

Administrators' views on supporting newly arrived students in Finland

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Abstract

This study examines Finnish municipal-level administrators' (N = 4) insights on organizing and administering education for newly arrived students. The data were gathered through interviews and analyzed using thematic content analysis. All the municipalities where the participants worked had good practices for preparatory education for newly arrived students. However, variations in these practices indicate that more coherent national guidelines are needed. Post-preparatory education practices were less developed. Overall, there are some effective practices related to organizing and administering education for newly arrived students in Finland, which could be implemented internationally; however, further practices need to be developed to promote educational and social justice for all students.

Keywords: *newly arrived immigrants, immigrant students, preparatory education, administrators, educational support*

1 Introduction

Schools play an important role in newly arrived immigrant youths' integration into society. In larger cities in Finland, practices related to organizing education for newly arrived students have been developing since the early 1990s (Pulkkinen et al., 2024); however, smaller municipalities have recently started to receive more immigrant students. This study examines municipal-level administrators' insights into organizing and administering education for *newly arrived students* – those who recently (within less than a year) moved to Finland from another country (see also Bunar, 2010). We do not categorize students based on their status as immigrant, refugee, or asylum seeker, and we acknowledge that this group is heterogeneous. However, all newly arrived students experience intersecting vulnerabilities that call for special arrangements in education.

There is extensive literature on educational models and strategies that support immigrant students (Erling et al., 2023; Moinolnolki & Han, 2017; Smythe, 2020). Recent studies, both international (Erling et al., 2023; Smythe, 2020) and from Finland (Harju-Autti & Mäkinen, 2022), have shown that educational support models should practice inclusive approaches and foster students' holistic development, including the development of their first languages (L1s; see, e.g., Cummins, 2021). In Finland, the organization of education for newly arrived students is guided by national guidelines and local decision-making. Municipal administrators are central to the process, yet little is known about their perspectives regarding what works or needs development (Mustonen et al., 2023).

We analyzed interviews with four school administrators working in four large municipalities in Finland, each of which has a long tradition of organizing and administering education for newly arrived students. This study was guided by the following research question: How do administrators in the four large municipalities in Finland describe the organization and administration of education for newly arrived students? How the principles of culturally and linguistically responsive education and the national guidelines for organizing education for newly arrived students are met in the administrators' practices is also discussed.

2 Culturally and linguistically responsive practices

The overall aim of culturally and linguistically responsive practices is to counter inequality in schools, foster pluralism, and empower minoritized students (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Paris & Alim, 2014). Diverse backgrounds are seen as assets (Cummins, 2021; Nieto & Bode, 2012), and newly arrived students are met with respect and affirmation to support their well-being and learning (Benediktsson et al., 2019; Cummins, 2021). Students' knowledge, skills, and linguistic resources are acknowledged and legitimized, which can optimize their opportunities for learning both the language of schooling and other subjects (Gay, 2013; Lucas & Villegas, 2011). Moreover, L1s are considered assets for learning. Disregarding students' L1s can hinder their identity development (Cummins, 2021; Hu, 2022), whereas supporting multilingualism is positively related to various cognitive outcomes (Adesope et al., 2010). Many studies have shown that a strong knowledge of one's L1 supports the learning of other languages and school subjects (Cummins, 2007; Ganuza & Hedman, 2018; Ovando & Combs, 2011; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). Thus, it is important that newly arrived students continue to develop their L1s.

Supporting culturally and linguistically diverse identities allows newly arrived immigrants to bond with both the new society and their culture of origin (Kindler, 2015; Kokkonen et al., 2019; Portes et al., 2009). Furthermore, a school culture that values all students' identities is crucial for their well-being and learning (Cummins, 2021). Those

who organize education for newly arrived students must commit to social justice and equity (see also Aronson & Laughter, 2016), critically reflecting on power structures and actively working to remove barriers hindering students' participation in school and society (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Mikander et al., 2018; Nieto & Bode, 2012) to organize education that challenges structural inequalities, empowers students from all backgrounds, and increases overall equity (Mikander et al., 2018).

It is also essential to support learning the language of schooling (Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Schleppegrell, 2012). Teachers must possess knowledge of language learning processes (Ellis, 2008) and the role language plays in all learning (Coady et al., 2011). Moreover, teachers must be adept at using language pedagogically and supporting language learners during content lessons (Lucas & Villegas, 2011). Language development is individual and influenced by various factors (Ellis, 2008); thus, learners require different kinds of support. Teachers' understanding of language levels and developmental differences (Ellis, 2008) helps them provide learners with meaningful affordances for learning (van Lier, 2000), and their awareness of language's impact on learning positively affects student outcomes (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2012).

Social interaction is also crucial (Lucas et al., 2008; Teemant, 2018). Authentic social interactions support language learning (van Lier, 2000) and are essential for integrating learners into their new home countries, local communities, and preparatory education (henceforth prep-ed) classes. However, alongside relationships with majority students (Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2018), ethnic groups are important social networks that support immigrant students' success (Portes et al., 2009). Indeed, a positive orientation toward both the co-ethnic and the majority group can foster immigrant students' well-being and integration (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013).

To support students' sense of belonging to their community and building of social capital (see, e.g., Laurentsyeva & Venturini, 2017), prep-ed should be organized in connection with general basic education (Riekkinen & Bahdanovich Hanssen, 2022). This can be done partly by integrating newly arrived students into mainstream education and placing them in schools close to where they live – however, no general guidelines support these processes in Finland (Venäläinen et al., 2022). Social and educational integration also support students' possibilities for employment later in life (Fratzke et al., 2021). Thus, students' inclusion is at least as important as teaching them the language of instruction (Fandrem et al., 2021). However, studies comparing inclusive and segregated prep-ed have found that both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses (Tajic & Bunar, 2020). Therefore, further research on organizing prep-ed is needed.

3 Guidelines for educating newly arrived students in Finland

Newly arrived students in Finland are usually offered prep-ed in basic education (National Agency of Education [EDUFI], 2015). However, each municipality is responsible for its organization, and they are not obligated to offer prep-ed. Depending on grade level, prep-ed comprises 900 or 1000 hours, and participation does not necessarily begin at the start of the school year (EDUFI, 2015). The main focus is learning the language of instruction (Finnish or Swedish) and developing skills in age-appropriate school subjects. Participation in prep-ed has been found to vary (Alisaari et al., 2021; Tainio et al., 2019); not all students have access or want to attend. Nevertheless, prep-ed positively impacts the development of Finnish language skills, especially among students who moved to Finland shortly before the end of basic education (Kuukka & Metsämuuronen, 2016).

At the beginning of prep-ed, individual study plans are created (EDUFI, 2015). The study plan includes all the subjects a student studies and the mainstream classes into which they will be integrated. During prep-ed, students are sometimes offered lessons in their L1, but state funding for this is only available after a student has transitioned into mainstream education. However, in Finland everyone has the right to maintain and

develop their language and culture (Constitution of Finland 11.6.1999/731, Chapter 2, Section 17). Indeed, a good command of one's L1 supports one's identity and overall learning, as well as the development of multilingualism (EDUFI, 2014).

Finland implemented an inclusion-oriented, three-tiered, learning-and-schooling-support framework from 2011 to 2025 (Finlex, 2011, 2013; Harju-Autti & Mäkinen, 2022). This support concerned all students, also prep-ed students (Finlex, 2013). Tier 1, "general support," is universally available and addressed individual needs in everyday learning environments through, for example, differentiation, co-teaching, flexible groupings, and occasional remedial instruction or special education. Tier 2, "intensified support," built on Tier 1 but with increased emphasis on part-time special education; it was designed for students requiring consistent or multiple forms of assistance. Tier 3, "special support," was reserved for students with ongoing needs for specialized educational services (Paloniemi et al., 2023). In 2020, 12.2% of students in Finland received intensified support, while 9.0% received special support (Official Statistics of Finland, 2020). All students are entitled to the support they need, but how to support learning subject-specific content while developing language skills is not specified (Harju-Autti, 2022).

After prep-ed, newly arrived students transition into mainstream education. Some cities offer structured linguistic support, which combines language and subject-specific learning (Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2022; Tedick, 2005), or support for learning different subjects in students' L1s. Learning an academic language takes several years; simultaneously supporting language and content learning is particularly important when students are in the early stages of language learning (Cummins, 2021; Schleppegrell, 2012; Weddle et al., 2024). However, the availability and types of resources vary widely, and regional and school-specific differences mean that immigrant students are not given equal opportunities to succeed academically (Heikkilä & Yeasmin, 2017).

Research on administrators' views on organizing instruction for newly arrived students is scarce. Cameron et al. (2011) compared Norwegian and Swedish administrators' perspectives on educating children with special needs and found that strong emphasis was placed on official diagnosis as a requirement to receive support. The study suggested that school administrators might be less critical of their own role and perceive problems as being related to aspects beyond the educational system. The segregation of students was seen as acceptable and even necessary relatively often. Both the Norwegian and the Swedish administrators perceived national and local policy documents to be important in guiding instruction, but the Swedish administrators viewed international policy documents (e.g., the Salamanca Declaration and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) as more important than their Norwegian colleagues. These results are an interesting comparison to the Finnish context, as the school systems in these three countries are quite similar with regard to promoting educational inclusion.

School leaders (as opposed to administrators) are studied somewhat more often in relation to teaching newly arrived students. In a Swedish study, school leaders and department heads emphasized academic outcomes over social integration. Mapping and considering students' prior knowledge when placing them in schools and planning the pace of integration from prep-ed into mainstream classes were highlighted; however, strong segregatory practices did not support social inclusion (Lundberg, 2020). In an Estonian study, school leaders emphasized collaboration between teachers and among teachers and students' parents to support students' learning and social inclusion and bridge gaps between the curriculum and students' prior knowledge (Vanahans et al., 2024). However, a lack of culturally and linguistically responsive practices was mentioned, which can lead to "cultural blindness" and not seeing students' L1s as a resource. In contrast, a study from the U.S. found that school leaders near the Mexican border emphasized culturally responsive pedagogy and a commitment to combat deficit views related to newly arrived students (Crawford et al., 2018); these school leaders perceived collaboration with families as crucial for students' academic and social success.

4 Methods

The data of the current study included four 50–70-minute online interviews conducted in spring 2022. The interviewees worked in school offices in four large Finnish cities and were responsible for planning the education for newly arrived students. The selection criteria for the interviewees were the following: they worked in cities with long traditions of educating students with migratory backgrounds and that they had established prep-ed practices. Many smaller municipalities also organize prep-ed but do not always have a municipal coordinator. The capital region, which has somewhat unique practices in organizing prep-ed, was also omitted from the study.

The interviewees were emailed and asked whether they were interested in and willing to participate in the study. In the university where the study took place, ethical approval is not required when all participants are adults and consent to participate. The interviews, which were semi-structured and thematic, included the following questions: *How are newly arrived students and their families received when they arrive in the municipality? How is prep-ed organized? What guidelines exist for supporting students from crisis areas? Which practices work well?* In addition, some follow-up questions were asked. The interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The excerpts from the interviews were translated from Finnish into English.

The data were analyzed using theory-based thematic content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019). The analytical framework is based on theoretical understanding related to *supporting students' identities and learning* (Cummins, 2021; Lucas & Villegas, 2011), *the importance of peer relationships* (e.g. Laurentsyeva & Venturini, 2017), and *supporting L1 and L2 development* (Cummins, 2021; Lucas & Villegas, 2011). Author 1 read the responses to gain an initial understanding of the data and to identify categories for coding, which were discussed and finalized by Authors 1 and 2. More detailed categories were then identified. The two main categories that emerged were *practices during prep-ed* and *practices supporting the transition from prep-ed to basic education*. These and the theory-based categories were complemented with sub-categories that emerged from the data and aligned with both the theoretical framework and the guidelines for organizing prep-ed. The main categories and their subcategories are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Categories and subcategories*

