

Research Report 380

**Henri Pesonen**

**Sense of belonging for students with intensive  
special education needs**

**An exploration of students' belonging and teachers' role in  
implementing support**

To be presented, with the permission of the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences of the University of Helsinki, for public discussion in Auditorium 107, Siltavuorenpenger 3 A, on Friday, February 12, 2016, at 12 o'clock.

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**Abstract**

Sense of belonging has been defined as the degree to which an individual feels included, accepted, and supported by others in a variety of social settings, for example, a school context. Previous research on sense of belonging has mainly focused on students with special needs in inclusive schools. There appears to be a shortage of research on sense of belonging in different school placements (general and special) and in post-school life for individuals with *intensive special education needs*.

The purpose of this thesis, which consists of three related, internationally published peer-reviewed articles (Studies I-III), was to examine to what extent sense of belonging can be supported in school and in post-school life for students with intensive special education needs in Finland. Particular focus was placed on the voices of those students in order to understand how best to create a positive school climate that supports sense of belonging for all. Teacher perceptions of the implemented three-tiered support model (Finland's Basic Education Act 642/2010) and school visit data were utilized to contextualize the students' conceptions and experiences.

Study I examined conceptions associated with sense of belonging in general and special school placements for middle-school students with intensive special education needs ( $N = 5$ ). Phenomenographic methods of analysis were utilized in Study I. In Study II, which was based on the narratives of two females (ages 26 and 29) with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the focus was on sense of belonging and various life transition issues that may appear in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in the absence of appropriate social supports. Qualitative narrative approaches were used in Study II to analyze interview and document data in order to create life transition stories. Study III examined the implementation of new, special education legislation in Finland (Basic Education Act 642/2010) among students with intensive special education needs. The material for Study III consisted of (1) survey data on teacher perceptions

( $N = 526$ ) of the implementation of the education legislation and the current organization of special education services, and (2) observations of the implementation of the legislation in schools ( $N = 12$ ) across Finland. The analysis of the survey data in Study III was based on sequential mixed-methods design. The school observation data were analyzed qualitatively.

In Study I, the qualitative phenomenographic analyses of interview transcripts revealed various conceptions regarding the students' sense of belonging in different school placements (general and special). The students had undergone numerous placements in which their sense of belonging had been jeopardized, as disturbing relationships with teachers and peers seemed to have affected the students' mental and physical well-being, resulting in disturbing behaviors in their earlier educational settings. Despite the various placements, the students felt "better" in their current, special, school, which had a positive climate. The results of Study II demonstrated that lack of social support increases the number of school placements and transitions and causes biases in forming a sense of belonging. The findings further suggested that providing social assistance and positive life experiences during emerging adulthood (ages 18-25) seems to matter most in forming a strong sense of belonging in life. Furthermore, the findings of both Studies I and II suggested that, for individuals with intensive special education needs, adapting one's behavior in order to feel a sense of belonging (Juvonen, 2006) might be associated with hiding the unique characteristics of a person's special needs. Study III found that teachers' values and beliefs seem to influence the organization of special education (e.g., affecting the overall school climate). Furthermore, some schools and teachers implemented the law's integration requirement by placing all students with intensive special needs in separate units or school buildings, whereas other schools placed students in general education.

The findings suggest that students with intensive special education needs can feel a sense of belonging primarily in schools in which adults work in multidisciplinary collaboration, which helps to create an accepting and supportive school climate. In the post-school phase, it appeared that positive experiences during emerging adulthood (between the ages of 18 and 25) seem to matter most in generating a strong sense of belonging to a community. Hence, individuals with intensive special needs would benefit from ongoing support from the time they first enter school with continuation through the post-school transition phase and into adulthood. Also, the results hypothetically imply that the school principal plays a significant role in creating a school climate that supports a sense of belonging for all students. The results of this thesis also shed light on several limitations that prevent generalizations from being made. Therefore, further study is unquestionably needed. This thesis has provided an initial exploration into the under-researched area of sense of belonging in

different school placements and in post-school life for students with intensive special education needs.

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*Keywords:* sense of belonging, intensive special education needs, school placement, transition, teachers' values and beliefs, school climate



**Henri Pesonen**

## **Kuuluvuuden tunne perusopetuksessa ja sen jälkeen henkilöillä, joilla on vaativan erityisen tuen tarpeita**

Tutkimus oppilaiden kuuluvuudesta ja opettajien roolista tukitoimien toteuttajina

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### **Tiivistelmä**

Kuuluvuuden tunne määritellään yksilön kokemukseksi osallisuudesta ja hyväksytyksi tulemisesta erilaisissa sosiaalisissa konteksteissa, esimerkiksi koulussa. Aiempi tutkimus on pääasiassa keskittynyt tarkastelemaan kuuluvuuden tunnetta perusopetuksessa oppilailta, joilla on erityistarpeita, joihin tarjotaan yleistä tai tehostettua tukea. Tämä tutkimus syventää ja laajentaa nykyistä tietämystä kuuluvuuden tunteesta oppilailta, joilla on *vaativan erityisen tuen tarpeita*.

Tämän väitöstutkimuksen, joka koostuu kolmesta artikkelista ja yhteenvedosta, tarkoituksena on selvittää miten kuuluvuuden tunnetta voidaan tukea peruskoulussa ja sen jälkeen. Tutkimuksessa painotetaan erityisesti tutkimukseen osallistuneiden henkilöiden käsityksien ja kokemusten merkitystä. Oppilaiden käsityksien ja kokemusten tulkitsemiseen saatiin syvyyttä tarkastelemalla opettajien näkemyksiä kolmiportaisen tuen toteutumisesta. Lisäksi kokonaisuuden tarkastelussa hyödynnettiin kouluissa kerättyjä havainnointiaineistoja.

Osatutkimus I tarkastelee oppilaiden (N = 5), joilla on erityisen tuen tarve, käsityksiä kuuluvuuden tunteesta perusopetuksessa. Osatutkimuksessa I käytettiin fenomenografisia analyysimenetelmiä. Osatutkimus II perustui kahden autismin kirjon kuuluvan naisen (iältään 26 ja 29 vuotiaita) narratiiveihin, joissa tarkasteltiin, millainen tuki oli merkityksellistä kuuluvuuden tunteen tukemisessa elämän eri vaiheissa (lapsuus, nuoruus ja aikuisuus). Osatutkimuksessa II haastattelu- ja dokumenttiaineistot analysoitiin narratiivisen tutkimuksen metodeilla. Osatutkimuksessa III tutkittiin kolmiportaisen tuen toteutumista vaativan erityisen tuen oppilaiden keskuudessa. Osatutkimuksen III aineisto koostui (1) opettajien näkemyksistä (N = 526) liittyen perusopetuslakiuudistukseen lain voimaan tulon jälkeen ja (2) havainnointiaineistosta kolmiportaisen tuen toteutumisesta kouluissa (N = 12).

Osatutkimuksen III kyselytutkimusaineisto analysoitiin monimenetelmällisesti. Kouluhavainnointiaineisto analysoitiin laadullisesti.

Osatutkimuksen I perusteella oppilailta oli monia erilaisia käsityksiä koskien kuuluvuuden tunnetta. Oppilailta oli useita koulusiirtoja erään suomalaisen keskisuuren kaupungin perusopetuksen kouluissa. Oppilaiden kertomana saatiin tietää, että kuuluvuuden tunne oli joutunut uhatuksi opettajien välinpitämättömyyden vuoksi. Lisäksi muiden oppilaiden kielteinen suhtautuminen oppilaiden erityistarpeisiin heikensi tutkimukseen osallistuneiden kuuluvuuden tunnetta. Haastateltavien mukaan edellä mainitut tekijät vaikuttivat heidän henkiseen ja fyysiseen hyvinvointiinsa. Nykyisessä koulussa (kaikilla oppilailta erityisen tuen päätös) edellä mainittuja haasteita ei ollut. Haastatellut arvioivat, että koulussa vallitsi myönteinen, hyväksyvä ja kannustava ilmapiiri. Osatutkimuksen II tulokset osoittivat, että yksilöllistetyn tuen puute lisäsi koulusiirtoja ja siirtymiä peruskoulun jälkeisessä elämässä. Useat koulusiirrot ja siirtymät myös aikuisuudessa heikensivät kuuluvuuden tunteen syntymistä. Tulokset osoittivat myös, että yksilöllinen tuki ja positiiviset elämäkokemukset varhaisaikuisuudessa (vuosien 18 ja 25 välillä) vahvistavat kuuluvuuden tunnetta. Lisäksi osatutkimuksien I ja II tulokset osoittivat, että yksilön oma tietoinen käyttäytymisen muuntaminen (kuuluvuuden tunteen osatekijä; Juvonen, 2006), jos hänellä on vaativan erityisen tuen tarpeita, voi liittyä tuen tarpeen peittämiseen ympäristöltä. Näin henkilö voisi tulla ympäristön hyväksymäksi. Osatutkimus III osoitti, että opettajien arvot ja uskomukset voivat vaikuttaa erityisopetusjärjestelyihin kouluissa (esim. yleiseen ilmapiiriin erityisoppilaita kohtaan). Osa kouluista ja opettajista tulkitse lakia siten, että kaikki vaativan erityisen tuen oppilaat sijoitettiin erilleen muista yleisen ja tehostetun tuen oppilaista, kun taas osa kouluista sijoitti oppilaat samaan ryhmään muiden oppilaiden kanssa.

Väitöstutkimuksen tulosten perusteella voidaan todeta, että vaativan erityisen tuen oppilaat voivat kokea kuuluvuuden tunteen ensisijaisesti kouluissa, joissa aikuiset työskentelevät yhdessä ja monialainen yhteistyö toteutuu. Aikuisten välinen tasavertainen yhteistyö näyttäisi liittyvän positiivisen kouluilmapiiriin syntyyn. Rehtorin rooli kuuluvuuden tunnetta tukevan positiivisen kouluilmapiirin synnyssä vaikuttaisi olevan myös merkityksellinen. Lisäksi peruskoulun jälkeisinä vuosina myönteiset elämäkokemukset synnyttävät vahvan kuuluvuuden tunteen. Tästä syystä, kuuluvuuden tunnetta tulisi tukea ja vahvistaa varhaislapsuudesta saakka. Tämä väitöstutkimus avaa tärkeän ikkunan vaativan erityisen tuen oppilaiden kokemis- ja käsitysmaailmaan. Kuitenkaan tulosten perusteella ei ole suositeltavaa tehdä yleistyksiä. Tätä tutkimusta voidaan pitää esitutkimuksena laajemmille lisätutkimuksille.

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*Avainsanat:* kuuluvuuden tunne, vaativa erityinen tuki, koulusijoitus, siirtymät, opettajien arvot ja uskomukset, kouluilmapiiri



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Henri Pesonen



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# Original articles

This thesis is based on the following three original publications, which are referred to in the text by Roman numerals (Studies I-III).

**Study I.** Pesonen, H., Kontu, E., Saarinen, M., & Pirttimaa, R. (2015). Conceptions associated with sense of belonging in different school placements for Finnish pupils with special education needs. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*. doi:10.1080/08856257.2015.1087138.

**Study II.** Pesonen, H., Kontu, E., & Pirttimaa, R. (2015). Sense of belonging and life transitions for two females with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Finland. *Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 18(2), 73-86.  
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9782/2159-4341-18.2.73>.

**Study III.** Pesonen, H., Itkonen, T., Jahnukainen, M., Kontu, E., Kokko, T., Ojala, T., & Pirttimaa, R. (2015). The implementation of new special education legislation in Finland. *Educational Policy*, 29(1), 162–178.  
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# 1 Introduction

Sense of belonging has been described in the literature as the extent to which an individual feels included, respected, accepted, and supported by others in different social contexts (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992). According to Maslow (1962), individuals have a natural, life-long desire to feel that they belong. In school, the characteristics of the school climate — as opposed to the characteristics of the school context (general versus special school settings) — have an important role in helping children to experience a sense of belonging from an early age (Ma, 2003; Murray & Pianta 2007; Prince & Hadwin, 2012). Students<sup>1</sup> who have dynamic social relationships with other children and adults (e.g., teachers and classroom assistants) are likely to feel a sense of belonging, which is also related to higher academic achievement, positive behaviors, and constructive social outcomes (Kunc, 1992; Ellis, Hart, & Small-McGinley, 1998). Some students might have challenges maintaining social relationships, as well as difficulties in mastering school subjects or abiding by expected behaviors. Specifically, students with special education needs might require a wide range of individualized support in order to feel a sense of belonging in general education (e.g., Frederickson et al., 2007; Murray & Pianta, 2007).

There is an increasing amount of research on the experiences of belonging in inclusive classrooms for students with special education needs (e.g., Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000; Hagborg, 1998; Schnorr, 1997; Williams & Downing, 1998). These studies suggest that, with appropriate support, inclusive education can increase the sense of belonging. On the other hand, scholars have argued that restrictive and segregated special education placements can weaken the experiences of belonging (Ellis, Hart, & Small-McGinley, 1998, Kunc, 1992; Williams & Downing, 1998). Although there are studies on the sense of belonging among students with special needs in inclusive settings, unfortunately, for those with *intensive* special education needs there appears to be a shortage of research with valid perspectives on school (in both general and special education schools) and on post-school life. *Intensive special education needs* (in Finnish, *vaativa erityinen tuki*<sup>2</sup>) is a term that was introduced by the VETURI research

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, “students” refers to individuals in the educational system from early childhood (e.g., kindergarten) to post-school education; in other words, education after comprehensive schooling (the 9th grade onwards, including high school, vocational school, college, etc.).

<sup>2</sup> Recently, this expression has been recognized in official government documents for defining a specific, marginal group of students in Finnish schools (see e.g., Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2014).

project (2011-2015).<sup>3</sup> *Intensive* special education needs refers to students with severe mental health problems, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), emotional disabilities, physical disabilities, or developmental or intellectual disabilities (Kokko et al., 2014; Pirttimaa et al., 2015). Often these students require the assistance of professional specialists who can ensure the quality of learning, teaching, and rehabilitation in the Finnish public school system. In the international literature, the term “significant support needs” (which is the Finnish equivalent of *vaativa erityinen tuki*) is used to describe students with low incidence or severe and multiple disabilities. Typically, these students have significant cognitive impairments, conditions which sometimes co-occur with sensory and physical disabilities (Carroll et al., 2011; Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2009). Yet this English expression does not cover individuals with mental health problems, for example, or with ASD (including those with both low and high functioning autism (see, e.g., Baron-Cohen, 2008). Hence, in the current study, I have chosen to use the phrase *intensive special education needs*,<sup>4</sup> because a direct translation of the Finnish expression *vaativa erityinen tuki* into English would not convey the intention to describe a marginal<sup>5</sup> group of Finnish students.

In this thesis, which is based on data collected in the VETURI research project in the years 2011-2015, I specifically focus on persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and/or individuals with a history of mental health problems or behavioral difficulties defined as follows: ASD is a neuro-developmental disorder ranging from mild to severe (WHO, 1994) and is more prevalent in males than in females (Baron-Cohen, 2008). The usual challenges for individuals with ASD are in social interaction, communication, and imagination (Wing, 1992), as well as in repetitive and restricted patterns of behavior, interests, and activities (American Psychological Association, 2013). These challenges persist throughout an individual’s lifetime (VanBergeijk, Klin,

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<sup>3</sup> For detailed information about the VETURI research project, the reader is referred to <http://www.peda.net/veraja/jyu/kastdk/veturi/english>

<sup>4</sup> This term has been used in an international publication of the VETURI project (see Pirttimaa et al., 2015), as well as in a few U.S.-based university websites to refer to special education specialist courses that prepare candidates to work with students having moderate, severe, or profound mental disabilities, for example, or emotional disorders or Autism Spectrum Disorder (see e.g., <https://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/ise/>, <https://www.csuohio.edu/majors/special-education-intervention-specialist-moderateintensive> ).

<sup>5</sup> The total number of students in Finnish schools is approximately 543,000 (Statistics Finland, 2015). Of the total it is estimated that there are approximately 10,000 students with intensive special education needs (Ojala et al., 2015). This estimate is based on the most recent statistics from 2010, before the three-tiered education support legislation was enacted. Because of the legislation, which requires teachers to provide support for students based on educational needs, statistics based on diagnosis (e.g., Autism Spectrum Disorder, social-emotional problems, significant disabilities) are no longer gathered.

& Volkmar, 2008). Mental health problems are clinically significant conditions characterized by alterations in a person's thinking, emotion, or behavior and associated with personal distress and/or impaired functioning (WHO, 2001). Individuals with such disorders have poor physical, mental, and social well-being (WHO, 2014). Finally, in this study, individuals with a history of behavioral difficulties include persons who might have been exposed to behavioral problems (e.g., violent outbursts), for example, owing to the unique characteristics of ASD or problems in their mental well-being.

Research on sense of belonging in school and in post-school life for individuals with intensive special education needs is important, given that in the past few years the prevalence of children diagnosed on the autism spectrum (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; Meng-Chuan et al., 2015) and children with mental health problems (Ojala et al., 2015; Statistics Finland, 2010; United Nations, 2014) has grown. Although there is an increasing number of autobiographies by individuals with needs such as ASD (see Cohen-Rottenberg, 2010; Gerland, 2003; Grandin, 2006; Miller, 2003; Williams, 1999), which provide valuable perspectives on living with unique special needs characteristics, a sense of belonging in school and in post-school life for those with intensive special needs remains an under-researched area. Such individuals can potentially provide essential insights into the services required to feel a sense of belonging during comprehensive education and in post-school life.

In an attempt to fill this gap, the present thesis focuses on students with intensive special education needs and how their sense of belonging can be supported in school (both general and special schools<sup>6</sup>) and in post-school life. In Finland, the groundwork for supporting a sense of belonging and preparing individuals for full community integration after compulsory education is the school system's three-tiered support model (see the Basic Education Act 642/2010 and the Basic Education Act 628/1998). Students have three tiers of support. The first tier is provided in regular classrooms; the second includes intensified support and targeted interventions for those who have learning difficulties; and the last tier is special education with more individualized support arrangements. Students in tier three have Individual Education Plans (IEPs or HOJKS in Finnish). The legislation that mandates these tiers (Basic Education Act 642/2010) aims at providing support for struggling students based

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<sup>6</sup> Since the enactment of the Basic Education Act (642/2010), distinction between general and special education schools is no longer made in Finland. Currently, special education schools in Finland are referred to as Finnish basic education schools. However, in this thesis, I use the terms general and special education schools. General education (which should not be confused with the Finnish term *yleisopetus*, which was used prior to the implementation of the three-tiered support) refers to education taking place outside special school settings. Furthermore, the students interviewed for the current thesis had studied before the new Basic Education (642/2010) legislation was enacted, a time when such distinctions were being made.

on their teachers' educational observations, because formal diagnoses are not required (Thuneberg et al., 2013). Since the implementation of the new three-tiered support model in January 2011 (Basic Education Act 642/2010), special education arrangements have appeared to be nationally diverse; thus, students with intensive special needs might be placed either in segregated units or in inclusive settings (Kokko et al., 2014). For example, the characteristics of a school climate and teachers' philosophies toward diverse learners can affect where students are placed, how those with intensive needs receive support, and how they experience belonging.

Schools play an important role in establishing the social relationships necessary to create a sense of belonging and foster successful community integration experiences in post-school life. Feeling accepted by other individuals in school can encourage interactions with others, and these relationships in turn can facilitate the experience of belonging throughout life (Osterman, 2000). This may not be possible without educators whose professional values and beliefs (e.g., Wilson, 1989) foster a positive school climate, which in turn is necessary for feeling acceptance and belonging (Ma, 2003; Murray & Pianta, 2007). Although students might have successful experiences of belonging while in school, the feeling may be interrupted in the transition to post-school life. The current legislation in Finland does not mandate separate transition planning as part of student documentation. Unquestionably, this might jeopardize the sense of belonging. In turn, a low sense of belonging increases feelings of isolation and loneliness (Juvonen, 2006; Osterman, 2000). With appropriately structured pedagogical methods in school (e.g., Wehman et al., 2009), efficient transition planning strategies before post-school life (e.g., Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009; Rydzewska, 2012; VanBergeijk et al., 2008), and ongoing support arrangements in adulthood (e.g., Tobin, Drager, & Richardson, 2014), individuals with intensive special education needs can actively contribute to their communities and experience a sense of belonging.

The aim of this thesis in special education is to examine the sense of belonging among individuals with intensive special education needs and the extent to which their belonging can be supported in school (general and special) and in post-school life. The current study has a life perspective on supports (see, e.g., Snell & Brown, 2000). The thesis that consists of three, internationally published, peer-reviewed articles (Studies I-III), which are based on both quantitative and qualitative data collected in the VETURI research project. The quantitative national survey results (Kokko et al., 2014) have guided the qualitative data collection for the thesis.<sup>7</sup> One of the main goals of the VETURI project was to examine the current state of arrangements for students with

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<sup>7</sup> This type of research procedure can be referred to as a "mixed-methods sequential explanatory strategy" (Creswell, 2003, p. 215).

intensive special education needs (e.g., determining the percentage of students with intensive needs who are placed in classrooms along with students without such needs). The survey data consisted of teachers' perceptions about such issues as the implementation of the three-tiered educational support (Basic Education Act, 642/2010). This act is meant to ensure that children with intensive special education needs are placed in the same education settings alongside their peers. It is also meant to prepare individuals for experiences of belonging in post-school life. The survey results (some of which are used in Study III) indicated that students with special education needs are less frequently placed in classrooms with their peers than are students with less challenging needs (Kokko et al., 2014). These results do not seem to differ greatly from a study conducted over a decade ago on the implementation of the Basic Education Act of 1997, which allowed students with the most significant disabilities to enter mainstream education (Jahnukainen & Korhonen, 2003). The VETURI survey results thus raised questions about students' feelings of belonging—a matter related to inclusive education with its perspective on helping individuals feel accepted, included, supported, and respected in different school settings—and guided the follow-up data collection on students' feelings of belonging in different school placements (general and special). The follow-up data included interviews of students with intensive special education needs (Studies I and II), as well as observation data from field visits (Study III). Using both quantitative (Study III) and qualitative (Studies I-III) data has facilitated interpretations of students' sense of belonging, both in school and after compulsory education (Creswell, 2003). In this thesis, particular focus has been placed on the voices of students with intensive special education needs (Studies I and II). Also important have been teachers' views of the implementation of the three-tiered educational support (Basic Education Act, 642/2010) (Study III). The goal is to understand better how to create a school climate that supports belonging for all students, as well as to identify ways to facilitate a sense of belonging in post-school life for those with intensive special needs.

The thesis consists of three chapters. The first begins with an introduction to the theoretical foundations for a sense of belonging and examines the constructs closely related to a sense of belonging (e.g., school engagement and membership). Chapter one also reviews the literature on the different factors associated with students' sense of belonging in school and in post-school life, after which I describe the supports available in Finland's educational system as a way of providing context. I introduce the recently implemented Finnish Basic Education Act (642/2010) of three-tiered support and review the implementation literature related to teachers' values and beliefs about such implementation, for example, how the literature can explain different teacher philosophies that might foster students' overall sense of belonging in school. Furthermore, in the first chapter, I examine the post-school transition planning in Finland and the

supports in adulthood for individuals with intensive special education needs. In chapter two, I briefly describe the three originally published articles: the studies' aims, methods, results, and discussions. Finally, in chapter three, I end with a general discussion of the results (of Studies I-III), share some theoretical and practical implications, and discuss the trustworthiness of the qualitative data sets in this thesis. I then reflect on the ethical considerations of the current study, shed light on the limitations of the thesis, make suggestions for future research, and finally, give the conclusions of the thesis.

## **1.1 Theoretical foundations for a sense of belonging**

The theoretical underpinnings for a sense of belonging are found in psychology. The psychological perspective used in the current study is that of an individual's need to belong and feel accepted and supported (see, e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Specifically, the focus is on the social aspects of belonging in school. These aspects include how experiences of belonging and feeling accepted can be fostered for students with intensive special education needs (e.g., teacher support, individualized education, etc.), and how these experiences can help students succeed in school and realize their potential for successful post-school transition and adulthood in society. Below, I review the theoretical foundations for a sense of belonging in school and examine the constructs closely related to a sense of belonging (e.g., school engagement, social participation, membership).

### **1.1.1 Theoretical foundations for a sense of belonging in school**

Sense of belonging has been defined in the literature as the extent to which an individual feels socially connected, included, respected, accepted, and supported by others in different social contexts (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992). A sense of belonging is a basic human need, as people want to be socially connected to other people, feel accepted, and be part of a group. For example, a feeling of belonging can mean being an accepted member of a family or a group of friends or by colleagues at work. The need to belong and to feel socially connected to others can be so strong that it motivates people to strive to maintain relationships even during difficult times (such as a crisis) (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Maslow (1962) emphasized in his theory of the *Hierarchy of Needs* that the need to belong is a basic need and a natural, life-long desire. Bowlby's *Attachment Theory* (e.g., 1982) likewise suggests that forming and maintaining relationships is an essential human need. Research suggests that persons who have close relationships with others and have feelings of belonging have better outcomes in mental and physical health and performance (Juvonen, 2006). Baumeister and Leary (1995) also point out that people who have active social relationships, which can help them feel connected and accepted, appear to be

mentally and physically in better condition than persons who are isolated. Baumeister and Leary further suggest that lack of belonging can cause serious ill effects (e.g., depression). Other research emphasizes that, in a school setting, the feeling of belonging is fundamental to understanding student behavior and performance (e.g., academic achievement) (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Osterman, 2000). While overall, the research on sense of belonging in the field of psychology is extensive, in this thesis, the focus is on social belonging in a school context.

The theoretical background for the thesis draws on the model by Juvonen (2006), which is based on an extensive review of current research in school belonging. The model's theoretical focus is on school-based social relationships (teacher-student relationships and relationships between students) and students' adaptation of their own behaviors. Faircloth and Hamm (2005) have also proposed a model for a sense of belonging in school that suggests that belonging in school is related to teacher-student relationships and peer relationships, as well as to perceived ethnic-based discrimination (experiences of discrimination among four ethnic groups [African American, Asian descent, Latino, and European American adolescents]) and participation in extra-curricular activities (e.g., social or sports-related non-compulsory activities in school). In Faircloth and Hamm's theoretical model, belonging is a mediator variable for explaining academic success. This differs from Juvonen's (2006) sense of belonging model, which takes into account the social interplay between students' relationships with teachers and peers, as well as the students' adaptation of their own behavior. In section 1.2, I present in detail Juvonen's model, which is used in this thesis as a theoretical framework.

### **1.1.2 Closely related constructs**

Below, I briefly examine the constructs which can be considered closely related to a sense of belonging and which have appeared in the literature (e.g., school engagement and membership) (see, e.g., Williams & Downing, 1998, Willms, 2003). What the related constructs all seem to have in common is the social aspect of feeling accepted and supported in different social contexts (e.g., school, work, and neighborhood community). In the school context (both in general and in special schools), the constructs appear to share the idea that school cultures and school climates involve values, beliefs, and practices that support belonging for all students (e.g., Carrington, 1999). For example, the focus seems to be on warm and supportive relationships with teachers and the feeling of being part of a peer group. Although the literature suggests that inclusive education is related to the construct of belonging (e.g., Carroll et al., 2011; Schnorr, 1997; Williams & Downing, 1998), the focus in this thesis is on a sense of belonging in both general (inclusive) and special school placements,

and particularly on the individual student's conceptions and experiences of feeling accepted, supported, and valued in various social contexts.

In this section, I first describe school engagement, which is under the same umbrella of psychosocial perspective as the sense of belonging. Then I briefly examine sense of belonging and its relatedness to membership and social participation.

### ***School engagement***

According to Willms (2003), school engagement involves a (1) behavioral component having to do with students' participation in school activities (e.g., school and class attendance, involvement in extra-curricular activities, completing homework, etc.), and a (2) psychological component, which includes students' experiences of belonging and feeling socially connected in school. The review of engagement in school (e.g., measures, outcomes, etc.) by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) indicates the complex nature of school engagement, which they suggest consists of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive factors, or in other words, how students feel, behave, and think. It thus appears that school engagement is closely related to a sense of belonging from the psycho-social perspective. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris further suggest that school engagement is related to higher student achievement and motivation. Klem and Connell (2004), for example, found that those students who perceived their teachers as warm, caring, and supportive were associated with higher school engagement. This appears to suggest the similarities between school engagement and sense of belonging; students who have supportive teachers and warm and caring relationships with those teachers are more likely to experience sense of belonging in school, which can lead to improved academic achievement, as well as school engagement (Juvonen, 2006). This notion seems to suggest that when students can feel that sense of belonging, they are more likely to experience school engagement. However, it is important to remember that sense of belonging refers to the students' social belonging and does not have to do with their participation in school activities (e.g., class attendance, completing homework, etc.), as the behavioral element of engagement suggests. In sum, school engagement is closely related to a sense of belonging, as engagement is complex, multifold, and involving different elements (emotional, behavioral, and cognitive). Sense of belonging is one of the factors (emotional) that fosters overall school engagement.

### ***Membership***

Membership refers to the "sense of belonging, which students with disabilities may experience in a variety of formal and informal group contexts in inclusive schools" (Staub et al., 2000, p. 396). For example, membership can mean membership in a small group, a classroom, or the entire school community.



Overall, these elements mean that students with intensive special needs are given the same roles and are included equally in the same daily classroom activities as their peers without special needs. The literature suggests that teachers have the main responsibility for helping students feel fully included in school (e.g., Schnorr, 1997; Staub et al., 2000; Williams & Downing, 1998). Teachers might individualize learning materials and instruction to meet the needs of diverse students, for instance. Furthermore, membership includes individuals with and without special needs “sharing the everyday experiences at school and work and living in the neighborhood...” (Williams & Downing, 1998, p. 99). In sum, the construct of membership is closely related to the sense of belonging with its similar idea of supporting the equal belonging of each individual to the group (be it peer group, classroom, or school community). However, sense of belonging in the current study refers to feeling accepted and supported in both general and special schools, whereas membership is understood as a part of inclusive general education settings (see Staub et al., 2000).

### ***Social participation***

Social participation is related to a sense of belonging from the perspective of individuals with special needs feeling accepted, supported, and included in different social contexts. For example, Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010) suggest that, for individuals with disabilities, participation can mean that their voices are heard in decision making, which thereby includes them socially. Koster et al. (2009), as a result of their literature review, suggest four key elements of social participation in an educational setting: (1) positive social interactions with peers at school, (2) friendships among students both with and without special needs, (3) acceptance of students with special needs by classmates, and (4) feelings of peer acceptance by students with diverse needs. Furthermore, Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010) remind us of the important role of adults in supporting social relationships among classmates and making sure that the needs of students with special needs are accommodated pedagogically (e.g., by using methods that support the participation of all students). Koster, Nakken, and Van Houten (2010) highlight the fact that students with special needs might face rejection and isolation by their peers without appropriate support from teachers and parents. The authors suggest that these adults should be involved in interventions (e.g., targeting changing attitudes toward students with disabilities) that facilitate social participation and inclusion. In sum, social participation is related to a sense of belonging through its similar focus on an individual’s successful experiences of feeling accepted, supported, and respected.

Next, in section 1.2, I present in detail Juvonen’s model of sense of belonging, which is utilized here as a theoretical framework for examining students’ conceptions and experiences of belonging in general and in special education schools.

## 1.2 Sense of belonging in school

School-based relationships are important for students in forming feelings of belonging. Individuals with well-functioning social networks can perform better in school than those who are alienated from their teachers and peers (Osterman, 2000). Sense of belonging has been widely researched in general education literature (as opposed to special education studies). An extensive literature review by Juvonen (2006) resulted in a theoretical model that suggests that a sense of belonging in school is associated with (1) well-functioning student-teacher relationships and (2) positive relationships with peers. Juvonen further suggests that (3) modification of students' behavior is required in order to meet the expectations of educators or the norms set by peers.

In the present thesis, Juvonen's (2006) model of a sense of belonging is utilized as a theoretical framework for examining students' conceptions and experiences of belonging in school. Juvonen's model is based on studies of a sense of belonging in general education settings. Unfortunately, there are few studies or theoretical models on sense of belonging for students with special needs, an area that has been little researched. For that reason, Juvonen's model has been used as a conceptual framework in the current study along with literature on sense of belonging in post-school life and adulthood (see section 1.4). Figure 1 on page 13 (adapted from Juvonen, 2006, p. 668) depicts this theoretical model, which involves teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, adaptation of behavior, and sense of belonging in school. The model has been modified from the original to suit the purposes of this thesis (see American Psychological Association, 2010). I have deliberately used certain parts of the original and omitted others. For example, in the original figure under the heading "relationships with teachers," I excluded the heading "dependency (early grades)," as I have not examined the correlations of teacher-student relationships in kindergarten (e.g., close versus clingy relationships) and later school liking. I also altered another heading under the heading "relationships with classmates" by changing the original "popularity" into "popularity among peers." This adapted theoretical model is examined below under the subheadings of *teacher-student relationships*, *relationships with classmates*, and *modification of behavior*.

### 1.2.1 Teacher-student relationships

Juvonen (2006) stresses that an important element in students' sense of belonging is associated with their relationships with educators (as depicted in Figure 1, p. 8). Research suggests that ongoing warmth, trust, understanding, and individualized support between students and teachers can positively affect children's emotional well-being and behavior (Hamre et al., 2008, 2012;

## Sense of belonging for students with intensive special education needs

Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson 1999; Mashburn et al., 2008), which in turn can facilitate a sense of belonging in school.

Hamre and Pianta (2007) introduced the domain of emotional support with regard to teacher-student relationships in the classroom. The authors suggest that emotionally supportive teacher-student interactions and relationships can facilitate students' developmental progress—both academic and social—and overall learning experiences in the classroom (e.g., students' individualized, supportive, and explorative learning rather than teacher-driven instruction). The domain of emotionally supportive teacher-student relationships functions well when teachers create a positive climate consisting of sensitive, supportive, and warm relationships with their students (e.g., Hamre, 2014; Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). This in turn facilitates the development of social skills that can help students make friends at school (Johnson et al., 2013), improve self-regulatory skills (e.g., adaption of behaviors to more positive actions, such as less violent behavior) (Hamre, 2014), facilitate early academic skills (e.g., in preschool) (Curby, Brock, & Hamre, 2013), as well as increase students' motivation to learn (Houser & Frymier, 2009). A study by Finn (1993) indicated that, when students perceive sufficient support from their teachers, the risk of negative incidences related to behavior may be lessened, especially among those who might be prone behavioral outbursts. Other research indicates that students who do not feel supported may become frustrated and withdraw from learning assignments (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), further increasing educational risks (e.g., aggressive behaviors and conflicts with teachers) (Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003). For example, without appropriate social support from their teachers, students with ASD might become isolated from their peers, which can cause individuals with autism to feel frustrated and can increase behavioral incidences. Thus, smoothly functioning teacher-student relationships can protect students from these and other risks. In sum, sensitive teachers who individualize education and create respectful and emotionally supportive learning environments (see e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2007) can better meet their students' needs and help them to avoid conflicts and situations that might hinder feelings of belonging (Osterman, 2000).

### **1.2.2 Relationships with classmates**

School-based relationships with classmates can foster a sense of belonging. Hamm and Faircloth (2005) suggest that these relationships are associated with peer acceptance. The authors also discuss students' relationships with classmates and how the peer group's homogeneous like or dislike of an individual can either foster or hinder the formation of a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, students with intensive special education needs might have difficulty forming friendships (Frostdad & Pijl, 2007), and their unique characteristics may cause them to be

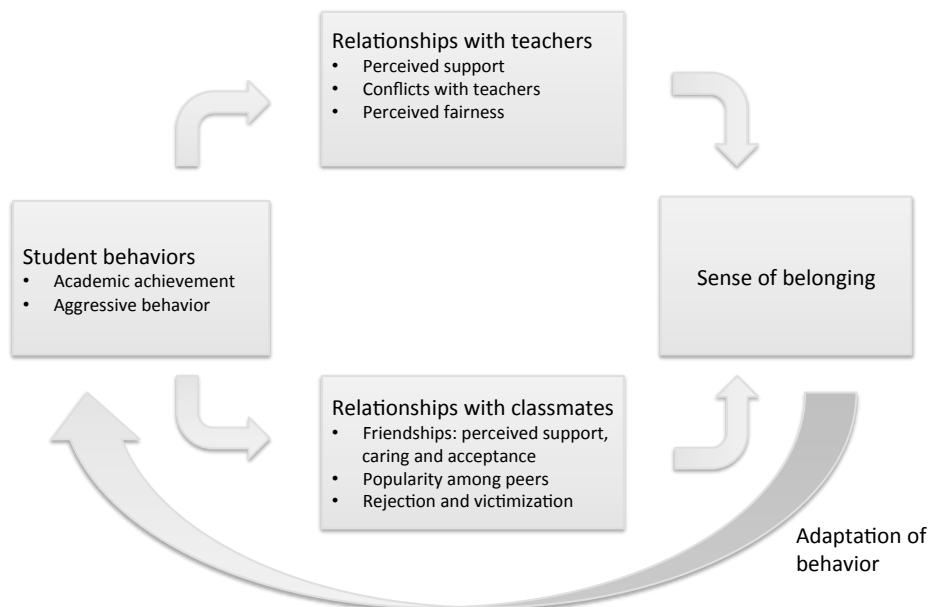
subjected to rejection and victimization by their peers (Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Rubin, LeMare, & Lollis, 1990). This type of peer alienation can present challenges to forming a sense of belonging in a school setting (general or special) and can also affect a student's overall mental well-being (Juvonen, 2006), whereas acceptance and understanding in peer relationships can make a remarkable difference in feelings of belonging (Osterman, 2000). For students with intensive special needs, successful experiences of acceptance also require a school climate that helps them form meaningful social bonds with classmates, which can lead to feelings of social belonging in the classroom and in the school community as a whole (Ma, 2003; Murray & Pianta, 2007). This highlights the important, collaborative role that adults (e.g., teachers, classroom assistants, and headmasters) play in creating a school climate in which diversity and unique characteristics are accepted, celebrated, and valued by all students, as well as by all staff members. An overall positive school climate requires school staff members with the kinds of values and beliefs (see e.g., Hamre et al., 2012; Honig, 2006; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013) that foster the development of an environment, which will increase the sense of belonging for all students.

### **1.2.3 Modification of behavior**

As Juvonen's (2006) model suggests, students must modify their behavior in order to form better relationships with teachers and peers and be accepted. The modification of behavior might be explained by fear of the emotional consequences if students do not meet the expectations of their teachers or tolerate the norms set by peers (Juvonen & Cadigan, 2002). For students with special needs, this might be challenging if they have to conceal their special needs (e.g., autism) (McRuer, 2006). This might cause individuals with special needs to feel different from those without such needs (Mietola, 2014). For example, individuals with ASD might be aware of their differences from others (Wing, 1991); therefore, it might be wiser to conceal their autism and not to mention it to other people (Davison & Henderson, 2010). Davison and Henderson claim that disclosure of autism to others (e.g., to peers in school, colleagues at work, etc.) can be as complex and stressful as "coming out of the closet" for lesbians and gay men. Such stressful experiences as hiding one's special needs might lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation (Muller, Schuler, & Yates, 2008; Preece & Jordan 2009), which can cause depression (Hedley & Young, 2006), and this may also have a negative impact on the sense of belonging (Juvonen, 2006). In sum, a caring and supportive school climate is important, specifically in providing support for those who have a history of problems associated with their well-being (e.g., experiences of anxiety among students with ASD or behavioral challenges or social-emotional problems). This

## Sense of belonging for students with intensive special education needs

type of supportive school environment (in both general and special education schools) can help students feel that they belong (see Murray & Pianta, 2007).



**Figure 1.** A model of sense of belonging depicting the associations between school-based relationships, student behaviors, and sense of belonging. (Adapted<sup>8</sup> from Juvonen, 2006, p. 668).

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<sup>8</sup> The figure has been modified from the original model to suit the purposes of this study (see American Psychological Association, 2010). Certain aspects of the original model have been used, while some have been left out. For example, in the original figure, under the heading “relationships with teachers,” I excluded the bullet point “dependency (early grades),” because I have not examined the correlations with teacher-student relationships in kindergarten and later school liking.

### **1.3 Sense of belonging in general and in special school placements**

Over the years, research on sense of belonging and inclusion efficacy for students with special needs has increased (Frederickson et al., 2007; Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000; Hagborg, 1998; Lindsay, 2007; Prince & Hadwin, 2012; Schnorr, 1997; Shochet et al., 2006; Williams & Downing, 1998). The literature suggests that with appropriate support, inclusive education can increase sense of belonging for students with special education needs. In contrast, some scholars have argued that segregated placements prevent students with special needs from forming feelings of belonging (Kunc, 1992; Williams & Downing, 1998). Although the current research suggests that inclusive school settings are necessary for students with special needs to feel a sense of belonging, sometimes students may be placed in special schools or special classes within regular schools, and these changes in school placements may jeopardize the sense of belonging. For example, students with a history of behavioral problems might be moved to a more restrictive special educational environment. These placement changes might lead to more problems in students' behaviors and feelings of belonging. Ellis, Hart, and Small-McGinley (1998) discovered that segregated placements are directly related to students' behavioral incidences (e.g., violent outbursts). The authors emphasize that students with special needs (significant behavioral problems) need to be in general education classrooms with their peers in order to feel that they belong. On the other hand, the overall school climate might also be an important factor in facilitating students' experience of a sense of belonging, as opposed to using the characteristics of the context (general versus special education settings) to define where students have the potential to feel a sense of belonging (see Ma, 2003). For example, both general and special schools might be ideal settings for fostering a sense of belonging among students with intensive special needs (and students without such needs as well, if there is a positive climate in the placement). In sum, the existing research on school placements (which is limited to studies conducted in general education settings [inclusive]) offers somewhat mixed ideas with regard to placement where students with special needs can potentially feel that they belong.

### **1.4 Sense of belonging in post-school life**

Satisfying social bonds such as friendships can help individuals feel a sense of belonging when they integrate into post-school life (Juvonen, 2006; Osterman, 2000). This critical period of emerging adulthood (between the ages of 18 and 25) is characterized by change and exploration in various aspects of life (Arnett, 2000). Arnett suggests that the areas of exploration can be related to experiences in such areas as relationships (love), work life, and hobbies. To be more specific,

persons with autism might discover meaningful experiences through sports, for instance, or other leisure activities. These experiences can help create relationships with other people and overcome possible challenges related to social interaction (see, e.g., Wing, 1992). Research has found that physical activities and hobbies related to music and art, in which individuals on the autism spectrum can participate without much conversation, serve as self-initiated support methods that may help in dealing with relationships with people with or without ASD (Muller et al., 2008). These kinds of successful and rewarding experiences of social bonding during the period of emerging adulthood are essential for an individual to feel satisfied, included, and accepted in a community (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). Furthermore, a study by Nuttman-Schwartz and Dekel (2009) indicates that forming a strong sense of belonging in communities during the post-school phase (e.g., after comprehensive school) and in emerging adulthood (between ages 18 and 25) is important, as it facilitates an individual's ability to cope later in life.

### **1.5 Supporting sense of belonging in school and in post-school life**

#### **1.5.1 Support in school**

In Finland, placing children with special needs in general education classes has gradually increased (Statistics Finland 2014a). However, concerns have been raised that students with intensive special education needs might be included in general education less often than those with milder forms of special needs (e.g., learning difficulties) (Kokko et al., 2014). Such concerns about the disadvantages of educating children in segregated conditions have led to the development of special education legislation initiatives (see, e.g., Thuneberg et al., 2013). Finland's nine-year, tuition-free comprehensive school system follows the Basic Education Act of Finland (628/1998), which promotes actions intended to help those with intensive special needs feel a sense of belonging and achieve positive outcomes during their school years. In January 2011, Finland implemented its most recent educational legislation. The amendments to the Finnish Basic Education Act (642/2010) were designed much like the Response-to-Intervention model (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Fuchs et al., 2003). The legislation consists of three tiers of support. The first tier is provided in the regular classroom; the second tier consists of targeted educational interventions and intensified support; and the third tier is special education, which is provided partly or fully in special education settings or schools. Students receive support arrangements based on the nature and the extent of their needs (Finnish Basic Education Act, 642/2010). Early recognition is vital; so is providing

individualized support as long as is deemed necessary. The aim of the legislation is to provide support for struggling students in classrooms with their peers and intensified support to reduce placements in full-time special educational settings (Kirjavainen, Pulkkinen, & Jahnukainen, 2014). In addition, the support services should be educationally determined (Ahtiainen et al., 2012; Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2010), given that official medical diagnoses are not required for students to receive special education services (Thuneberg et al., 2013). Rather than being medically determined, the support should be based on a student's educational needs. Teachers can establish which students are struggling and can seek support for them based on observations in the classroom (Thuneberg et al., 2013). For example, principals, teachers, and the school itself might have different philosophies about how to respond to students with special needs. Similarities in philosophies can create a school climate that fosters a sense of belonging for all students (Ma, 2003).

When the new legislation was enacted in Finland in January 2011, those responsible for implementing it (e.g., teachers, principals, etc.) may have had different values and beliefs with regard to special education needs. Honig (2006) suggests that the formal targets of the policy (e.g., the three tiers of support, the Basic Education Act, 642/2010) are shaped by how those working in the field respond to the policy demands. Furthermore, individual identities and experiences also shape how implementation unfolds, according to how those doing the implementing interpret the policy messages (Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). Scholars have used various terms to identify those responsible for implementation, such as teachers and principals, who play a central role in the policy implementation. For example, Wilson (1989) calls these individuals "front-line operators," while Weatherly and Lipsky's (1977) term is "street-level bureaucrats."

Wilson (1989) proposes that the front-line workers make decisions based on the context in which they encounter a situation while taking into account professional norms and values. This notion of the implementers' use of situational imperatives would suggest variation in regional implementation based on the prior knowledge, experiences, and values of those implementing a given policy (Honig, 2006; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). Moreover, the geographical location of a school (see Honig, 2006, who speaks of "place" on p. 18) invokes historical institutional patterns and context, which affect educational arrangements. For example, municipalities in Finland have had various ways of organizing special education over the years. In other words, the system (that is, the place) and its actors convey values and beliefs that are distinctive of the location's historical patterns and culture (Honig, 2006). For instance, teachers make sense of policies based on their own knowledge base, experience, and values (Hill, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). This can result in highly diverse educational arrangements, especially since the recent implementation of



the three-tiered education support model, for students with intensive special education needs, depending on the school and the municipality. Although the Finnish educational legislation for support may have its weaknesses, due to differences in teachers' values and beliefs regarding special education needs, legislation concerning post-school transitioning planning in Finland is almost non-existent. In the following section (1.5.2.), I describe what does exist for post-school transition planning in Finland.

### **1.5.2 Post-school transition planning in Finland**

The Basic Education Act of Finland (2010) does not mandate separate transition planning as part of student documentation, especially after comprehensive school (ages 16 and above). By contrast, in the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004 (IDEA) requires schools to identify post-school transition support and planning in the education plan (IEP) of each child between the ages of 16 and 21. Numerous studies suggest that students in Finland with special education needs might continue to experience challenges after comprehensive school, and some become socially excluded from their communities and from meaningful participation in society (e.g., Brunila et al., 2011; Jahnukainen, 1999; Jahnukainen & Järvinen, 2006). For example, students with intensive special education needs might end up without any further education or employment. This might be the result of poor planning and poor documentation of support arrangements for individuals with diverse learning needs, as well as regional variation in the documentation (IEP). For example, unlike in the United States, in Finland there are no policy instruments, such as mandates, inducements, or monitoring (see, e.g., McDonnell & Elmore, 1987), for how transition planning should be prepared.

### **1.5.3 Support in adulthood**

As I demonstrated under the previous subheading, there is no legislation in Finland requiring formal individualized transition planning for individuals with special needs after comprehensive education. In the United States, for example, such individual transition planning procedures are carried out until a student reaches the age of 21 (see IDEA, 2004). Even though post-school transition planning is not a mandate in Finland (as opposed to the United States), international research provides suggestions for other alternatives that might help individuals with special needs become integrated into their communities and overcome issues during the critical post-school transition period and later, in adulthood. For example, research has found that formal or informal social support groups can serve as sites for structured activities, which can facilitate social interactions for individuals with ASD (Tobin et al., 2014). This, in turn,

might increase the likelihood that a student experiences belonging. Other studies have indicated that support groups specifically targeting young women with disabilities foster a positive sense of belonging, especially during the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Mejias et al., 2014). The authors of the research highlight the importance of sharing one's thoughts about disability, womanhood, and issues related to social acceptance in the support group meetings. Establishing these support groups for individuals with intensive special needs (both women and men) before and during transition to post-school life might facilitate the formation of important social bonds, and specifically friendships. For instance, a study by Muller et al. (2008) suggests that post-school-age and adult participants with ASD reported that they had not experienced real friendships in adulthood, owing to poor social support and challenges in social interactions. At the same time, the participants expressed how much they wanted deeper friendships and one-on-one conversations. Indeed, it would be of utmost importance to make these groups visible and inclusive for all individuals—those with special needs and those without—in order to increase public awareness and acceptance of persons with special needs and decrease the number of situations in which individuals with such unique needs feel dissimilar. In sum, the support groups have the potential to foster a strong sense of belonging to society among individuals with intensive special needs.

## **1.6 The present study**

### **1.6.1 Aims**

Given the current emphases in the literature on a sense of belonging in school and post-school life for students with special education needs and on the role of different kinds of support, coupled with the lack of previous research specifically about students with *intensive* special education needs and their sense of belonging in different school placements and into adulthood, it has seemed important to investigate this under-researched area. The current study is unique in Finland by introducing a new perspective in research in the field of Finnish special pedagogy, namely, the perspective of a sense of belonging (in Finnish, *kuuluvuuden tunne*).

The aim of this thesis is to examine the extent to which a sense of belonging can be supported in school and in post-school life for those with intensive special needs. Specifically, I address the following questions:

1. What are the conceptions and experiences associated with a sense of belonging for students with intensive special needs in general education schools and in special education schools? (Studies I and II)
2. How can teachers' values and beliefs foster the implementation of a three-tiered support (as mandated by the Basic Education Act 642/2010) and the organization of special education with regard to a school climate that supports a sense of belonging for students with intensive special needs? (Studies I and III)
3. What can different school placements and post-school support services do to help students with intensive special needs feel a sense of belonging? (Studies I and II)
4. To what extent is Juvonen's (2006) model of a sense of belonging applicable as a theoretical framework for examining a sense of belonging in school for students with intensive special education needs? (Studies I, II, and III)

### **1.6.2 An overview of methodological solutions**

An overview of the methodological solutions utilized in the original publications (Studies I-III) is provided in Table 1 on the next page. The table summarizes the aims, participants, methods of data collection, types of data, and methods of analysis of each study.

**Table 1.** A summary of the aims, participants, methods of data collection, types of data and analyses in the original studies.

<b>Study</b>	<b>Principal aims</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Method of data collection</b>	<b>Type of data</b>	<b>Method of analysis</b>
<b>I</b>	To examine conceptions associated with a sense of belonging in general education and in special schools for students with intensive special needs	Five students with intensive special needs. All students had experienced multiple changes in school placement	Semi-structured interviews	Interview transcripts (130 pages, 3 hours and 15 minutes of recordings)	Phenomenographic analysis of interview transcripts.
<b>II</b>	To examine sense of belonging and various life transition issues which may appear during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in the absence of appropriate social support	Two females with ASD	Semi-structured interviews and documentary data concerning participants' sense of belonging throughout life	Interview transcripts (63 pages, 2 hours and 30 minutes of recordings) and documentary data (old report cards, documents received from parents, etc.)	First, drafting narratives with content analysis technique. Then final narratives about sense of belonging throughout life utilizing Polkinghorne's (1995 & 2007) framework for analysis
<b>III</b>	To examine the implementation of new special education legislation in Finland (Basic Education Act 624/2010) among students with intensive special education needs	Teachers' perceptions of the implementation of legislation (N=526) and follow-up observations of the implementation in schools (n=12) across the nation	Electronic survey and follow-up observations in schools	Survey data (quantitative and qualitative) and school observation data	Survey data: frequencies, percentages, and content analysis -> mixed methods design. Observations: content analysis. In general, using the implementation literature to explain the outcomes of the legislation in Finland.

## 2 Overview of the original studies

This thesis consists of three peer-reviewed articles. In this chapter, I will provide a more detailed overview of each study's aims, methods, results, and discussions (sections 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3). The original publications (Studies I-III) can be found at the end of this thesis.

### 2.1 Study I

#### 2.1.1 Aim

The purpose of Study I was to examine conceptions associated with a sense of belonging in different school placements (general and special education schools) for students with intensive special education needs.

#### 2.1.2 Method

In Study I, a qualitative method of phenomenography was utilized. Phenomenography is often used in educational research, because its purpose is to capture conceptions of the phenomenon being studied (Marton, 1981). Conceptions are based on an individual's relationships in the world around him from which perspectives, contexts, and experiences are constructed (Marton, 1981; 1986). Each individual interprets the world differently and therefore forms different conceptions (Marton, 1981). This emphasis on the individual's diverse conceptions of the world helps to us understand better a person's experiences, actions, and relationships with the environment—the assumption being that the individual is the one with the knowledge and perceptions of the phenomenon being investigated (Marton, 1981; 1986; Richardson, 1999). Phenomenographic studies, for example, use interviews as data sources, thereby allowing the researcher to create descriptions based on the individual's knowledge and lived experiences of a phenomenon (Kakkori & Huttunen, 2010).

#### ***Setting***

A special school in the southwest of Finland located in a municipality with an approximate population of 40,000 (Population Register Centre, 2014) served as the research site. The total student enrollment across the whole municipality was 3,645 (Statistics Finland, 2014b). In the special school, the total enrollment was 74. There were eight classes with one special teacher per class. Many of the students had a personal assistant. The research site was mainly responsible for providing special education for students with autism, but it also appeared to be

an “alternative school” for students who were repeatedly unsuccessful in the municipality’s other educational settings (both general and special). The school was gradually integrating the students into nearby general education schools (as outlined in section 1.5.1). For example, the school had integrated some of its students into nearby general education schools, although in some subject areas these students were receiving intensified support in the special school. Meanwhile, other students required ongoing intensified support; they attended the special school full-time.

### ***Participants***

Five students with intensive special needs were selected for Study I using purposive sampling from a special school in the southwest of Finland. Of these five students, three were female and two were male. The age of the participants ranged from 13 to 15. All the participants received special education services.

The purposive participant sampling was based on conversations in university-led focus groups (see Kokko et al., 2014), in which the principal of the special school was a member. The principal completed the purposive participant sampling; during the focus-group conversations, the principal expressed her concern about a unique group of special school students (N=5). Even though the current legislation attempts to provide support for students in inclusive classrooms and to utilize intensified support to reduce placements in full-time special education (Kirjavainen, Pulkkinen, & Jahnukainen 2014), the principal described this specific group of students as having experienced various placements (as many as 3 to 7) in the municipality’s schools (in both general and special schools) before coming to the special school. According to the principal, the special school seemed to be an “alternative” setting for students who were not successful in the municipalities’ other schools. Furthermore, in Finnish schools, the number of students receiving intensified support has increased, while full-time special education placements have decreased (Statistics Finland, 2014a). Therefore, it was considered important to examine these data to determine what was needed for all the school children to feel a sense of belonging.

### ***Data collection***

Two researchers from a four-researcher team<sup>9</sup> conducted the individual semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2003; Kvale, 2008) at the research site between September 2013 and February 2014. The open-ended interview questions were based on the literature related to the phenomenon being studied and on conversations among the team of researchers. The interview questions were divided into two different categories according to the students’ conceptions of a

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<sup>9</sup> All the research team members were involved in the VETURI research project. In Study I, the team consisted of four members.

sense of belonging: (a) sense of belonging in previous placements and (b) sense of belonging in their current school. The interview questions covered the elements that are needed for a student to feel a sense of belonging in school.

Both researchers interviewed the student participants in distraction-free classrooms on the school premises. The researchers did not define sense of belonging for the participants either prior to or during the interview situation. One of the researchers interviewed three students, and the other interviewed two students. The entire interview data consisted of approximately 3 hours and 15 minutes of recordings, with the duration of each interview ranging from 20 to 60 minutes. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed using Microsoft Word, resulting in 130 pages of interview transcripts.

### ***Data analysis***

The data analysis consisted of several steps. First, the separate interview transcript documents were combined into one Word document and printed out. Although the transcripts were combined into a single document, each transcript had a cover page that included the participant's background information (student's age, grade, and changed name), so that I was able to distinguish between the participants and therefore examine the data within and across students in order to develop themes throughout the analysis. Once I had the printouts, the transcripts were read through several times with the greatest possible openness to the data. Next, the recorded interviews were listened to along with the interview transcripts while I jotted down notes in the transcript margins. After listening to the audiotapes, I conducted a thorough coding of the transcripts, identifying specific words, phrases, and concepts. At this point, the printed versions of the transcripts were filled with various handwritten notes, highlighted text segments, and other markings; therefore, I decided to continue the data analysis electronically. The interview transcript document was opened in Word, and the print versions of the transcript were placed on the table. The decision to use Word was based on the ease of keeping the extensive data and codes organized. Hence, even more thorough coding and combining codes into themes was possible. Different sections (words, sentences, and paragraphs) of the text were highlighted in different colors, and each color code was labeled (Creswell, 2003). Once this was completed, I went over the different codes, combined these into larger themes, and labeled the themes (e.g., reasons for placement changes, students' behaviors, hiding characteristics of special needs, students' popularity, experiences of rejection, relationships with teachers, classroom assistants and other adults helping students, etc.). Next, I created a matrix to facilitate a more intensive analysis (Check & Schutt, 2012). The matrix (7 by 34) consisted of cells that included background information about the participants and cells with descriptions covering each theme that emerged for each student participant. I carefully examined the multiple relationships

displayed on the matrix and began to identify and condense the data into simpler themes (e.g., stigma, poor individualized support), and the themes into categories (Check & Schutt, 2012). Throughout this process, I frequently referred to the original interview transcripts (Creswell, 2003).

### ***Trustworthiness***

In Study I, two methods were used for purposes of reliability. First, the members of the research team frequently utilized peer debriefing (Su'o'ng & Nguyen, 2008) to discuss the methods and the major themes that emerged. Second, as I conducted the initial analysis, I organized two data validation meetings. I gave the coded transcripts and the matrix to other members of the research team and explained in detail the steps that had been followed in the analysis. During the two meetings, our research team went over the codes and sections of the text from which the final themes and categories had emerged. Any disagreements were discussed until the team of researchers reached consensus.

### ***Ethics***

All of the appropriate ethical guidelines were followed in Study I. The families of the students received formal consent letters, which included information about the voluntary participation, the purpose of the research, and characteristics of the interviews (interview themes, duration, public scrutiny, etc.). The families and students also learned that the audio-taped interviews would be shared only with the researchers of the current study. The letters further explained the confidential nature of the research. To ensure and protect participants' anonymity, all identifiable information was removed.

### **2.1.3 Results**

The phenomenographic data analysis of the semi-structured interviews resulted in six major themes, which I divided into two major categories: (a) barriers to sense of belonging and (b) facilitators of sense of belonging. The category of "barriers to sense of belonging" included the following themes: (1) poor individualization, (2) students' victimization and rejection by peers, and (3) students' experiences of stigma. The category of "facilitator of sense of belonging" consisted of (1) students' relationships with various adults, (2) equality among adults, and (3) supportive school climate (in the current school).

The most common and consistent finding was that the students had undergone different types of disruptive education placements (general and special) before arriving at their current school, which was a special school. Table 2 presents the different placements the students had experienced prior to the current placement. Furthermore, the students reported having received inadequate support in their previous schools as a result of their teachers'



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inability to understand their unique characteristics, as well as having experienced rejection by their peers. These unfavorable peer experiences had also caused the students to hide their diverse learning characteristics and to feel stigmatized. Additionally, the disturbing relationships with teachers and peers seemed to have affected students' mental and physical well-being, manifested in behavioral outbursts and suicidal thoughts in the previous educational settings. In other words, the students had been "shipped around" in various educational settings owing to the teachers' inability to accommodate the students' needs.

One of the major findings of Study I indicated that the current school with a positive climate allowed students with special needs to feel a sense of belonging (see Ma, 2003). This was not the case in the previous educational settings, where students did not experience belonging. The findings indicated that the school climate in the current placement was created by cooperating adults who had values and beliefs about educating children with intensive special needs that fostered the experience of belonging. The findings suggested that the characteristics of the school climate matter the most (as opposed to the context of the school) in creating such an experience (see Ma, 2003; Murray & Pianta, 2007).

**Table 2.** Students' placements prior to their current special school placement

<b>Number of Placements before Current School</b>	<b>Mike</b>	<b>Larry</b>	<b>Lizzy</b>	<b>Cindy</b>	<b>Susan</b>
1	Kindergarten	1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade (same school)	Kindergarten	School A	Preschool
2	Preschool (x 2)	Hospital school (6 months)	Pre-school	School B	Elementary school (general education)
3	1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> grade (new school)	Special education school (6 months)	1 <sup>st</sup> grade	Special school	Inpatient family support center treatment period (4 months)
4	3 <sup>rd</sup> -6 <sup>th</sup> grade (new school)	4 <sup>th</sup> – 6 <sup>th</sup> grade (new general education school)	New school (one year)		Special school
5	7 <sup>th</sup> grade in special class in inclusive general education school	Special school	New school (two years)		
6	Inclusive general education school with assistant		New school (five years)		
7	Special school		Special school		

### **2.1.4 Discussion**

The purpose of Study I was to examine conceptions associated with sense of belonging in different school placements (general education and special schools) among Finnish students with intensive special needs. Despite the various types of placements, as well as ableism, feelings of stigma, and educational exclusion, the students felt “better” in their current special school, which had a positive climate. The findings suggest that a school’s climate (e.g., adults’ philosophies about students with intensive special needs) could either foster or hinder students’ sense of belonging ( e.g., Lindsay, 2007; Kunc, 1992; Schnorr, 1997). It appears that a poor school climate (as opposed to general or special school placement contexts) can lead to students being “shipped around.” In the current school, there appeared to be cooperative adults who seemed to create a positive climate, which increased the students’ sense of belonging. Indeed, the overall school climate has a significant impact on students’ sense of belonging (Ma, 2003; Murray & Pianta, 2007). The findings suggest that the school principal seems to play a major role in fostering collaboration and positive philosophies among adults, which lays the foundation for an educational climate that increases students’ sense of belonging. In Study I, the students described how they had been able to form relationships with teachers and peers in their present school and thus feel a sense of belonging; moreover, they were no longer being “shipped” around to new educational settings. Generally, in the current school, adults had been able to individualize support and create a caring, respectful climate for the students.

## 2.2 Study II

### 2.2.1 Aim

Study II, based on the narratives of two females (ages 26 and 29) with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), examined sense of belonging and various life transition<sup>10</sup> issues which may appear throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in the absence of appropriate social supports.

### 2.2.2 Method

In Study II, narrative approaches were used. Narrative research attempts to provide a real sense of what an individual's world is like through rich detail and how actual life events have evolved (Bruner, 1986). Narrative studies use interviews and documents as data sources (Check & Schutt, 2012; Creswell, 2003; Greenhalgh, Russel, & Swinglehurst, 2005; Riessman, 2008), thereby allowing the creation of life stories and a presentation of particular life events, which help to make sense of individuals' lived experiences (e.g., Miller, 1999; Waitt & Gorman-Murray, 2011; Sandelowski, 1991). Life stories alone provide detailed insight into an individual's lived experiences; however, narrative research can also include interpretations of the stories (Polkinghorne, 2007). The interpretation of the narratives might draw on themes that appear in the narratives and identify the type of plot the story illustrates (Polkinghorne, 2007). Further, narrative research attempts to contextualize the stories by comparing and contrasting the narratives with the existing literature on the phenomenon under study (Polkinghorne, 2007).

### *Participants*

Two participants were selected for Study II. A purposive participant sampling (Check & Schutt, 2012) was carried out by university-led focus groups, of which one participating institution was a school in southwest Finland for students with autism (see Kokko et al., 2014). We, that is, the members of the VETURI research project, who authored the original publication, explained to the school principal that we wanted to identify former students from the 1990s who were

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<sup>10</sup> In the original published article (which can be found at the end of this thesis) the term "life transitions" referred to transitions beginning in childhood and continuing through adolescence and adulthood (e.g., transitions in school, to a new school, to adulthood, to work, or to unemployment, including school placement changes [between general and special schools]). The use of this term in the article is different from its traditional use in special education research, which applies to post-school transitions. Apart from this original article and the overview below of the published study (2.2.2., 2.2.3, and 2.2.4), generally in this thesis, the term transition refers to the "traditional" post-school transition phase.

females with ASD, because we wanted to obtain a valid perspective on life transitions. Furthermore, research into life transition trajectories of females with ASD was considered important, given that in the past few years the number of girls diagnosed on the autism spectrum has grown (Meng-Chuan, Lombardo, Auyeung, Bhismadev, & Baron-Cohen, 2015). As a result, we received information about potential interview candidates who had attended the specialized autism institution at some point between 1990 and 1999.

The entire participant data consisted of eight females with a current diagnosis of ASD (WHO, 1994). Regarding the inclusion criteria for Study II, participants (a) had to demonstrate that they had no severe, diagnosed communication concerns, (b) had to be over 18 years of age, (c) had to have transitioned to further education and/or employment since comprehensive education, and (d) had to be living independently. The inclusion criterion (a) was selected in order to ensure reliability in the interview situation. Inclusion criteria (b), (c), and (d) were based on “the dimensions of adulthood,” which include experiences of autonomy (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2000, p. 633). The purpose of these criteria was to include individuals who had a variety of transition experiences to adulthood in order to document transition data throughout each individual’s life. Ultimately, two females with ASD ages 26 and 29 were selected for Study II. Those who did not meet the inclusion criteria had either moderate or severe communication challenges and had not obtained a degree since leaving comprehensive school or they had not been employed. In addition, they lived in supported arrangements or care units.

### ***Data collection***

In Study II, the data were collected via semi-structured interviews and documents. The individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in March and June of 2013 in a distraction-free university-based office. Open-ended interview questions were based on themes that covered (a) experiences of transition and support in childhood, (b) experiences of transition and support in adolescence, (c) transitioning to adulthood, and (d) experiences of transition and support in adulthood. The entire interview data comprised approximately 2.5 hours of recordings, with the first interview lasting approximately 1.5 hours and the second lasting 60 minutes. Both interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed using Microsoft Word.

Once the interviews were conducted, I collected the document data. These data included the teacher’s notes about each student, report cards, records received from the participants’ parents, as well as previous research containing case descriptions of the participants’ childhood schooling (see Kontu, 1995).

### ***Data analysis***

The audio-taped interviews were transcribed into an electronic format using Microsoft Word, resulting in 63 pages of interview transcripts. The transcripts were merged into one document and printed out. Then the document data were skimmed through and organized into different piles (e.g., teacher's notes regarding organization of support, diagnostic history, report cards, etc.). The analysis of the data entailed a three-step process, which was used to identify emergent themes in the participants' life stories.

First, I read the interview transcripts several times and with the greatest possible openness to obtain a general understanding of the data before conducting a more thorough coding of the transcripts (Creswell, 2003). In addition, I listened to the recorded interviews repeatedly along with the interview transcripts, writing notes in the margins of the transcripts. Once this was completed, I thoroughly coded the transcripts, highlighting specific words and phrases in the text by hand. Furthermore, I made notes in the margins pertaining to the highlighted sections. This process of coding and making notes helped in identifying connections in the data. During the analysis, I gained familiarity with the interview data, which also made it possible to organize all the relevant life-transition events into visual presentations (e.g., transition timelines). The visual transition timelines helped me to write draft versions of the life-transition stories using Microsoft Word.

Thereafter, I proceeded to review the documentary data in order to enhance the drafts of the life transition stories based on the interview data. I read the organized documents multiple times. In reading, I utilized a "first-pass document review" technique (Bowen, 2009, p. 32) to fill in the gaps identified in the drafted stories with meaningful and relevant documentary evidence. Once the narrative drafts had been supplemented with documentary data, I utilized Polkinghorne's (1995, pp. 16-18) seven categories of narrative analysis to complete the investigation.

I placed the draft versions of the narrative accounts along with both data sets on the desk and began to generate the final (1) descriptions of cultural context, such as meaningful portrayals of special education settings; (2) descriptions of physical appearance and mental attributes of the individuals; for example, appearances of ASD characteristics in school; (3) descriptions of other people meaningful to the students, such as parents, teachers, friends, classmates, etc.; (4) descriptions of the students' life goals, hopes, and dreams and the actions taken to achieve them (e.g., social support); and (5) descriptions of the impact of meaningful life events; for example, an event that helped the student acquire self-determination, which is considered a means of constituting rational maturity and autonomy over one's life choices (see Ferguson & Ferguson, 2000, p. 634). The sixth category of the analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995, pp. 17-18) included generating the final narrative findings. In the generation of the final narrative

discoveries, major themes were identified which had appeared in the life transition stories of both participants (Polkinghorne, 2007). Using Microsoft Word's text highlighter capability, I was able to identify the major themes in the narratives (Polkinghorne, 2007) and organize the narrative stories around these main themes.

### ***Trustworthiness***

In Study II, several methods were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis. First, I used triangulation to cross-check the findings across the data sources (Creswell, 2003). Second, a member check (Schwandt, 2007) was conducted, since there were some unclear data patterns which I could not resolve by re-examining the data sets. Therefore, a former teacher together with the original 29-year-old participant were contacted and asked to clarify the interpretation. The teacher provided supplemental information regarding transitions in educational settings in childhood, and the participant explained the unclear information related to her employment. Third, a three-member research team<sup>11</sup> discussed the methods and major themes of the analysis as they emerged, frequently using peer debriefing (Su'o'ng & Nguyen, 2008). Finally, the team of researchers organized an official data validation meeting during which the major themes were discussed and the findings cross-checked across the data sources. Any disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached among the team of researchers.

### ***Ethics***

All appropriate ethical considerations were strictly followed throughout Study II. When the two participants were contacted via email, the purpose of the research was explained, along with the voluntary nature of the participation and the characteristics of the interviews (interview themes, public scrutiny, duration, etc.). The participants were also informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of the research; all names of people, places, institutions, and other identifiable information were removed. Likewise, the participants were informed that the audio-taped interviews were to be shared only with the research team of Study II. Additionally, we explained that the participants had the right to ask questions about the research and to withdraw at any time.

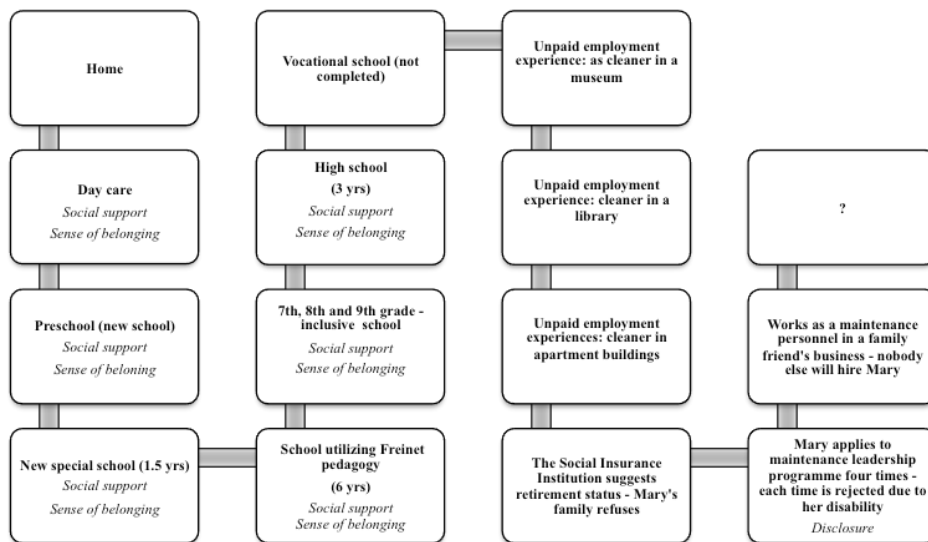
## **2.2.3 Results**

Analysis of the life transition stories of the two participants (Mary & Emma) (including changes in school placements; see footnote 10, p. 28) resulted in three major themes: (1) social support throughout life transitions, (2) disclosure of

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<sup>11</sup> The authors of the original publication.

characteristics of autism, and (3) a sense of belonging. The following figures (2 and 3) demonstrate Mary’s and Emma’s total life transitions and the different placements they experienced in school. The existence of the themes that emerged are presented in each figure, or put more precisely, the experiences of a sense of belonging during the participants’ school placements and throughout post-school life and adulthood are presented.



**Figure 2.** Mary’s various school placements and life transitions path.

As the figure demonstrates, Mary had experienced 13 transitions during her life. Throughout these life transitions, Mary had been in different schools and experienced feelings of belonging in both general education settings and in more restricted special education schools. The findings indicated that Mary had mainly been in special schools (such as a Freinet school) during her childhood and elementary education. In these schools, she was able to experience a sense of belonging. When Mary transitioned to secondary school, the inclusive school individualized her support arrangements so that she was able to experience belonging. Furthermore, the above figure illustrates her transition to post-school life and adulthood, as well as Mary’s experiences of social support and sense of belonging during this period. Unfortunately, the analysis indicated that Mary did not have very successful experiences of belonging during her post-school life because of poor transition planning, the support system, and prejudice toward autism. For example, Mary explained that people perceive her negatively because of her ASD; hence, it was difficult to find gainful employment:

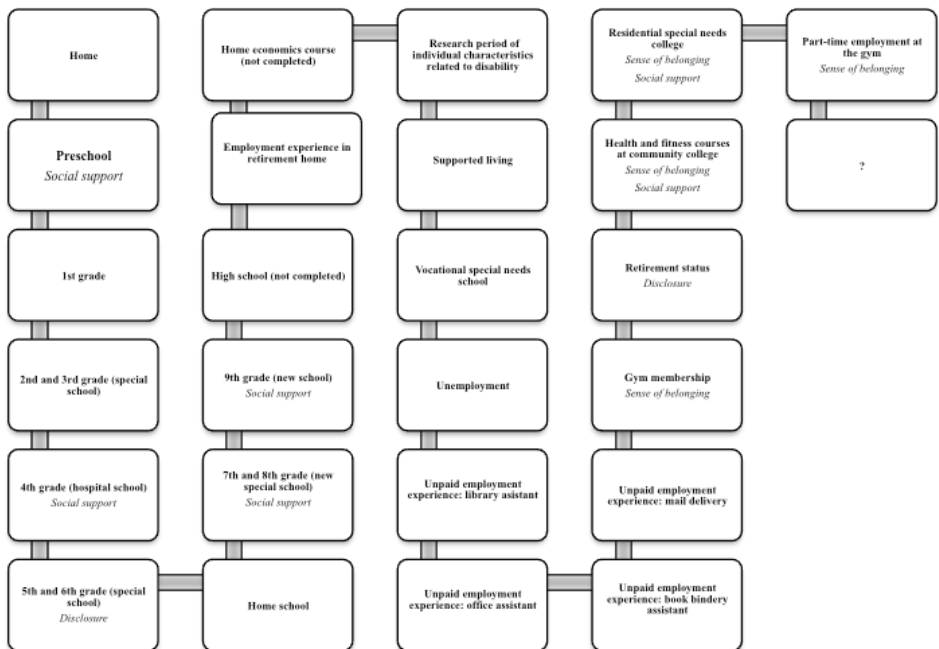
*When I mention that I have Asperger’s Syndrome, I believe that probably some of the co-workers think that I’m someone less intelligent who needs*



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*help most of the time. And I am not. If there is a person who would explain to me how things are done, and someone I can ask if I am having difficulties, I can manage. But many co-workers do not agree; they think the opposite.*

Mary's narrative demonstrated that she had rather satisfying experiences of being accepted and feeling accepted as well as supported and included during her school years. Most of these schools in her childhood and adolescence had adults working in collaboration to create supportive and accepting learning environments. However, as the quotation above demonstrates, in adulthood, Mary did not experience a sense of belonging, owing to lack of support and peoples' negative attitudes toward individuals with ASD. Next, I will demonstrate Emma's life transitions and her different school placements during these transitions.



**Figure 3.** Emma's school placements and life transitions path.

Examination of Figure 2 reveals that Emma had numerous school placements (general and special) during her education. Throughout these life transitions and school placements, Emma had experienced a sense of belonging in varying degrees. She was in different placements during her childhood and adolescent education and failed to experience a sense of belonging. Although the figure shows that during elementary education Emma had been in various schools (both general and special), the analysis indicated that these schools did not support

students' sense of belonging. Unfortunately, during these unfavorable school experiences, Emma also felt that she had to hide the unique characteristics of her autism. For example, the following quotation demonstrates that one of her teachers often yelled at her, and she began to adjust her behavior accordingly:

*It was my fault that the teacher lost his nerve, and then it just gets to you. First, I tried to force myself through it and so on; I kept going there, and then I just got tired, and I didn't manage to pretend to be normal anymore . . . For six months I was able to pretend to be normal, and then I just could not anymore . . .*

Although Emma did not have successful experiences of belonging during and after school life, she has had strong experiences of belonging in post-school life. At the age of 24, Emma found a discount deal for joining a gym. Working out became her true passion. Emma explained how much she enjoyed sports and praised the motivating instructors at the gym. Emma's fulfilling experience and meaningful life event was discovering sports. Engaging in sports seemed to help Emma to "feel socially at ease" and afforded much-needed experiences of feeling satisfied with herself and being socially accepted by others. The importance of this kind of meaningful experience is supported by Nuttman-Schwartz and Dekel's findings (2009), which show that feeling accepted and respected during the post-school period helps an individual create a sense of belonging and an ability to cope later in life.

#### **2.2.4 Discussion**

Study II, based on the narratives of two females (ages 26 and 29) with ASD, examined a sense of belonging and the various life transition issues that may appear in the absence of appropriate social support. Although limited to two narrative accounts, the findings of Study II suggest that there can be either a fading sense of belonging or a simmering sense of belonging. Mary's narrative revealed that she had vibrant experiences of social support and a sense of belonging during her schooling and before transition to adulthood; however, she did not have any such experiences during emerging adulthood (between the ages of 18 and 25). Therefore, her experience can be described as a fading sense of belonging. Emma, on the other hand, had numerous transitions compared to Mary, owing to a lack of social backing during her various school placements, which seemed to prevent Emma from feeling a sense of belonging. However, during emerging adulthood, Emma gained a strong sense of belonging when she discovered her strength, abilities, and self-determination through a meaningful life event and its accompanying experiences. It appears that Emma's sense of belonging was simmering, evolving throughout her life and culminating in the meaningful event of discovering sports (at the gym) in emerging adulthood.

## **2.3 Study III**

### **2.3.1 Aim**

The aim of Study III was to examine the implementation of special education legislation (Basic Education Act 642/2010) in Finland among students with intensive special education needs.

### **2.3.2 Method**

In Study III, two data sets were used. Below, I will first present these data sets, followed by a description of the analysis and then the research ethics.

#### ***Electronic survey***

The survey data were collected by members of the VETURI research project, which was directed by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture for baseline and compliance purposes (for the full report, the reader is referred to Kokko et al., 2014). The electronic survey data were collected from school personnel working with students having intensive special needs from April 2012 to June 2013. The final report consisted of teacher perceptions (N = 526) of the implementation of the legislation (Basic Education Act 642/2010) and the current organization of special education services.

#### ***Field observation data***

Field observations were conducted on the implementation of the new legislation (Basic Education Act 642/2010) in schools (n = 12) across Finland over a six-month period in 2012 and in 2013. The schools were selected by means of purposive sampling (Check & Schutt, 2012). Schools were chosen based on their voluntary involvement in university-led focus groups, which brainstormed ways to implement the new special education policy. The schools were located in a variety of regions in Finland, which provided a reliable picture of the organization of special education across the country.

The field visit data were collected through observations of the organization of special education (i.e., classroom situations, recess, lunch, etc.) and of focus group discussions with school personnel about the implementation of the Basic Education legislation. After each visit and focus group meeting, the team of researchers met to discuss their observations. These discussions resulted in a report that required consensus among the researchers.

#### ***Data Analysis***

The purpose of the analysis was to make sense of the nationwide data from a policy implementation perspective and to analyze how the implementation

literature (e.g., implementers' values and beliefs) can explain the outcomes of the legislation in Finland. We therefore deliberately selected components of the VETURI project's survey (e.g., outcomes of the basic education reform, current special education teaching arrangements for students with intensive special needs, integration arrangements within schools for students with intensive special needs, teachers' professional development needs) that covered the respondents' views of the impact of the legislation.

In the analysis of the survey data, a sequential mixed-methods design was used (Morse, 2003) in which statistical information was quantitatively analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics (Creswell, 2007; Morse, 2003). The findings, aggregated from the final VETURI report (Kokko et al., 2014), which were presented in Study III, were analyzed by calculating frequencies, percentages, and summary variables.

In the analysis of the field report data, qualitative content analysis methods were utilized. First, the data were read to obtain a general idea of the contents before a more thorough inductive coding process was conducted (Creswell, 2003). Once the initial coding was completed, the document was re-coded several times, which resulted in combining the codes into larger concepts (Check & Schutt, 2012). Then researchers utilized critical content analysis of the merged themes, which helped obtain a profound interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2003). The survey data provided general data patterns, and the qualitative field report analyses helped in further probing into those patterns and triangulating the findings across data sources (Creswell, 2003).

### ***Ethics***

In Study III, all the standard ethical considerations were followed (see Check & Schutt, 2012). The survey respondents and the schools were informed about the voluntary participation and the confidential nature of the research (topic, public scrutiny, purpose, etc.). All names of people, places, institutions, and other identifiable information were removed to ensure anonymity. In addition, the site observation school personnel had the right to ask questions related to the research and to withdraw at any time.

### **2.3.3 Results**

In the analysis, general patterns from the survey and field notes were examined and grouped under two major themes. The first theme as labeled in the results is "Capacity, values and beliefs," and the second is called "Increased bureaucracy and collaboration." The results showed that teachers' attitudes toward the three-tiered service model varied according to their beliefs. Almost half of the respondents (45.8%) believed that students with intensive special needs should be partially placed in mainstream classrooms, and only some believed in full-

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time participation in general education classes (7.1%). By the same token, 36.6% of the respondents reported that students with intensive special education needs should be placed mainly in self-contained special classes and integrated into general education classes only in selected subjects. Some simply believed in full-time special education (9.3%), and only a few (1.6%) thought these students should be placed somewhere else (e.g., care units). In terms of the existing organization of special education, teachers reported that students with intensive special needs were grouped with general education students only during recess, lunch, school parties, morning and afternoon childcare, clubs, and transportation. Furthermore, the field observation data indicated that schools which had participated more in in-service trainings and had a history of being involved in other school reforms were more willing to reform their special education practices (e.g., the three-tiered support model).

The second theme that emerged covered perceived changes in bureaucracy and collaboration. The survey results indicated that the new legislation increased administrative tasks (e.g., paperwork, meetings, and other administrative chores), with 72.2% of the respondents reporting that their work was radically altered when the new law was enacted; 22.7% perceived a small change, and only 5.1% saw no change at all. The main bureaucratic changes reported by teachers were increased paperwork and documentation of student progress. The survey respondents also reported that students' individualized support and rights to equal learning opportunities had improved since the arrival of the new documentation systems. In addition, although the bureaucratic burden increased, the respondents reported improved collaboration between special education and classroom teachers, which was perceived as a positive change.

### 2.3.4 Discussion

The purpose of Study III was to examine the implementation of the new education legislation (Basic Education Act 642/2010) on the organization of special education in Finland. The results suggest that those schools and municipalities which had participated in training leading to the enactment of the statute and which had a history of being involved in other school reform initiatives had more capacity and willingness to reform their special education practices substantially (e.g., create a school climate that increases sense of belonging for students with intensive special education needs). Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that local flexibility can result in favorable educational arrangements in schools and municipalities; however, this was not the case in all schools and regions. In Study III, the analysis revealed that varied educational arrangements arise from the way teachers, principals, and other school personnel interpret a policy and make sense of it based on their experiences, values, beliefs, and professional norms. Finally, the implementation of this education

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legislation in Finland is unique because it is grounded on professional trust and no enforcement mechanisms were incorporated into the act.

### **3 General discussion**

The aim of this thesis was to examine sense of belonging for students with intensive special education needs in school and in post-school life. In an attempt to address the research aim, conceptions associated with sense of belonging for students with intensive special education needs were examined. Also, a sense of belonging throughout life, including in school and post-school experiences, was investigated using narrative research methods. Finally, the implementation of Finnish special education legislation (Basic Education Act 642/2010) among students with intensive special education needs was examined. An investigation of the education implementation helped to provide a better understanding of teachers' values and beliefs, as well as of the characteristics of a school climate that facilitates a sense of belonging for all students. This in turn facilitated conceptualizing students' voices. Below, the main results are discussed after which I will share some theoretical and practical implications. This is followed by the trustworthiness of the qualitative research (particularly in Studies I and II), ethical considerations and limitations of the thesis, as well as ideas for further research. I end by giving the main conclusions.

#### **3.1 Main findings of the studies**

The most common and consistent finding in Studies I and II were that the students had undergone different types of school placements. In Study I, the students had received inadequate support in their previous schools, owing to their teachers' inability to understand their unique characteristics; the students had also experienced rejection by their peers. The unfavorable experiences with peers had caused the students to conceal their dissimilar learning characteristics and feel stigmatized. The disturbing relationships with teachers and peers seemed to have affected the students' mental and physical well-being, manifested in disturbing behaviors in earlier educational settings. In other words, the students had been placed in different schools and "shipped around" to other educational settings (general and special) because of their teachers' inability to accommodate the students' unique needs. This phenomenon was also apparent in the results of Study II. Both Mary and Emma had been "shipped around" during their school years, Mary less often than Emma. The results of Studies I and II suggested that in schools where the students felt that they belonged, the adults had been able to individualize support and create a caring, respectful climate for the students.

In Study I, the findings indicated that a school's climate (e.g., adults' philosophies about students with intensive special needs) might either foster or

hinder a sense of belonging (see e.g., Lindsay, 2007; Kunc, 1992; Schnorr, 1997). The findings of Study I further suggested that a poor school climate seems to lead to students' being "shipped around" (as opposed to being placed in general or special school context). Study I found that there appeared to be cooperative adults in the current school who had supportive and warm relationships with the students (e.g., Hamre, 2014; Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). The adults seemed to create a positive climate, which increased students' sense of belonging. This is in line with earlier studies suggesting that the school climate has a significant impact on students' sense of belonging (Ma, 2003; Murray & Pianta, 2007). Based on the results of both Studies I and II, it appears that collaboration and positive philosophies among adults have the potential to foster students' sense of belonging. Thus, schools should employ adults who have the values and beliefs that foster a positive atmosphere in which all students can feel that they belong. Because of hypothetical differences in teachers' values and beliefs, the variations among schools may enable more or fewer students to feel a sense of belonging. Perhaps some schools have a greater number of adults with positive philosophies about students with diverse learning needs. Study III indicated that schools and municipalities which had been involved in other educational reform initiatives (e.g., training in the new legislation) were more ready and/or willing to implement the Basic Education Act. These schools and municipalities had an openness to reform initiatives, as well as the willingness to make the organizational changes necessary to implement the new policies and procedures. However, as the literature suggests, policies are transformed, interpreted, and shaped by those who implement them (e.g., teachers) (Wilson, 1989). Street-level bureaucrats (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977) or front-line workers (Wilson, 1989) respond to situations based on their professional expertise, personal experiences, normative values, and capacity, thus shaping the meaning of a policy (Honig, 2006; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). This notion of people making the policy through implementation not only explains the variation of how the law was implemented across the country, but also sheds light on how teachers' values and beliefs influence the organization of special education, such as the way in which teachers, principals, and other adults in the school create a climate in which students with intensive special needs feel a sense of belonging. Study III found that teachers' attitudes and beliefs may affect how the needs of students with disabilities are accommodated in schools. While there has been a paradigm shift from diagnosis-led instruction to providing support and equal opportunities for learning based on educational needs (Mitchell, 2001), few policies can transform the attitudes and beliefs in a society (Grinker, 2007). Consequently, it seems that the values and beliefs of those who work with students with intensive special education needs may affect the organization of special education, which is evident in a variety of educational arrangements



across Finland. In sum, based on the results of Study III, it could be concluded that the 2010 reform is an example in which, on the one hand, there is an educational mandate, but on the other hand, this mandate is framed broadly enough to allow regional interpretations that fit local needs.

## **3.2 Theoretical implications**

In this section, I present the main theoretical implications of the thesis. The implications are discussed under the subheadings “General theoretical implications” and “Modification of the model of sense of belonging.”

### **3.2.1 General theoretical implications**

In general, the findings of this thesis are in line with those of Juvonen (2006), Schnorr (1997), and Williams and Downing (1998). These scholars found that a sense of belonging is associated with well-functioning relationships with teachers whereby students perceive that they are receiving sufficient support and understanding from an educator. Based on the findings of this thesis, it was the good relationships with teachers in the school settings (both general and special) that protected students from becoming frustrated and anxious (Furrer & Skinner 2003), improved their emotional well-being (Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson 1999), and reduced conflicts such as violent outbursts (Finn, 1993; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell 2003). These supportive and warm teacher-student relationships might suggest that the students were willing to adopt more positive behaviors (e.g., Hamre, 2014), whereas in previous schools, the lack of teacher support might have lessened feelings of belonging and students’ willingness to adopt positive behaviors (Baumeister et al., 2005). The thesis findings also complement the discoveries of Hamm and Faircloth (2005), who suggest that accepting and supportive peer relationships can improve the feeling of belonging, while dislike and rejection by peers can jeopardize it. Additionally, the findings of the present study suggest that the students’ experiences of victimization might have led them to adapt their behavior (as outlined by Juvonen, 2006), which can be associated with a person concealing the characteristics of special needs (e.g., Davison & Henderson, 2010; McRuer, 2006). These situations can cause a young person with intensive special education needs to feel different from those without such needs (Mietola, 2014) and even jeopardize their well-being (e.g., Hedley & Young, 2006; Muller, Schuler, & Yates, 2008; Osterman, 2000).

Although Finnish legislation involving the three-tiered support model (Basic Education Act, 642/2010) is intended to provide high-quality support, it appears that the model may have its weaknesses; nor is it put into practice the same way in all Finnish schools. The results of this thesis align with the implementation literature (e.g., Honig, 2006; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013; Spillane, Reiser,

& Comez, 2006; Wilson, 1980) in that varied educational arrangements are due to the way the implementers (e.g., teachers and principals) interpret a policy and make sense of it, based on their experiences, values, and professional norms. The results of the thesis indicate that school climates vary widely as do teachers' philosophies of a climate in which students with intensive special education needs can feel that they belong. In Finland, no policy instruments such as mandates, inducements, or monitoring (see e.g., McDonnell & Elmore 1987) are embedded in the legislation. In contrast, the values and beliefs of adults working with students with intensive special needs may have varying degrees of influence on the support arrangements for special education in Finnish schools. Therefore, I offer the present findings as a contribution to the existing research on policy instruments (e.g., mandates, inducements, etc.) (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). I suggest that the culture of professional trust is a policy instrument, one that is unique to Finland, where teachers are valued professionals and are trusted to interpret and implement policy (Study III). With trust as a policy instrument, no mandates, inducements, or monitoring are embedded in the legislation. Trust as an instrument relies on professional development, even though this legislation is a "mandate." Owing to the instrument of trust, perhaps the new model of three-tiered support is gradually shaping educators' philosophies (it was enacted in January 2011), and therefore, "shipping" students to special schools may still occur. The legislation has the potential to reduce this practice, and the law could almost be considered a promise of inclusive education.

Study II of the thesis offers hypothetical contributions to the literature. I propose that there can be either a *fading sense of belonging* or a *simmering sense of belonging*. Mary's narrative revealed that she had vibrant experiences of social support and a sense of belonging during her schooling and before transition to adulthood; however, she did not have any such experiences during emerging adulthood (between the ages of 18 and 25). Therefore, hers can be described as a fading sense of belonging. Emma, on the other hand, had numerous school placements compared to Mary, owing to a lack of social backing during her schooling and adolescence, thus preventing Emma's feeling a sense of belonging. But during emerging adulthood, Emma gained a strong sense of belonging when she discovered her strength, abilities, and self-determination through a meaningful life event and its accompanying experiences. This view is in line with Arnett's (2000) notion that positive experiences during emerging adulthood seem to matter the most in generating a sense of belonging. It appears that Emma's sense of belonging was simmering, evolving throughout her life and culminating in the meaningful event of discovering sports in emerging adulthood. Sports might also have worked as a self-initiated support strategy, easing her interactions with other people (Muller et al., 2000) and helping Emma finally to feel a strong sense of belonging.

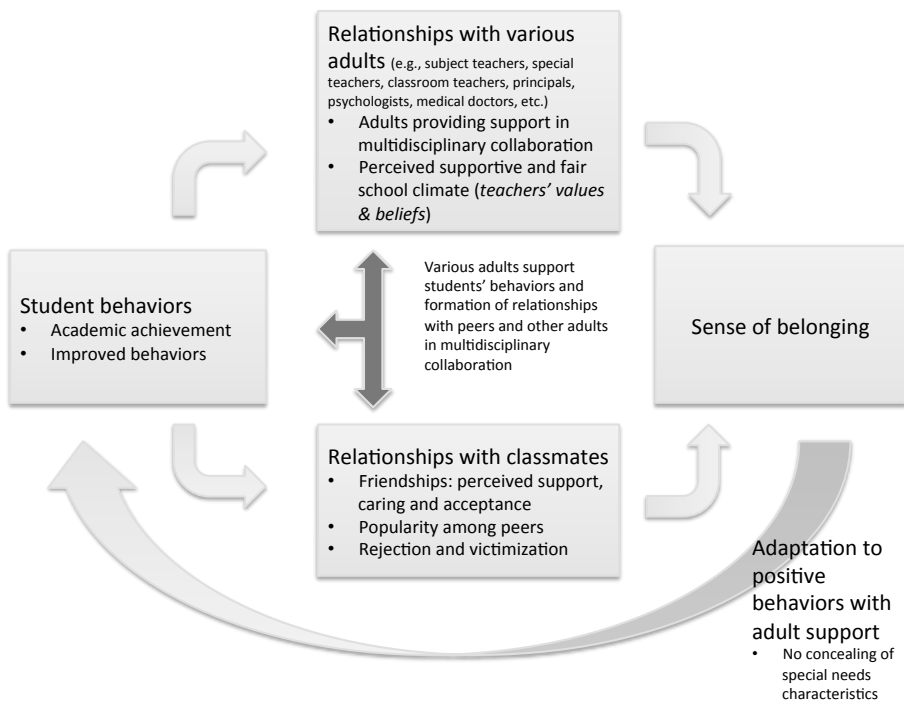
### **3.2.2 Modified model of sense of belonging**

One of the main findings of this thesis is the new perspectives it may add to Juvonen's (2006) model on how to help individuals with intensive special education needs to form a stronger sense of belonging already during their school years, as well as helping to prepare them for post-school life. Unfortunately, the current model for sense of belonging mainly considers general education students and how to better understand their sense of belonging in school. It fails to address students with diverse learning needs. Based on the findings of this thesis, I will next propose some modifications to the current model. Figure 4 on page 44 depicts the modified model.

First, I propose that the model should address relationships with various adults who are in the school system (e.g., teachers, assistants, psychologists, medical doctors, etc.). These adults should be required to work in multidisciplinary collaboration in order to facilitate a sense of belonging for students with intensive special needs rather than counting on a student's smoothly functioning relationship with just one teacher (as suggested by Juvonen 2006). Furthermore, adults working with students who have intensive special needs should have the kinds of values and beliefs that facilitate a sense of belonging among these students (Honig, 2006; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). Although limited to a small data set of student voices, the findings of this thesis hypothetically suggest that for students with intensive special education needs to experience a sense of belonging requires a school climate that supports this goal (Ma, 2010; Murray & Pianta, 2009). This proposed modification to Juvonen's model is illustrated in Figure 4.

Second, Juvonen (2006) suggests that individuals must modify their behavior in order to "fit in" and become accepted. By contrast, the findings of this thesis suggest that the adaptation of behavior for individuals with intensive special needs might actually be associated with hiding special needs characteristics for fear of incurring prejudice. The student participants in this thesis (Studies I and II) seemed to be aware of their differences from those without special education needs. They might have been concerned about people's preconceptions of individuals with intensive special needs, which might have caused them to feel uncomfortable disclosing their own dissimilar needs (e.g., to peers at school or work colleagues in adulthood). It seems that these students had feelings of distress similar to those of lesbians and gay men in "coming out of the closet" (McRuer, 2006; Davison & Henderson, 2010). Based on the findings of the present thesis, I suggest that the modification of the model (in regard to what adaptation of behavior might mean to individuals with intensive special needs) might contribute to a better understanding of the kinds of preventive actions that may reduce feelings that can lead to depression (e.g., Hedley & Young, 2006), as well as loneliness and isolation (e.g., Muller et al., 2008; Preece & Jordan,

2009). Furthermore, educators need to be sensitive in creating a school climate that celebrates uniqueness and diversity. In other words, educators should help students with intensive special needs use their strengths as building blocks for healthy identities. The modified model (Figure 4) depicts these suggested modifications.



**Figure 4.** A proposed model depicting the associations among relationships with various adults and classmates, student behaviors, and sense of belonging for students with intensive special education needs.

### **3.3 Practical implications**

The findings of this thesis have practical implications for teachers, researchers, school principals, and other adults who work with the target population, as well as for educational policy developers. The findings suggest that it is important for all schools in Finland to invest in educating their staff and to encourage collaboration among adults to create a positive climate in their schools. It appears that the school principal plays a major role in fostering such collaboration (Bateman & Bateman, 2002), which in turn lays the foundation for an educational climate that supports the students' sense of belonging. Perhaps in hiring staff, principals could consider carefully whether each and every adult is committed to creating an atmosphere in which students both with and without special education needs can feel that they belong (see, e.g., Attfield & Williams, 2003; Bateman & Bateman, 2002; Carroll, 2011; Jamil et al., 2015). Principals and all other adults working in the school should believe in and highly value the potential of each and every student. Furthermore, schools, municipalities, and front-line operators (e.g., teachers and principals; see Wilson, 1989) need further training so that all students, despite disabling conditions, can feel a sense of belonging. The results of this thesis suggest that those schools and municipalities which participated in training leading to the enactment of the educational legislation and which had a history of being involved in other school reform initiatives had more capacity for and willingness to make substantial reforms in their special education practices. Although the current system of professional trust has also demonstrated that local flexibility can result in favorable educational arrangements for students with intensive special education needs, this is not the case in all schools and regions. Perhaps more inducement and sanction mechanisms could be included in the educational system. Furthermore, teacher education programs could also prepare their candidates with more knowledge and skills to work with students who have intensive special education needs.

The thesis results further suggest that there is a real need to develop the existing social and transition support services in Finland. It appears to be important for schools to strengthen their current social assistance, which could include ongoing use of person-centered planning strategies (see Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989). Developing specific long-term, person-centered transition planning is required before students proceed to the post-school phase of emerging adulthood, because the current legislation (Basic Education Act 628/1998) does not mandate any such planning. More precisely, in order to help post-school-age individuals who have intensive special education needs form a strong sense of belonging; I recommend developing support-group services within the schools to facilitate the creation of meaningful social bonds with those who are facing similar transitions. It would be of utmost importance to

make these groups visible and inclusive for all individuals—those with disabilities and those without—in order to increase public awareness and acceptance of diverse learners. In sum, more efforts are needed to help individuals with intensive special needs form a strong sense of belonging to society.

### **3.4 Trustworthiness of the qualitative research**

In this thesis, several methods were utilized for ensuring the trustworthiness of the qualitative data. According to Given and Saumure (2008), trustworthiness refers to the ways in which qualitative researchers can ensure that the elements of transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability are apparent in a study. Transferability is a concept that parallels generalizability and refers to how applicable the results are in different contexts (broad and narrow) (Given & Saumure, 2008). Given and Saumure further suggest that the worthiness of the research is determined by how well other researchers can apply the results to alternative contexts. Credibility means the internal validity of a study or, in other words, how well the researcher has richly and accurately described the phenomenon under investigation. Dependability refers to research techniques (e.g., in my case, data collection and analysis) and to how well other scholars can replicate the procedures in similar studies. