to the strong pressure on schools as a result of the negative results of the OECD's PISA test, and the strong demand to raise the level of students' skills. The second is the difficulty for teachers to implement the strategy of adapted education: in this perspective special education, according to Haug (2014), is also a form of support for teachers, a form of co-teaching.

According to information disseminated by the Utdanningsdirektoratet⁴ (2016), recourse to special education has declined compared to 2011, going from about 52,000 students to just over 50,000, which represents 8% of the school population in the

⁴ Education agency.

mandatory age⁵. For about half of these students the intervention consists of 7 or more hours of weekly support. The proportion of SEN⁶ students increases during the years of compulsory schooling: in the first class of primary school they are 3.8% and in tenth grade they represent 10.6% of all students. The ministry justifies this trend by hypothesizing that students are not ready to deal with school demands, which intensify with the years. The proportion of students receiving the necessary support in mainstream classes is increasing: 35% of SEN students in 2015-16, 7% higher than in the school year 2013-14. The remaining 65% of SEN students receive support either individually or in small groups. About 4000 students attend special schools or schools with a permanent section dedicated to special needs. In addition, around 1,700 students attend an alternative learning environment one or more times a week, including practical work activities (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2016).

It may seem provocative, but adapted education, in some cases, exacerbates the very feeling of segregation that it aspires to work against, both because to benefit from special education it is necessary to go through a number of steps that expose the student to medical processes and because it highlights even more the student's difficulties of being in an ordinary context and the school's inability to address the student's needs. In any case it is, above all, the student who bears the burden of failure. This seems not to be the case in Finnish schools, where about a third of students benefit from some form of special education (Halinen 2008; Hausstätter and Sarromaa 2008b).

In Finland, in addition to special schools for blind, deaf and socially disadvantaged children, a tradition of theoretical studies on cognitive and behavioral disabilities was established at the beginning of the 20th century (Hausstätter and Sarromaa 2008b) and since 1948 further training schools for special education teachers have been developed (Takala and Hausstätter 2012). Although the concept of integration, inclusive schooling and equity is also of primary importance for Finnish education policies, the way to achieve this goal is very different from the Norwegian one: in Finland 31% of all students receive special education. Support is given to students in two ways: part time or full time special education.

The forms of special education are distinguished according to specific needs and do not imply the identification or presence of a diagnosed learning impairment or disability (Takala 2007; Takala and Ahl 2014). As soon as the teacher has the perception that a student has fallen behind, special part time education can be provided, which is a temporary form of remedial education to which everyone is entitled (Basic Education Act 1998). The teacher is responsible for recognizing the difficulties of their students and decides independently, without asking the school or the family for permission, to intervene with the measures considered appropriate (Halinen 2008; Takala, Pirttimaa, and Törmänen 2009). Generally, the session lasts from 4 to 10 weeks, the support is provided by the class teacher in small groups or individually,

⁵ Statistisk sentralbyrå <<http://www.ssb.no/en>> (Accessed 18.06.2017).

⁶ Special Educational Needs

a few hours a week, before or after the regular school hours depending on the organization of students and teachers. Alternatively, the teacher can give extra support during normal class activity, when other students are involved in independent group or individual work, freeing the teacher to concentrate more on those in need. Additional support is provided by the teacher's assistant, who is generally a secondary school graduate specialized in school support but lacking the necessary qualification for ordinary teaching. As an assistant does not carry out autonomous programs but follows the instructions of the class teacher. His or her task is to sit alongside students in need during the ordinary day and follow their progress or difficulties more closely.

If none of these provisions are sufficient to get the student back on track, the intervention of the special education teacher is requested. This is a teacher who has the ordinary qualifications for teaching with an additional year of specialization for dealing with learning difficulties. In the case of severe disabilities or specific serious disorders, a team of specialists is obviously involved, and an individualized diagnosis and an educational plan are made (Grubb 2007).

The total number of students who benefit from part-time school support is distributed in this way: 2% in kindergarten, 74% in primary school and 24% in secondary school. The emphasis is therefore on early intervention, which is generally more frequent in the first two classes of primary school, especially with regard to interventions for verbal expression and reading and writing difficulties.

According to Kivirauma and Ruoho (2007), in Finland the fundamental meaning of inclusion is the right to learn. This right is guaranteed in two ways: the first is to ensure full-time special education, the second is to guarantee part-time special education, which is the integrated solution to guarantee the right to learn to all students. From a Finnish perspective, therefore, part-time special education is an important part of the inclusive strategy implemented by educational policies (Hausstätter and Takala 2011).

Since the mid-1970s Norway has been emphasizing the goal of school inclusion through the suppression of all forms of separation between students and the sharing of mainstream education (Haug 1999). This is why very little use is made of special full-time education in compulsory education, offering this type of support only to students with severe cognitive disabilities or with serious social or behavioral impairments. The reason for limiting the use of this type of intervention is both because of egalitarian ideals (Repstad 2005) and because of the value given to some studies on the results obtained by SEN students in inclusive contexts and in specific separate contexts (Markussen 2004). According to Markussen (2004), students with special needs who have attended ordinary classes perform better at school and are more likely to continue their studies. Norwegian educational policies, therefore, follow the idea that there is a strong link between school achievement and social acceptance. For this reason, the same skepticism that is addressed to full-time special education also extends to part-time special education, on the belief that even with this type of support students would be marginalized and excluded.

Tab. 2 - Comprehensive school pupils receiving part-time special education in the academic year 2008-2009 by primary reason for special education.

Primary reason for part-time special	Pre-primary education	Year-classes	Year-classes	Additional education	Total	Boys	Girls
		1-6	7-9				
Speech disorder	1 509	14 800	134	–	16 443	10 288	6 155
Reading or writing disorder	589	48 453	3 552	14	52 608	34 364	18 244
Learning difficulty in mathematics	74	19 074	10 631	26	29 805	13 608	16 197
Learning difficulty in foreign languages	6	2 545	9 373	12	11 936	7 001	4 935
Difficulties in adjustment or emotional disorder	100	3 020	3 717	2	6 839	5 264	1 575
Other learning difficulties	384	5 136	4 730	8	10 258	6 635	3 623
Total	2 662	93 028	32 137	62	127 889	77 160	50 729
Compared with number of pupils in comprehensive school, %	20,3	26,5	16,4	4,8	22,8	26,9	18,5

Source: Statistics Finland 2018

As mentioned above, in 2004 the problem was perceived to such an extent that the abolition of special education was proposed, precisely because of the tendency it showed to isolate and marginalize students. The alternative to special education is adapted education, whereby the teacher provides each student with education adapted to individual needs but that also respects the general curriculum (Education

Act 1998). In this perspective, interventions provided outside the ordinary classroom context are perceived as a failure of both the school and the teacher, as special education is seen as an external element to the educational context, in other words not as an integrated system or as a part of ordinary education. Applying the same consideration criterion to the Finnish school system, it would seem to perform very badly, if 30% of all students need extra support. Yet we know that this is not the case (Hausstätter and Takala 2011). For example, we know from the statistics (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2017) that 27% of students enrolling in upper secondary school in Norway, fail to complete their studies in a period of 5 years, where the regular study program lasts 3 or 4 years depending on the path chosen (Halvorsrud 2017). So probably Norway's inclusive school has the same number of students in hardship as does Finland, but it does not provide them the same level of support. The problem seems to be represented, above all, by the definition of "special education" and the idea that being considered a disadvantaged person would lead the student out of a normal model, creating a sense of inequality and isolation (Florian 2010).

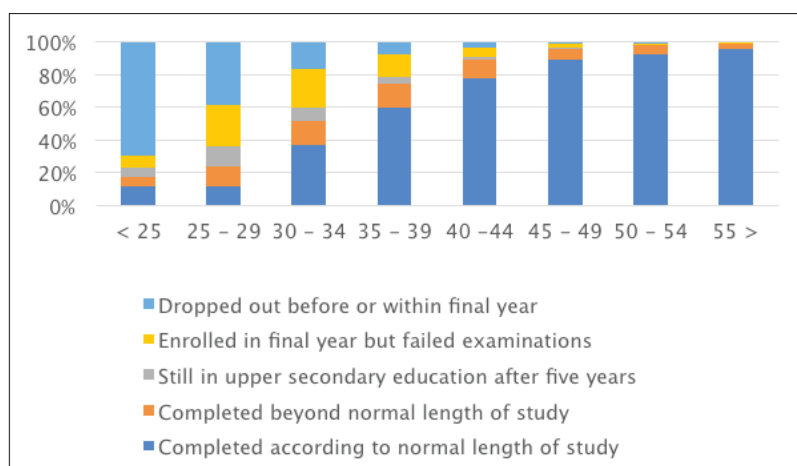
Upper secondary school dropout

The compulsory schooling ends both in Norway and in Finland with a matriculation exam⁷ evaluated by an external board. In Norway, a final mark corresponding to the arithmetic mean of the marks obtained in all subjects, multiplied by ten, is assigned: the highest mark being 6, the final score cannot exceed 60 points. As already outlined, compulsory schooling does not impose any constraints or obstacles on students and a school leaving certificate is guaranteed to all, after 10 years of school, regardless of the skills acquired and the final assessment. It is therefore possible to leave school with an insufficient evaluation, i.e. less than 30 points⁸. However, depending on the institution, a higher exit mark is required for upper secondary schools, with a higher barrier in the most requested schools⁹. Many vocational schools enroll even students with minimal grades (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2016). Of all students who completed lower secondary school in the summer of 2014, 98% enrolled in upper secondary school the same year. Of these, 49% chose to enroll in the track of general studies and the remaining 51% in a vocational training track (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2016). As can easily be inferred from the premise, vocational schools are more frequently chosen by students who have completed basic school with a negative evaluation or in any case an evaluation that is not sufficient for them to accede to other educational offers. Students enrolled in vocational and training are more likely to graduate from school beyond the regular deadline, to drop out of education before starting their apprenticeship, not to pass the final exam and thus leave without a professional qualification.

⁷ For Finnish students it is the first standardized national exam they meet in their school career.

⁸ The maximum score is 60 and 30 is the sufficiency.

⁹ <https://www.oslo.kommune.no/skole-og-utdanning/videregaende-skole/poenggren-ser-videregaende-skoler/> (Accessed 21.02.2018).



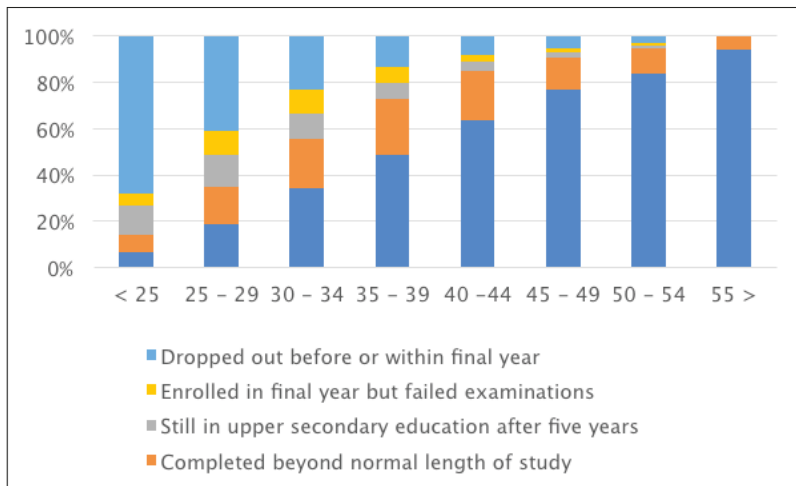
Source: Statistisk Sentralbyrå [2016]

Fig. 2 - Correlation between final grades in 10th grade and early school leaving in general studies.

According to many authors (Halvorsrud 2017; Tveit 2013; Utdanningsdirektoratet 2016) early leaving and delays in school completion, in upper secondary, are related to the final evaluation from lower secondary. In fact, in both tracks of upper secondary school, students who have started school with a high level of preparation are more likely to finish their studies successfully than those who had an insufficient mark. The two graphs show that, in both fields of study, students who started with a score of less than 25 or between 25 and 29, are unlikely to finish upper secondary studies, with a higher frequency in vocational and training than in general studies. Those who had an assessment of more than 50 points at the end of lower secondary education, in more than 90% of cases completed upper secondary education either within the regular time-frame or at most two years beyond. In fact, only 58.9% of all students graduate in three or four years, more than 13% finish with a delay, more than 15% leave school and the remaining 12% are still at school after 5 years from first enrollment or have completed their studies without passing the final exam successfully.

All this obviously has a cost, not only for the school system but also for society as a whole. People who do not complete upper secondary education will have less favorable job prospects than those with a professional qualification or diploma. On average they have lower economic incomes, are more exposed to unemployment, and rely more frequently on social welfare. In addition, there is a strong correlation between early school leaving, social exclusion, poverty and crime (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2012). This situation is not reflected in equivalent statistics on drop-outs from Finnish upper secondary schools (Rinne and Järvinen 2011) where early school leaving decreased from 9 % in 2009 to 2 % in 2015¹⁰.

¹⁰ Drop-out from general upper secondary education in Finland is very low. In 2015 only 2 per cent of the



Source: Statistisk Sentralbyrå [2016]

Fig. 3 - Correlation between final grades in 10th grade and early school leaving in vocational education.

It could be assumed that the Finnish educational system prevention policy, based on early intervention with special education, is successful. However, it is difficult to isolate one element from another and see which is really the most effective. Among the features highlighted by the peer-reviewed publications to explain the success of the Finnish educational system is teachers' highly specialized skills: a highly sought-after profession, which requires a high level of qualification, five-year university degree to which only 10% of aspiring teachers are able to gain access, a highly respected role in society, well paid, with a good degree of professional autonomy (Hausstätter and Sarrmaa 2008a; Grubb 2007; Halinen 2008; Simola 2005; Sahlberg 2007). This is not the case in Norway, where teachers are often described as poorly prepared (Tveit 2014) for the challenges faced by the school and with sometimes insufficient training (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2016). I will not dwell any further on teacher training in Norway because a reform has just been approved which also adopts a curriculum similar to the Finnish one and it will be interesting to follow its development in the coming years.

Another key element that Sahlberg (2015) points out as strategic for the success of upper secondary education in Finland is the counseling service that is made available to students for two hours a week during the three years of lower secondary school. Again, therefore, it seems that the strategy is to prevent difficulties rather than to remedy them once they have already occurred.

students interrupted their studies. Drop-out is more common among students whose mother tongue is not Finnish or Swedish, 6.5 per cent. The trend is, however, positive. In 2009 the drop-out rate was 9 per cent. Source: Finnish National Agency for Education <https://www.oph.fi/english>

In Norway, a specific program, *Oppfølgingstjenesten*¹¹, has been introduced since 2010 to support pupils at risk of dropping out of school and young people who have left education without entering the labor market (NEET). The schools themselves report the students, who fit into the profile, to the service throughout the school year (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2012). The service must support young people in finding a job or support them in completing their studies and in 59% of the cases followed in 2013-2014 it succeeded in one of these two initiatives. If we analyze the data on NEETs, we see that in Norway the age group of 15-19 years old corresponds to a 2.8% of share. Even in the 25-29 age group, which is the most critical, we find a proportion of 10% which is in any case lower than the EU average of 16%.

Research on the subject suggest that there is not enough evidence to state which is the most appropriate measure to remedy the high drop-out rate. According to Markussen (2008,10,11) there are 4 elements that could be of great help:

- 1) Introduce or strengthen counselling and career guidance measures before starting upper secondary school, to ensure that students are prepared for the occupational opportunities that school choice offers and the commitment that the curriculum requires.

- 2) Reintroduce more hours of practical work into VET. These had been removed with Reform 94¹² and replaced with subjects that provided a greater theoretical background, to standardize more the professional school and general studies, with the intention of overcoming the historical distinction between practical school and intellectual school.

- 3) Widen the use of special education for young people at risk;

- 4) Promoting reforms and global policy measures.

The first provision suggested concerns counselling services, since those who are not accepted into the school of preference or do not choose the most suitable education path correctly, are more likely to leave school early. This service, as we have seen, is guaranteed in the Finnish lower secondary school (Sahlberg 2015).

The third suggestion, which is again based on the Finnish school system, is that greater use of the resources offered by special education would be an extremely valuable tool if it were used as a preventive approach, with an emphasis on early intervention rather than as a last resort at the end of the school career. But, as highlighted by Markussen, Frøseth, and Sandberg (2011), Norway is reluctant to deploy the resources of special education because it considers it a discriminatory intervention that undermines the principle of equality, even if:

“When we see the importance of the students’ performance from compulsory education for their achievements in upper secondary education, it is of the utmost importance that early intervention is put on the agenda to a much greater extent, in order to improve the compulsory education performance for a large number of students.” (p. 241)

¹¹ Follow-up service.

¹² Reform of upper secondary education made in 1994.

Discussion

According to Lauglo (1995), the Norwegian educational system is open and highly inclusive, and not a hierarchical structure. In the twentieth century the development of State schools -*enhets-skolen*¹³- was intended as a project aimed at the community, the goal of mass socialization, which influenced both the content of curricula and access to school policies. From a structural point of view, admission to school has been democratized at the higher level, following the social-democratic principle of providing more education for a larger proportion of citizens. To do this, the government's educational policy has changed and lowered academic ambitions in the Norwegian school curriculum.

Again, according to Lauglo, who generalizes what is stated in section 1.1 of the Education Act of 1998¹⁴, educational ideals are based on the values of altruism, family life, popular culture and community life. These spheres were extremely important for the upbringing of young people, while there was a certain skepticism towards purely academic and cultural values because too much theory would lead to a practical inability. Other learning environments such as work, home and community life were also, if not more, considered important. The attribution of great value to practical manual activities, survival training in nature and early approach to the work dimension is well expressed and still very relevant in the basic school curricula¹⁵. According to the opinion expressed by Skarpenes and Sakslind (2010) in a study dedicated to the perception of the Norwegian middle class, about its social status and the value of its education:

“One main purpose of the social-democratic era was to realize equal opportunities and develop solidarity [...] Values and norms such as solidarity, equality, honesty, democratic attitudes, local cultural and political orientation, altruism, morality, ordinariness, and sometimes also anti-academic attitudes, all seem to be important in Norwegian society. Such values are culturally embedded and mobilised in public discussions, they influence school structures and curricula, and they have, apparently, been internalized in the middle class.” (Skarpenes and Sakslind, 2010, p. 228)

¹³ Comprehensive school.

¹⁴ Education and training in schools and training establishments shall, in collaboration and agreement with the home, open doors to the world and give the pupils and apprentices historical and cultural insight and anchorage. Education and training shall be based on fundamental values in Christian and humanist heritage and traditions, such as respect for human dignity and nature, on intellectual freedom, charity, forgiveness, equality and solidarity, values that also appear in different religions and beliefs and are rooted in human rights. Education and training shall help increase the knowledge and understanding of the national cultural heritage and our common international cultural traditions. Education and training shall provide insight into cultural diversity and show respect for the individual's convictions. They are to promote democracy, equality and scientific thinking. The pupils and apprentices shall develop knowledge, skills and attitudes so that they can master their lives and can take part in working life and society. They shall have the opportunity to be creative, committed and inquisitive. The pupils and apprentices shall learn to think critically and act ethically and with environmental awareness. They shall have joint responsibility and the right to participate. Schools and training establishments shall meet the pupils and apprentices with trust, respect and demands, and give them challenges that promote formation and the desire to learn. All forms of discrimination shall be combated.

¹⁵ <https://www.udir.no/laring-og-trivsel/lareplanverket/> (Accessed 26/07/2018).

One aspect of the Scandinavian welfare model that is more common in Norway than in other Nordic countries is the low wage differentiation between social classes. The well-educated middle class in Norway receives the lowest financial reward in proportion to their years of study. It is a specific government policy to keep wage differentials as low as possible.

75% of the middle-class professionals interviewed by Skarpenes and Saksliind states that their salary is fair. The answers to the same interviews also highlight a certain widespread unease to be qualified by using qualifications or professional attributions that underline a high social or occupational status.

The value of egalitarianism – *likhet*¹⁶, in Norwegian - which has long been considered an unquestioned cultural value, is beginning to raise some doubts. Social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad (2002) believes that the cultural heritage of egalitarianism should be safeguarded, especially when considering the positive effects, it has had in keeping economic, political and social inequalities at very low levels. At the same time, she believes that the *likhet* feeling leads to forms of skepticism and stiffening towards what is new and what is different. The perception is that society is moving from an ideal of equality to an ideal of cultural homogeneity (Repstad 2005). In Norway equal opportunities and treatment are very important in social policies, for example, the benefits granted by the welfare state should be equally distributed to all beneficiaries without distinction of income. An example of this is the family allowance, which has a fixed amount based on the number of children and not on the parents' employment. This is because unequal distribution of resources would be seen as an injustice that would lead to a loss of confidence in the system itself.

The question, however, is whether the system also allows for equal results. The reforms of the educational system in Norway have mainly contributed to the creation of schools for all, with the assumption of granting everyone the same opportunities, in a perspective of democratic development. This objective, as we have seen, has led to the adoption of inclusive strategies such as the absence of a formal evaluation system in primary school and the right to enter upper secondary school even after leaving compulsory school with inadequate preparation and insufficient final evaluation.

Looking at the situation in Finland, we have seen that their educational system is also oriented towards “a school for all”, except that, unlike Norway, the aim is not only to guarantee everyone the right to participate, but also the right to high outcomes. The OECD data (2016) show a very small difference between schools, which is in any case less than the differences in attainment within schools. This indicates homogeneity on Finnish territory: in other words, the inclusive school has proved to be effective in offering its students the opportunity to learn.

As has been highlighted above, special education in the Finnish educational system is used as a support for students who lag behind. Its employment therefore has the very purpose of helping students to learn. This support, which is partly provided in separate classes, is increasingly being transferred to regular classes as provided for by

¹⁶ Literally it means both sameness and equality.

the new 2010 amendments (Basic Education Act 1998). In Norway, cultural tradition leads to the avoidance of special education because it is considered an organizational approach that reduces student participation. Special education is not considered as a best practice (Hausstätter & Thuen, 2014).

Trying to understand what has oriented these two countries in such different directions, first of all, it must be said, that despite having similar cultures, many conceptual and ideological differences lead them to interpret and employ special education in different ways. To comprehend this, it is necessary to see the historical journey that has been made in each country: in Finland the school is seen as the means to achieve success as a nation, while Norway has made it a vehicle of transmission and diffusion of cultural identity values (Telhaug 2003). A second point is the different interpretation that Finland and Norway have of the concept of inclusion and special education. From the Finnish perspective, using part-time special education in common schools and full-time special education in special classes is part of a global inclusive strategy (Halinen 2008).

In Norway, the perspective reverses and special education is seen in the opposite terms, as an obstacle to inclusion (Hausstätter and Takala 2008). Consequently, one can sense the different attitudes and procedures applied by these two countries in relation to inclusive policies, which differ with respect to the final purposes: for Finland the right to learn and for Norway the right to participate (Hausstätter 2011; Takala and Hausstätter 2012). The relatively weak results achieved by Norway in the PISA tests (OECD 2002, 2012, 2017) could suggest that in Norwegian schools, despite the strong focus on inclusion, there is still a long way to go to really creating an effective school for all. All the emphasis on “adapted” education has made it difficult to determine whether students actually benefit from ordinary instruction. According to Hausstätter and colleagues, the debate on the concept of inclusion in Norway resembles Low’s definition of “stupid inclusivism” (1997)¹⁷ and that refers once again to the culture of egalitarianism: in order not to discriminate anyone, differences are denied. It may happen, however, that by changing definitions, changing the name of needs, they may be forgotten. So, wrote Low, in an article in 1997:

“Some disabled people are obviously capable of a high degree of independence notwithstanding their disability. But others are clearly not, or not straight away, without some sort of help or rehabilitation. It seems unfair to deny assistance to some for the sake of the independence of others” (p. 77).

In the end, it is important to remember that: “Equality of results requires inequality of resources” (Markussen, Frøseth, and Sandberg, 2011, p. 243).

¹⁷ Stupid inclusivists recognize the need for special provision. They just don’t like calling it such. In particular, they object to the word ‘special’. I can see no merit in this. It proceeds from an expressive aversion to labelling and differentiation and a modish obsession with terminology which puts form entirely before substance (Low 1997).

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