Categories	Subcategories	Definition
<i>Practices during prep-ed</i>	<i>Individual study plans</i>	Creating individual study plans for prep-ed students
	<i>Integration</i>	Supporting peer relations in the neighborhood and socialization in basic education
	<i>Offering support for learning in prep-ed</i>	Different ways of supporting learning during prep-ed
	<i>Supporting L1 development</i>	Different ways of supporting L1 development during prep-ed
	<i>Group size</i>	Ideal sizes of prep-ed groups
	<i>Number of allocated hours</i>	Number of hours of prep-ed that is provided
<i>Practices supporting the transition from prep-ed to basic education</i>	<i>Transferring information</i>	Different ways of transferring information from prep-ed teachers to mainstream education teachers
	<i>Structured linguistic support</i>	Ways of offering linguistic support in mainstream education
	<i>Offering support for learning after prep-ed</i>	Different ways of supporting learning in mainstream education

The study has some limitations, which we will now evaluate. Although multiple municipalities organize prep-ed in Finland, only four administrators were interviewed,

impacting the generalizability of the results. Moreover, participants' views are not a direct measure of actual practices. The administrators were aware of our research interests and the fact that they were invited as experts to participate in research aiming to improve practice; thus, the positionalities of both the researchers and the participants were influenced, possibly impacting the things that the participants chose to share. However, experts represent a complex interdependence of knowledge and power; thus, the power relations between the participants and researchers were not necessarily imbalanced.

5 Findings and discussion

Here, the findings related to the research questions are presented. The section is divided into two main parts: organizing and administering education for newly arrived students *during* and *after* prep-ed. The participants are referred to as Administrator 1, 2, 3, and 4. The quotations were translated into English by the authors; some discussion particles (e.g., "like" or "um") have been omitted.

5.1 Practices during prep-ed

Individual study plans are required by the prep-ed curriculum (EDUFI, 2015). According to the interviewees, this requirement was followed with no exceptions, and the importance of learning newly arrived students' skills and knowledge to provide them with optimal education was emphasized (see also Lundberg, 2020).

The individual study plan required by the curriculum must be made within three months of a student entering school. It covers [...] school background, language skills (such as knowledge of L1 or knowledge of other languages), [...] learning difficulties [...], and hobbies to get to know the student better. This is discussed with the family and used to define what goals are to be achieved in different subjects during prep-ed. Administrator 1

All interviewees desired to support prep-ed students' educational and social **integration** by integrating them into mainstream classrooms, which has been shown to be crucial (Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2018; Laurentsyeve & Venturini, 2017; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013; Vanahans et al., 2024). According to Administrator 3, integration practices should be flexible, acknowledging each students' unique learning strategies and progress; for example, the number of mainstream classes in which a student participates can be increased if they learn Finnish quickly. However, contrary to the aims of the prep-ed curriculum (EDUFI, 2015), students' opportunities to participate in mainstream classes may be restricted by subject, teachers' unwillingness to welcome them, or limited resources:

[...] especially in lower secondary school, whether there is room for integrating prep-ed students depends on a group's size. I heard of one example where a prep-ed student was not able to participate in mainstream classes and therefore was not given grades in some subjects [at the end of basic education]. Administrator 3

This result aligns with earlier findings. Teachers sometimes perceive that prep-ed students' participation in mainstream classes disturbs other students (Tajic & Bunar, 2020), and a lack of collaboration and inadequate resources can challenge the academic integration of prep-ed students (Venäläinen et al., 2022). Teachers' reluctance may be due to (perceived) inadequate skills in supporting newly arrived students' learning (see Alisaari et al., 2022; Biasutti et al., 2019; Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Schleppegrell, 2012; Vanahans et al., 2013). Moreover, in the Nordic context, the segregation of students is often perceived as acceptable and even necessary (Cameron et al., 2011).

