

Nordic perspectives on disability studies in education: a review of research in Finland and Iceland

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ABSTRACT

Disability studies in education (DSE) is an interdisciplinary field derived from the need to re-conceptualise special education dominated by a medical perspective on disability. In this article we identify what characterises DSE research and consider whether there is a case for arguing for a specific field of DSE in Finland and Iceland. Our analysis is based on a review of 59 studies published by Finnish and Icelandic scholars during the time period of ratification process of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities from 2007 to 2016 in Finland and Iceland. We suggest that DSE has emerged as a dynamic area of research in both countries. It has provoked researchers to analyse disability in social contexts and turn the gaze from individual person with disabilities to the social structures and educational policies and practices. The fields of DSE in Finland and Iceland have not developed in identical ways and both have fluid cross-overs to related fields such as disability studies and inclusive education. We argue for the potential of DSE to contribute to the discussion on educational equality and social justice. However, this requires opportunities to bring together scholars across disciplinary borders.

KEYWORDS

educational equality; inclusive education; special education; social justice; social perspectives on disability

Introduction

Citizens' social rights and equity are central aims of welfare states, and they have framed educational policy in the Nordic countries. Disabled people are one example of a group whose opportunities in education and working life have remained limited, thereby increasing their risk of social and economic exclusion (e.g. Björnsdóttir & Jónsson, 2015; Vesala, Teittinen, & Kaikkonen, 2014). In this review article, our aim is to examine disability studies (DS) and, in particular, disability studies in education (DSE) to address disability policy issues such as the right to education, working life and lifelong learning.

Our research assignment relies on the importance of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) that emphasise the societal change needed

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for seeing disabled people as persons who want to determine their own life and have opportunities to participate and contribute in their communities and society. Education has been described as a key to opportunity and successful social participation. Article 24 of the CRPD requires state signatories to recognise the right of disabled people to education (United Nations, 2007). Furthermore, the CRPD declares that recognition is required without discrimination and should be based on equal opportunities and such things as provision of reasonable accommodation, support in everyday life and learning possibilities to disabled students in the general education system in order to facilitate their effective education (United Nations, 2007). The CRPD reiterates the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO, 1994), which emphasises inclusion and participation as essential to human dignity. The CRPD extends this claim to educational systems at levels that include lifelong learning and full and effective participation and inclusion in society in all areas of life.

Finland and Iceland ratified CRPD 2016, which was late in comparison with the other Nordic countries. For this reason, these two countries form a particularly interesting case in the Nordic context. Also, the origins of this article comes from collaboration in the Justice through Education in the Nordic Countries (JustEd) network of researchers where Finnish and Icelandic scholars were interested in reviewing the possible emergence of DSE in these two countries. Our aim is to identify what characterises DSE research in Finland and Iceland and, furthermore, to study whether there is a case for arguing for a specific field of DSE.

Emerging research field in DSE

Internationally, DS as a research field theorising disability from sociological perspective have developed at least since the 1980s (Roulstone, 2013). In 2013, the *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* published reviews of disability research and DS in the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). The conclusion of these is that early disability research in the Nordic countries was based on clinical approaches derived from medical and rehabilitation studies, while DS are concerned with the social relational aspect of disability (Roulstone, 2013). The main difference between these approaches is the emphasis clinical disability research puts on treating and “fixing” individuals’ impairments, which are identified as the source of their disabledment, while DS are more focused on how disability is created in relation to or caused by the way society is organised. Roulstone (2013) argues that despite developments away from clinical disability research towards DS in the Nordic countries, there is still tension between academia and activism. What distinguishes Finland and Iceland somewhat from the other Nordic countries in regard to disability research and DS is the attempt to find more emancipatory models in research (Saloviita, 2013) with high commitments to participatory research (Traustadóttir, Sigurjónsdóttir, & Egilson, 2013).

A graduate programme in DS was established at the University of Iceland in 2004. Although the formal DS programme is relatively new, the first scholarly writings based on Icelandic research in DS were published in the 1990s, with attention given to inclusive education (e.g. Bjarnason, 1995, 1997; Marinósson & Traustadóttir, 1993), disability and family life (Traustadóttir, 1995) and disabled parents (Sigurjónsdóttir & Traustadóttir, 1998). Early research in DS in Iceland was focused mainly on education,

childhood and families, but in recent years DS have developed into an interdisciplinary field with increased emphasis on the humanities (Traustadóttir et al., 2013).

Similarly, in Finland, DS as a discipline began to grow within the field of educational research and in sociologically oriented critical studies on special education (e.g. Kivirauma & Kivinen, 1988; Pirttimaa, 1996; Saloviita, 1989; Vehkakoski, 2003; Vehmas, 2002; see also Saloviita, 2013). Finland's Disability Policy Programme 2010–2015 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2010) was formulated to prepare the policy changes needed to ratify the CRPD (Sjöblom, 2016). Preparation for this ratification has involved clarifying the requirements for establishing an academic basis for DS. One step in this process was taken when the first professorial chair in DS was created at the University of Helsinki in 2013. This development was supported and followed in particular by associations of disabled people, e.g. Finnish Society for Disability Research and the Research Unit of the Finnish Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (FAIDD).

DSE, on the other hand, is an interdisciplinary field in which concepts and methods in DS have been applied to study education, including policy and educational institutions. The emergence of DSE as a specific research area can be traced to a conference at the Rochester University on the topic of disability and inclusion. At this conference, educators from around the world gathered to discuss how to re-conceptualise special education, not least by examining ethical, social and political issues resulting from the dominant medical perspective of disability and special education (Connor, 2014). At a second conference, also in 1999, held by TASH (an organisation formerly called The Association for the Severely Handicapped) in Chicago, a group of scholars coordinated a panel entitled *Ways of Constructing Lives with Disabilities: The Case for Open Inquiry*. At the conference, they and other scholars formed an informal network, called *Coalition for Open Inquiry in Special Education*. Following the conference, application was made to the American Educational Research Association (AERA) to establish a Special Interest Group (SIG) on DSE (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011; Gabel, 2005).

Although there is no formal or organised subfield of DSE in Finland or Iceland, we realised that Finnish and Icelandic researchers have performed numerous studies that could fall under such an umbrella. For instance, active scholarly work in Finnish DSE has been conducted in the Nordic Centre of Excellence network *Justice through Education in the Nordic Countries (JustEd)*¹. DSE researchers coming from FAIDD and the University of Helsinki have been focusing research on justice in educational trajectories of disabled students and on education policy intertwining with disability policy formulating preconditions for citizenship (Hakala, Mietola, & Teittinen, 2013; Kauppila & Lappalainen, 2015; Niemi & Mietola, 2017; Vaahtera, 2015). Icelandic DSE had been performed by a number of scholars (e.g., Björnsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2009; Gunnþórsdóttir & Bjarnason, 2014), but they had not formed any network as such except that both Icelandic authors of the article, and perhaps other researchers, had participated in the DSE SIG in the AERA between 2000 and 2010.

Method

The analysis began with discussion among the authors in which we sought a joint understanding of DSE and criteria for a search that we originally intended to be a

database search. The initial selection criteria were based on DSE's opposition to a medical understanding of disability and the belief that the research in our database should focus on how the external environment constructs disability and shapes students' educational opportunities and outcomes. We also decided to concentrate on works published during the CRPD ratification process in Finland and Iceland, that is, between 2007 and 2016.²

We selected the materials in two steps with a third step being the full analysis. In Step 1, we used three distinctive ways of identifying refereed works in English, Finnish, Icelandic and Swedish. First, we carried out a database search in international journals using as keywords and titles the English words Finland, Iceland, disability, education, school and learning. The databases and web search engines used were Aleph-Linda (Finnish), EBSCO, ProQuest, WebVoyage, SAGE Journals, Terkko Navigator (Finnish) and Leitir (Icelandic).

Second, as we wanted to include also articles in Finnish and Icelandic, we read the content lists of main educational journals in Finland and Iceland, and identified more works (for a list of these journals, see Table 1).

Third, realising that some important work was still missing, we selected works by known authors, such as journal articles, books, book chapters and dissertations.