All participants emphasized that peer relationships are supported by placing newly arrived students in the school nearest to their neighborhood. However, the nearest schools may not be available:

Usually, we have 11 schools with preparatory groups, but now we have a few more. [...] these are in schools that usually have a lot of prep-ed students, so it's pretty well organized. Especially for students who enter school in the autumn, we're able to place them in the prep-ed group of the neighboring school. It's more difficult in winter and in spring, when the groups are full; you have to look where there's space. Students can have longer distances to school, but I don't know how many... At least more than half – maybe two-thirds, three-quarters – can access prep-ed in their local school. Administrator 4

I look at the bus route to see where you can get to directly. For example, there is a situation where Ukrainian pupils go from [place A] to [place B] because Bus [X] goes there [...] there's a prep-ed group in [place A's] kindergarten, [but] it's full, so then what's the easiest way to get [to another prep-ed]? Administrator 1

As the previous quote indicates, social integration was sometimes challenged due to the (distant) location of the prep-ed instruction. The administrator 1 checks the bus schedule to see which bus route goes to which school and places the students to prep-ed groups based on the bus routes, if the prep-ed groups of the neighboring school are full. However, the prep-ed should be organized in a way that does not segregate newly arrived students from their peers in the same neighborhood and does not increase the societal segregation, an argument presented also in previous studies (Bunar & Juvonen, 2022; Fandrem et al., 2021; Riekkinen & Bahdanovich Hanssen, 2022). Segregation between suburbs or municipalities is also a growing problem in Finland (Bernelius & Kosunen, 2023); therefore, aspects related to segregation require critical reflection.

There was no consensus among the participants regarding how to support students' social integration. Prep-ed classes are usually separate from other groups, and with young students (grades 1–2), prep-ed may be offered inclusively in basic education classes. One administrator supported inclusive prep-ed for young students because of the lack of resources in rural Finland. They gave an example of students needing to travel 70 km to the nearest school for prep-ed; thus, it was in their best interest to go to a school without a separate prep-ed group. The same administrator mentioned that teachers with experience in inclusive prep-ed were not convinced of its functionality, while another discussed a failed attempt to organize inclusive prep-ed for young students:

We had the experiment in [place X], but it was so unfunctional that we decided not to implement it in [the municipality]. Perhaps the biggest problem was group sizes. Classes should be quite small. [Also], with first grade students, everything went okay in the early autumn [...], but when more students arrived in November and December, things became a lot more difficult because the students' process of learning to read was at a different stage than for the newcomers. It was perceived as a difficult system. There were probably other factors. The experiment was, of course, monitored to see how it was implemented. Based on these experiences, we decided to continue with group modules. Administrator 4

Research has criticized offering prep-ed separately from general basic education (Riekkinen & Bahdanovich Hanssen, 2022), as segregated prep-ed delays students' social integration and negatively affects older students' opportunities upon entering the labor market (Fratzke et al., 2021). However, as the literature supports both inclusive and segregated prep-ed (Tajic & Bunar, 2020), more research on the matter is needed.

Offering support for learning in prep-ed was discussed thoroughly by the interviewees, especially the three-tiered support model and multi-professional support, which usually comprehends a team of different professionals, such as special education teachers, psychologists and/or social workers. All students are legally entitled to these services (Finlex, 2013). However, the administrators' perceptions concerning the legislation varied. Some believed that prep-ed students had the right to special support, whereas others did not. The interviewees suggested that decisions on the types of support offered are often made somewhat automatically, without proper evaluation or documentation:

[...] prep-ed students have their own study program. [...] we move in the opposite direction on the support stairs – we start with special support, after which we step down to intensified support, and finally to general support. Normally, the longer the student has been there, the need for support decreases. But if we have learners who have some kind of learning problem, for example, then we'll [...] create the pedagogical documents for them, and we need those documents when we have to move to basic education and consider whether the student can cope in mainstream [...] education [...] or whether we need a small group there. Administrator 4

The national guidelines (EDUFI, 2023) state that decisions regarding three-tiered support should be accompanied by pedagogical documents relevant to the student. However, unlike their Swedish and Norwegian colleagues in Cameron and others' (2011) study, the administrators interpreted the legal documents individually, resulting in significant differences in how schools view prep-ed students' rights to receive special education and whether these services are offered. Administrator 3 stated, "It varies a lot, depending on the school, how much support a student receives." In some schools, prep-ed is incorrectly considered special education per se, and it is not understood that prep-ed students may need additional special education. Furthermore, students' rights to special education are sometimes denied due to insufficient language skills. While developing language skills are not a reason for special education (see, e.g., Harju-Autti, 2022; Kytälä et al., 2013), neither should they prevent students from receiving it:

Sometimes, students need [...] special education [...], but prep-ed is still in progress, [and] we cannot put a student there who has not yet mastered the language. [...] you can't demand the teacher to be able to provide language support. Administrator 2

This conflicts with the idea of language learning as developing a repertoire of dynamic multilingual resources (see, e.g., van Lier, 2000). Teachers should be aware of the processes related to language learning and provide learners with meaningful scaffolding so that learners are able to learn both language and content (Lucas & Villegas, 2011; van Lier, 2000). With regard to linguistic support, some teachers' perspectives contradict the overarching principle of the core curriculum for basic education, which specifically states that supporting language learning is every teacher's responsibility (EDUFI, 2014) – all teachers should teach both language and content (Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Schleppegrell, 2012).

Supporting L1 development was mentioned as an important form of pedagogical support for newly arrived students (see also Cummins, 2021), which is an opposite finding compared to an Estonian study by Vanahans and others (2024). Although L1 lessons are not funded by the government during prep-ed, they are provided in the municipalities of this study, some offering more than 30 languages. However, due to a lack of resources and teachers, no municipality can offer L1 instruction in every language spoken by their students. Indeed, current resources are not sufficient for supporting students' L1 development (Venäläinen et al., 2022).

Government funding for L1 lessons requires a group of four students (Finlex, 2009). However, in one of the four municipalities, the minimum was six students, perhaps due to a lack of resources. In another municipality, approximately 80% of prep-students participated in L1 lessons, compared to around 40% in basic education (Alisaari et al., 2021; Tainio & Kallioniemi, 2019; Venäläinen, 2022). However, even when students have opportunities to participate in L1 instruction, not all choose to do so. To increase participation in L1 lessons, they are sometimes included in the prep-ed schedule. Older students are often less motivated to participate in L1 lessons, and participation decreases if L1 lessons are at a distant school (Administrator 4); this often occurs when only a few students are studying a language. Administrator 4 emphasized that it is the prep-ed teachers' responsibility to advocate for participation in L1 lessons, which aligns with the culturally and linguistically responsive practices of seeing students' first languages

as valuable for their identities (Cummins, 2007, 2021), and as resources for learning (Ganuza & Hedman, 2018; Ovando & Combs, 2011; Slavin & Cheung, 2005).

In some schools, L1 support is provided by, for example, mentors and teaching assistants, some of whom are permanently present in some prep-ed groups. Occasional support may be offered to students with general learning challenges; L1 teachers assess students' L1 skills to discover possible explanations for challenges in L2 learning and help communicate with guardians. Collaboration with L1 teachers is usually flexible, responding to students' needs.

We have native-speaking teaching assistants in primary education, rotating assistants [...] three are allocated one day a week to the prep-ed group. We have Russian, Arabic, and Somali language support. So, all of them one day a week, and [...] we always see which group or student has the greatest need, then the language support teacher goes with that group for the day. Administrator 4

Project-based funding is a challenge. It offers temporary relief instead of sustainable support (see Harju-Autti & Mäkinen, 2022), which may signal a (perhaps unconscious) lack of appreciation for students' languages (see also Cummins, 2021).

Group size was a concern for the interviewees, as optimally supporting students is more challenging in large groups. Although the national recommendation for prep-ed group size is 10 students (Finnish Government, 2015), this number varies:

We have a maximum of 12 students per group. We try to keep the number at 10. However, the groups can be very heterogeneous. At the primary level [grades 1–6], there may be students aged 6–12 in the same prep-ed group. [...] the aim is to have more age-specific groupings, but this isn't always possible. [...] we try to draw the line firmly at 12 students. In late spring, when some of those who started in the fall are integrating into their future classes, the number of prep-ed students might be 13. But [...] it's tough for the prep-ed teachers if there are more than 12 students; 10 is pretty manageable, but above that, more resources are needed. Administrator 4

It's somewhat embarrassing to tell the families and students that a group is full when we have a group of 10, that they would be the 11th or the 12th student, that although they've come from challenging circumstances, we'll stick to this. Somehow, we can't. We also have to think about individuals and how they fit into everyday life and get into a daily rhythm. Administrator 2

Larger groups lessen students' chances to obtain support from teachers and jeopardize teachers' capacities to provide optimal instruction for students (see also Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2022; Teemant, 2018). Furthermore, students might start or finish prep-ed during the academic year. While it is advantageous for students to start prep-ed immediately instead of waiting until the next semester, such constant fluctuation of group sizes (see also Lankinen, 2019) challenges the development of peer relations and creates extra work for teachers. Moreover, when group dynamics are affected, so is learning, since a safe socioemotional environment is crucial for learning (Chiu et al., 2012; Mustonen & Puranen, 2022). Thus, structural inequalities occur when national guidelines are not followed.

The number of hours allocated for prep-ed is defined in the national guidelines (EDUFI, 2015). However, these guidelines were not followed in two municipalities.

Prep-ed covers 900 hours for 6–10-year-old students and 1000 hours for older ones. Even if our first graders [...] have 20 hours of school a week, in prep-ed, it's 25 hours per week for 6–10-year-old students. Administrator 1

We follow the same timetable as basic education for the same grade levels. For example, in first and second grade, prep-ed covers 20 hours per week. If a child participates in afternoon clubs and L1 lessons, these are included in the number of prep-ed hours because everything's in Finnish. Of course, L1 lessons are not in Finnish, but [...] the Finnish National Agency for Education has said that, because it's also teaching, it can be counted [...]. 20 hours per week is mainly for the youngest

ones. From then on, it [gradually increases] to 30 hours [...] in lower secondary schools. It's already more than the 1,000 hours of prep-ed stated by the National Agency for Education. So, it's about 26 hours a week, but 30 hours for lower secondary school pupils. Administrator 3

The administrators' decisions not to follow these regulations positions students unequally and decreases overall equity (see also Mikander et al., 2018).

5.2 Practices after prep-ed

Transferring information during students' transition from prep-ed to basic education occurs systematically, from prep-ed teachers to students' future teachers. The process is easier when the transition happens within the same school, but collaboration between schools also occurs. Information transfer meetings sometimes include a wider group of individuals from the student's future school:

I was involved in an information transfer meeting where there was a Finnish-as-a-second-language teacher from the receiving school, a study counsellor, a special education teacher, a teacher who was responsible for the student's future class, and so on, and then there was a preparatory teacher, and we went through [...] what had been written in the study plan and the necessary teaching arrangements. We talked about what needed to be considered when the student entered eighth grade so that the certificate from basic education would include the necessary grades from the seventh grade. [...] this is the kind of thing we talk about a lot. Yes, students are transitioned carefully. Administrator 2

There are no official school or municipality-level practices for information transfers; rather, teachers are responsible for how and what information is shared (Harju-Autti & Mäkinen, 2022). While knowing students and their backgrounds is essential for planning and implementing teaching and pedagogical support (Gay, 2013; Lucas & Villegas, 2011), information transfer should be guided at the national level to ensure equity.

Two of the municipalities **offered structured linguistic support**, for example, special education teachers, to support students in mainstream education:

Especially for students who've had interruptions in schooling or learning challenges during prep-ed, there's special support available in three lower secondary schools. Usually, it's simultaneous teaching; [...] it may be separate teaching, but that's the starting point, [...] the co-teaching done by these teachers. There are two teachers who know the student's situation in more detail. It's often a challenge when a student goes from the safe prep-ed group to the lower secondary school – [...] where teachers change according to the subjects. [...] we want to improve that, [so] there's always someone who's aware of those students' progress and support needs. Then, [support] will be targeted to the subjects in which each student has the greatest need. Administrator 4

There could be more resources for structured linguistic support. It's needed when students have only been in Finland for a short time, so it would help in primary and lower secondary schools. Administrator 3

Specific linguistic support was not mentioned in all the interviews. One participant emphasized every teacher's role in supporting students' linguistic development. However, considering the heterogeneity of student groups in basic education, newly arrived students' language skills would benefit from more focused support (see also Harju-Autti et al., 2022; Pulkkinen et al., 2024; Schleppegrell, 2012), for which national guidelines are needed.

Offering support for learning after prep-ed is essential for students' transitioning from prep-ed to basic education. Within the three-tiered support model, this was often implemented as special education. In some municipalities, students were almost automatically placed at the second (or third) level without proper evaluation or

documentation. The interviewees justified this as a way of meeting students' needs for higher-level support:

[...] students always need support in the transition [...]. The National Agency for Education recommends that we make a study plan for all those who come from prep-ed, so we've concluded that, in principle, intensified support is the appropriate support. Administrator 4

In Finland, the law requires that teachers assess students' individual needs (Finlex, 2011). Indeed, automatic decisions are never optimal. Overall, students' learning immediately after the transition from prep-ed to basic education is an understudied area (see, however, Harju-Autti, 2022), and more specific national guidelines for this phase are needed.

6 Conclusion

The four investigated Finnish municipalities have well-established practices in organizing education for newly arrived students. However, the administrators reported varying practices, many of which contradict the existing official guidelines or previous studies on optimal educational practices emphasizing the importance of students' need for inclusion (see, e.g. Fandrem et al., 2021) and of peer relationships (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013; Riekkinen & Bahdanovich Hanssen, 2022). The administrators seemed to be committed to providing optimal support for newly arrived students' learning and well-being, which was reflected in their views on recognizing students' backgrounds as resources (Cummins, 2021; Nieto & Bode, 2004), the importance of peer relations (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013), and L1 support (Cummins, 2021). However, they encountered structural obstacles and unwillingness from schools and teachers to support prep-ed students, mainly due to scarce resources (see also Venäläinen et al., 2022) and deficit views (see also Tajic & Bunar, 2020). Teachers and administrators have little control over material resources, but ideologies and attitudes can be influenced, for example, through professional development (Kirsch et al., 2020); administrators must strongly oppose unequal structures (see also Crawford et al., 2018).

Guidelines concerning group size, number of hours of prep-ed, and support measures for students were not always followed, and L1 support for students varied; thus, students' legal rights may be at risk (see also Harju-Autti & Mäkinen, 2022). Teachers' negative attitudes, for example, toward the integration of students into mainstream classes, contradict the national curriculum and can disadvantage students. Moreover, stronger post-prep-ed support measures that do not include extensive segregation are needed (see also Ahlholm et al., 2023).

There are ongoing discussions regarding the length of prep-ed in Finland, and there will likely be new guidelines in the near future. Currently, variations in guideline implementation are preventing the actualization of culturally and linguistically responsive education and violating students' rights. To promote social justice and equal rights in education, coherent national guidelines and equal and adequate resources for all municipalities are needed. More explicit guidance could lessen variations in local decision-making. Administrators play a key role in developing educational practices for newly arrived students, linking national- and local-level decision-making and schools. However, more critical reflection on their role is needed (see also Cameron et al., 2011). Finally, a dialogue between national and local decision-making stakeholders should be fostered to reinforce practices supporting education for newly arrived students.

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