We continued by reading all abstracts of 100 articles (see Table 1) to determine whether the content was about education with a DS view of any kind. In some instances, we skimmed each article to determine whether it should be included. Our reading of the abstracts was guided by the question: in what sense could the text be considered DS or DSE? We included educational articles that were composed from a social relational approach to disability with emphasis on the way sociocultural factors shape disabled students' experiences and educational policy. We systematically excluded articles that employed deficit or medical approaches to disability or special education needs, or where educational hindrances were viewed as individual faults. After this reading, we conducted an initial review in Step 2 where we read the full texts of 69 articles that were either only DS or studied education from a deficit or a medical approach.

Table 1. Selection process.

Journal	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
	Identifying potential articles and reading abstracts	Reading full articles	Final selection
DIAK search – Finnish articles	13	5	4
<i>Kasvatus</i> (Finnish journal of education)	24	8	6
<i>Kasvatus & Aika</i> (Finnish open access journal on research on the history of education)	7	6	6
Search by the authors	16	14	13
Total number of Finnish studies	60	32	29
DIAK search – Icelandic articles	6	3	3
<i>Netla</i> (web-based open access journal, University of Iceland School of Education), including special issues	12	12	8
<i>Glæður</i> (Icelandic special educators' journal – refereed articles only)	10	10	8
<i>Icelandic Journal of Education</i> and its two predecessors (which merged in 2016)	9	9	8
Search by authors	3	3	3
Total no. of Icelandic studies	40	37	30
Total no. of studies under review	100	69	59

As a result of this selection process, we had 59 texts for analysis, as reported in Table 1.

In Step 3, we analysed the material using the following questions as guides:

- (1) What is the educational context of the article? (e.g. pre-primary education, compulsory education, etc.)
- (2) What is the content?
- (3) What theoretical perspectives are employed?
- (4) What methods are used?
- (5) What are the contributions to DSE?

Using the approach described above, we have been able to highlight current tendencies and variations in the field of DSE in the two Nordic countries under study. With this analysis, we will describe more closely what we consider as characterising research in DSE in our selection.

Findings

We organise our findings under three headings, with separate sections for Finland and Iceland under the first two headings. In the third section, we discuss the trends in ideologies and methods that could be identified as remarkable and as making contributions to establishing DSE as a research area. In the discussion section, we also explore differences in defining DSE in Finland and Iceland.

Educational context and content

Finland

The Finnish research ranged across a variety of contexts, although compulsory school was the context for the highest number (19 studies). Another field of education often contextualised in Finnish DSE was the upper-secondary school level in vocational education and in pre-vocational preparatory programmes (10 studies). Pre-school level was dealt with in only one study. One study dealt with disabled students at the tertiary level, one study addressed swimming training in leisure time, and one examined supported employment. Studies on transitions from one level to another (9) worked in two or more of these contexts.

Two themes stood out as the most frequently studied, namely inclusive education and twofold practices of special education divided between general education and special education in segregated school settings. Analysis of educational policy and how inclusive education can be interpreted based on statistics and registered data were the topics of several studies (Hakala & Leivo, 2015; Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2007, 2010).

Many studies questioned segregating practices as paradoxical with the inclusive ideology in educational policy: students' post-compulsory choice-making and experiences in student transitions were examined and demonstrated how segregating structures form "tracks" for students to follow (Hakala et al., 2013; Niemi & Kurki, 2014; Niemi & Mietola, 2017). A similar perspective was taken in a study of experienced transfer from early childhood education to compulsory school (Lempinen, 2016).

Finnish research has often used ethnographic data from everyday school life, for instance in studies of individualised teaching in heterogeneous classrooms (Rytivaara & Vehkakoski, 2015) and studies of educational practices that included students with significant disabilities (Pesonen et al., 2015). These sources represent research that examines pedagogical practices in schools in relation to inclusive educational ideology.

Persistent historical and cultural structures and educational institutions that segregate vocational special education as paradoxical when related to inclusive education ideology have been the subject of some researchers (Hakala, 2010; Hakala et al., 2013; Kauppila & Lappalainen, 2015). The views of teachers and educational professionals on inclusive education or on problematic students have been analysed, for example by Pinola (2008) in interviews with 18 teachers and focusing on their definitions and attitudes to integration and inclusion; and by Saloviita (2015), who has developed and tested a scale intended to promote teachers' more positive attitudes to inclusion. Koskela (2016) analysed teachers' use of a ready-made form for statement to define "problematic students" and deviance in school and showed how teachers concentrate on individual students and their families, but do not reflect on their own actions or the impact of the school environment.

Several authors have used the diagnosis of a specific disability as the starting point for their research. A study based on interviews with 13 Finnish young people (ages 11 to 16) diagnosed with ADHD and 18 Finnish mothers of children diagnosed with ADHD examined the meanings of ADHD in the context of compulsory schooling (Honkasilta, 2016). ADHD and the ideals of inclusive education were analysed in a study on children's transitions from kindergarten to school (Lempinen, 2016). The subject of one article was historical trends in the schooling of the blind (Huuskonen, 2007). Another article examined the history of sign language and Christian charity in educating the deaf (Rantala, 2011).

Several studies looked at the educational contexts of young people diagnosed as having intellectual disability. One investigated the Finnish law on forced sterilisation of the "feeble-minded" pupils exempted from compulsory elementary schools in Turku. The law was in force from 1935 to 1970. The analysis interprets the law as a form of racial hygiene policy and evidence of eugenics as a widespread global ideology at the time, although sterilisations were not implemented for the 78 pupils in the data (Agge, 2014). The history and culture of educational institutions offering vocational special education, especially for people with intellectual disabilities, were the subject of one study (Hakala, 2010); the author went on to analyse the education and labour market possibilities of this group (Hakala, 2013). Another study examined attitudes of university staff and students to a female student diagnosed with severe mental impairment in a university-based inclusion programme (Saarinen, 2013).

A study of swimming training (Vaahtera, 2015) is a sophisticated analysis of complicated mechanisms of ableism: it shows how the Finnish national ideal of the ability to swim and inhibitions about the inability to swim makes able-bodiedness an essential feature in hierarchies of bodily identifications.

Iceland

The Icelandic articles reviewed ranged across all age levels. However, about two-thirds (20) dealt with compulsory education; 18 focused only on compulsory school, while two

dealt with compulsory education along with upper-secondary education. Only one article dealt with the pre-school level. We grouped together the articles about pre-schools and compulsory schools and found it useful to organise these 21 articles about compulsory and pre-school education around the main themes of the research as a whole.

Seven themes were identified. The first was individualised teaching (Sigurðardóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2012), the transition from pre-school to compulsory school with emphasis on individualised teaching (Óskarsdóttir, 2014) and the effectiveness of an Individualised Education Programme for students with special needs (Gunnbjörnsdóttir, 2008). Although Sigurðardóttir and Óskarsdóttir (2012) were not focusing on students with special needs, they described educational environments and teaching methods that could benefit all children at the youngest compulsory school level.

The second theme is special education reform. For instance, Elvarsdóttir and Gunnþórsdóttir (2014) discussed recent developments in the field of education, which has changed from one-on-one instruction to providing general support in group settings. In a similar vein, Einarsdóttir (2015) explored the perspectives of students who had been categorised as mathematically challenged and identified factors influencing educational performance and well-being.

The third theme deals with teachers, their working conditions and their views of inclusive education. One article that illustrates the topic is that of Gunnþórsdóttir (2010). She studied ideas of primary school teachers in Holland and Iceland on the role of teachers in an inclusive school and how different cultural backgrounds and a country's predominant educational policy shape teachers' ideas and understandings. Furthermore, Gunnþórsdóttir and Jóhannesson (2014) examined teachers' discourse in newspapers on the subject of Icelandic compulsory school. Another article on teachers' perspectives was Karvelsdóttir and Guðjónsdóttir (2010), which showed the effect of culturally diverse student groups on teaching by interviewing teachers who had experience in multicultural classrooms. Similarly, Matthíasdóttir, Björnsdóttir, and Bjarnason (2013) reported special education teachers' views on inclusive education policy, while Gunnþórsdóttir and Bjarnason (2014) focused on teachers' perspectives on their professional practices in inclusive schools.

The fourth theme is educational policy, for which we identified two articles. Karlsdóttir and Guðjónsdóttir (2010) studied how five compulsory schools in Iceland organise and implement an inclusive school policy through their web sites. The authors followed up this study by interviewing school administrators on inclusive education (Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2009).

The fifth theme concerns factors that facilitate or hinder school participation by students with physical disabilities and conducts an exploration of how those factors interact (Egilson, 2011, 2014; Egilson & Traustadóttir, 2009a, 2009b).

Two articles comprising the sixth theme stood out from the rest in being based on quantitative measurements, i.e. predetermined criteria for judging the quality of life. These articles were about children on the autism spectrum and their parents, but the authors articulated a relational perspective by contributing barriers to participation in the interplay of impairments and their social context (Jakobsdóttir, Egilson, & Ólafsson, 2015; Ólafsdóttir, Egilson, & Ólafsson, 2014).

The seventh and final theme has to do with personal accounts of disability and/or special education needs in which disabled adults reflect on their school experiences (Björnsdóttir & Jónsson, 2015; Traustadóttir, Sigurjónsdóttir, & Gunnarsson, 2010).

As there were so few articles devoted to school levels other than the compulsory, we did not organise these few around themes based on the topic of study. Two of the 27 Icelandic articles dealt with upper-secondary education alone. The remainder dealt with aspects of tertiary education (five articles), an after-school programme for compulsory school children (one), continuing education (one), and residential schools, regardless of school level (one).

The two upper-secondary school articles dealt with different issues. One concerned a self-contained special education programme for autistic students organised as one-on-one instruction. The students were not considered capable of participating in the more integrated upper-secondary special education programmes on offer to those with intellectual disabilities (Júlíudóttir, Björnsdóttir, & Magnúsdóttir, 2016). The other article was about the counselling that students with intellectual disabilities receive in the transitions between school levels and from school to employment (Óskarsdóttir, Sigurjónsdóttir, & Vilhjálmssdóttir, 2012).

Four of five tertiary articles dealt with the educational options and opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities (Hildipórsdóttir, 2008; Stefánsdóttir, 2013; Stefánsdóttir & Björnsdóttir, 2016; Stefánsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2011). The fifth article investigated opportunities for students in teacher education to develop their competence for teaching in an inclusive school (Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2012).

One article dealt with an after-school programme. The role of the programme was to offer meaningful leisure activities and guide children from diverse backgrounds, including disabled and non-disabled children, to explore human diversity and gain new perspectives (Jörgensdóttir Rauterberg & Pálsdóttir, 2015).

One article dealt with continuing education for disabled people and what would enable full participation (Haraldsdóttir, 2011). Finally, there was a historical article about residential schools. The aim of the study was to obtain information about the everyday lives and experiences of a particular group of Icelanders (Stefánsdóttir, 2010).

Most of the Icelandic articles put students with special educational needs (19) in the foreground, and the majority of these articles were related to students labelled as having intellectual disabilities (8). Yet five articles focused particularly on students with physical impairments, three on autistic students and the rest (3) on students with special educational needs in general. Consequently, fewer articles placed teachers (6) or teaching methods and policy (5) at the forefront.

Theoretical perspectives and methodologies

Finland

In the Finnish research, we reviewed the theoretical perspectives varied. Most studies had starting points in disability policy and human rights' perspectives on inclusive education and their implementation in different educational contexts in Finland (e.g. Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2007; Lempinen, 2016; Pesonen et al., 2015). Many of the researchers used perspectives that come from social theorisations on disability as a socially created category rather than as an attribute of individuals (e.g. Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2010).

Studies explicitly using DS theorisations approached their topics from such viewpoints as social constructionist discourse framework, for example, and intersections of DS and special education (Honkasilta, 2016), or they analysed the consequences and social dimensions of the diagnosis and of problematising normality versus abnormality and medicalisation (Lempinen, 2016). The explications of theoretical perspective in DSE have been significantly developed in the network of feminist researchers who share an interest in post-structural feminist theorisations and methodology. Their research has been focused on cultural processes in which social differences are constructed, established and negotiated. Most of these researchers have come to DS from outside the discipline of special education, and they concentrate on the critical analysis of inclusive education and on cultural practices of inclusion and exclusion (e.g. Arnesen, Mietola, & Lahelma, 2007; Hakala, 2010; Mietola & Lappalainen, 2006; Niemi, 2008).

In the years from 2009 to 2013, the Academy of Finland funded a large project entitled “Citizenship, Agency and Difference in Upper Secondary Education”, with a special focus on vocational institutions, run by Professor Elina Lahelma. One of the sub-projects, entitled “Being special in the learning society? The ‘Competent citizen’ and discursive practices of vocational special needs education and training”, contributed especially to the field of DSE. The project’s research problematised the cultural and historical structures in segregating institutions of vocational special education (Hakala, 2010; Hakala et al., 2013) and the educational and employment possibilities of people with intellectual disabilities (Hakala, 2013). The agency of students having the status of special educational needs, especially in the processes of choosing their educational paths, was examined in several studies (e.g. Niemi & Kurki, 2014; Niemi & Mietola, 2017). Two researchers focused on the meaning-making by educational professionals of students’ specialness and categorisations as well as making an analysis of special education practices in compulsory school (Mietola, 2014) and vocational special needs education (Niemi, 2014). Drawing on post-structural feminist theorisations, ethnographic fieldwork and life historical approach, researchers have highlighted the power of institutional barriers and diagnostic restrictions in educational choice-making (Niemi & Kurki, 2014) as well as the persistence of stereotypical cultural narratives of disability (Niemi & Mietola, 2017).

Some of the Finnish scholars position their theoretical and methodological commitments in critical DS, an area that argues that the focus of research should expand from studies in disability to include the knowledge system in which ideas of (dis)abilities and normalcy are produced and established. Drawing on a genealogical analysis of various cultural texts, Vaahtera (2015) has focused on cultural mechanisms of ableism. Kauppi and Lappalainen (2015) have analysed gaps in education and disability policy in the Nordic countries that represent a social democratic welfare model and have reputations of being “model countries” in terms of equality and social justice. Analysing disability and educational policy documents side by side, Kauppi and Lappalainen argue that the notion of citizenship produced and re-stated at the intersection of policies indeed fosters ideals of independence and economic autonomy and thus actually excludes its subjects. They end up suggesting a revision of the concept of citizenship.

Of the 29 Finnish studies in our review, 21 used qualitative methods, such as narrative studies, discursive studies and different applications of ethnographic methods.

Two of these studies used and developed inclusive research methodologies (Äikäs, 2015; Saarinen, 2013). Six of the studies combined quantitative and qualitative methods. Only three studies used purely quantitative methods: one examined the changes in special education by cohorts and grade levels (Kirjavainen, Pulkkinen, & Jahnukainen, 2016); one focused on the relationship of inclusion and school choice by analysing pupil admission to schools and classrooms in relation to pupils' level of support, catchment area, gender and mother tongue (Lempinen, Berisha, & Seppänen, 2016); and a third surveyed supported employment in Finland (Saloviita & Pirttimaa, 2007).

Iceland

It is worth noting that the majority of Icelandic studies reviewed focused on policy and practice. There were also examples of studies less focused on policy and practice, and with stronger roots in various theoretical perspectives, such as the sociology of education (e.g. Júlíudóttir et al., 2016), sociology of childhood (e.g. Traustadóttir et al., 2010), Sen's capability approach (Björnsdóttir & Jónsson, 2015) and Dewey's writings on democracy (e.g. Jörgensdóttir Rauterberg & Pálsdóttir, 2015). Three major theoretical themes of interest emerged from the literature: (1) social and relational understanding of disability and special needs, (2) human rights and (3) inclusive education.

The articles that emphasised the social or relational aspects of disability and special needs appeared to identify educational barriers in the environment instead of focusing on students' impairments and limitations. A common thread running through the research was the absence or vague articulation of medical diagnoses with the exception of the two articles based on quantitative measurements of quality of life (Jakobsdóttir et al., 2015; Ólafsdóttir et al., 2014). Some of the authors who took a social or relational standpoint located the research within DS, but none specified DSE.

The second theme to emerge from this literature review was education as a human right. This theme is linked with the third theme, inclusive education, since the discussion on inclusive education in Iceland is usually connected with the Salamanca Statement, which reaffirms the right of every individual to education as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). The declaration has become a popular justification for inclusive educational research. This has to some extent been further emphasised by the CRPD (e.g. Björnsdóttir & Jónsson, 2015; Egilson, 2011; Stefánsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2011).

Of the articles reviewed, the majority were on the topic of inclusive education. However, as there was no single or uniform understanding of the concept of inclusion, different scholars had different understandings. Relatively few articles addressed inclusive education from the standpoint of the students themselves; rather, the standpoints were policy, teachers' and parents' perspectives as well as teacher education.

In the majority of the articles, qualitative research methods were largely employed; the exceptions reported on data gathered with quantitative or mixed method approaches (Jakobsdóttir et al., 2015; Matthíasdóttir et al., 2013; Ólafsdóttir et al., 2014). While most of the articles would be considered traditional qualitative research based on data gathered from interviews, focus groups, observations and document analysis, five stood out as exceptions. Two were based on action research with the authors attempting to use research to implement changes in their own workplace (Elvarsdóttir & Gunnþórsdóttir, 2014; Jörgensdóttir Rauterberg & Pálsdóttir, 2015).

The third article followed an inclusive research paradigm and was a collaboration between a disability scholar and a self-advocate who had been identified as having intellectual disabilities (Björnsdóttir & Jónsson, 2015). Two other articles were based on an analysis of educational policy documents with a focus on inclusive education (Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2009, 2012).

Discussion of Finnish and Icelandic contributions to DSE

In the studies we reviewed, we identified three aspects that we consider important to DSE: (1) distinctive groups of scholars who are contributing to this field; (2) methodological trends; and (3) a focus on educational transitions and trajectories of disabled students continuing to different post-school options questioning the inclusiveness in working life.

As to the first point, we have identified three distinct positions of researchers that formulate their starting points and perspectives to DSE in Finland and Iceland. First, there are scholars who explicate their commitment to DS theorisations and criticise the medicalisation of disability. They analyse educational questions as socially contextualised, yet they themselves come from diverse backgrounds, such as occupational therapy, education, social pedagogy and sociology of education (e.g. Egilson, 2014; Kauppila & Lappalainen, 2015; Stefánsdóttir, 2013). A second group consists of special education scholars who are attempting to re-conceptualise the special education system and abandon segregation; similar to DS scholars, they frame disability and special needs as social constructs (e.g. Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2012; Gunnþórsdóttir, 2010; Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2010). The third group comprises scholars from the field of (general) education and research on teaching and pedagogy who have expanded their focus to include a particular emphasis on inclusive education (e.g. Niemi, 2014; Sigurðardóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2012).

Aarnesen et al. (2007) have brought together these three positions and searched for new ways to analyse inclusion and diversity in the school policy and practice drawing from ethnographic studies in Finnish and Norwegian schools, both from mainstream and from special classes. The importance of disability as a category of difference that has conceptual potential in theorising education, teaching and pedagogy becomes visible in these three positions and perspectives of researchers.

Second, we have identified a methodological aspect in the studies in which the majority were carried out in the qualitative tradition. The medical model of disability has more positivist underpinnings, and therefore, traditional special education research is located more or less within the quantitative tradition. Baglieri et al. (2011) have described the international field of DSE as being based on a non-positivist and critical theory methodology. That does not mean that there is no space for quantitative “knowledge construction” within DSE, and we identified a few such studies (e.g. Jakobsdóttir et al., 2015; Lempinen et al., 2016).

We paid particular attention to participatory research methods. Such a methodology turns the perspective from individuals with disabilities as targets of research to acknowledging them as knowledge producers. In participatory research methods, disabled and non-disabled researchers are co-researchers. This regards data generation, dialogic analysis of the data and collaboratively presenting the results. The CRPD (United Nations, 2007) emphasises the right of disabled people to be actively involved in all kinds of decision-making concerning their lives, an idea that corresponds directly to this kind of methodology. Although the

majority of the articles we reviewed were not carried out in collaboration between disabled and non-disabled people, we found evidence based on four articles, two from Finland (Äikäs, 2015; Saarinen, 2013) and two from Iceland (Björnsdóttir & Jónsson, 2015; Stefánsdóttir, 2013), of this type of scholarship. These studies are examples of applying and developing the research methodology that has been called for, advanced and applied in disability research from its early stages (e.g. Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). The methodology has also been an explicit tool for empowerment of disabled people and challenging academic researchers to think over the questions of knowledge production so that issues of social justice, equity and power relations are taken within the research process. This has also meant crucial challenges for the traditional methodological concepts of epistemology and ethics when research is necessarily addressing political issues, material and ideological barriers to participation, which means that this kind of research cannot be disinterested or neutral (Barton, 2005).

As for the third aspect, we identified a trend in Finnish research that focuses on transitions from one educational level to another and from education to employment, thereby creating segregated “tracks” for young people. Nine of the 29 Finnish studies reviewed dealt with this theme. An active research group at the University of Turku is studying school choice, from which two articles were selected for our sample. These examined school choice in special education settings; one analysed the transition phase from early childhood education to compulsory school (Lempinen, 2016) and the other transition within compulsory education when students choose an upper-secondary school (Lempinen et al., 2016). Labour market citizenship as the goal of education has been studied by analysing transitions from compulsory school to the post-compulsory level and later on in employment (Hakala, 2013; Hakala et al., 2013; Niemi & Kurki, 2014; Niemi & Mietola, 2017). These studies have dealt with processes by which segregated special education arrangements lead students to the marginalities in the school system, which continues in the employment processes and places constraints on access to labour market citizenship.

Although transition was not a prominent topic in the Icelandic research, two studies did address employment of people with intellectual disabilities (Björnsdóttir & Jónsson, 2015; Stefánsdóttir, 2013). According to Björnsdóttir and Jónsson (2015), people with intellectual disabilities in Iceland lack access to education, economic and material resources, and paid work, which consequently results in their exclusion from society. However, Stefánsdóttir (2013) argued that the vocational diploma programme for students with intellectual disabilities has created employment opportunities for this group of disabled people, of which the majority (70%) who graduated have succeeded on the open labour market. In Finland, a supported employment model in the transition process of searching and finding a job for those with intellectual disabilities has been shown to be a good way to support employment in the open labour market, even if not as successful as had been expected (Saloviita & Pirttimaa, 2007).

Conclusions

The aim of our review was to clarify what characterises DSE research in Finland and Iceland. Furthermore, we wanted to study whether there was a case for arguing for DSE as a specific field of research in both countries. Our analysis suggests that there is a body of work that can be viewed as belonging to an emerging research field that focuses on disability in education from a social perspective, i.e. DSE. We argue that this is making important contributions to

understanding disability as a category of societal difference in education – and making new challenges on the narrow ideals of normalcy.

We analysed the research made during the ratification process of the UN CRPD in both countries. DS as an academic programme had been established in the University of Iceland already 2004, and there was no need to take CRPD so much in focus in academia as it was taken in Finland where establishing the DS as an academic discipline was justified strongly with the CRPD. Thus, it is evident that the field of DS and DSE in Finland and Iceland has not developed in identical ways.

The authors of the studies in both countries, are, however a rather large and distributed group, many of whom would probably identify themselves not with DSE but rather with DS, inclusive education, special education, sociology of education or educational policy. DSE as a field of study, therefore, does not have strict boundaries, and it was not our intention to suggest so; rather, DSE combines insights from other fields. The most important characteristic is to infuse DS concepts, methods and ideals into educational research to provide the necessary perspective not only on research on inclusive and special education but also on any education research.

In both countries, it would be an interesting task to bring together these somewhat different groups of scholars, i.e. those who explicate their commitment to DS theorisations but coming from diverse backgrounds, such as occupational therapy and social pedagogy; special education scholars attempting to re-conceptualise the special education system; and the scholars from the field of (general) education and research on teaching, pedagogy and policy who have expanded their focus to include a particular emphasis on inclusive education.

We suggest that all academic borderlines between DSE and related fields, such as DS, inclusive education and policy studies, should be kept low and easy to move in between for to make possible dynamic and fluid new combinations of thought and theorisations on human rights based education. We recommend that stakeholders in both countries organise conferences on the topic of DSE, bringing together scholars across disciplinary borders to share ideas and approaches. There is space and opportunity for effective collaboration among these groups who have the potential of promoting social justice for all students.

Notes

1. What is shortened as the JustEd network is a Nordic Centre of Excellence called Justice through Education in the Nordic Countries, funded by NordForsk. The centre has members in all five independent Nordic countries (JustEd, [n.d.](#)).
2. If an article in our search was published online in 2016, we included it in our analysis, although the date was later changed to 2017 when the journal was printed.

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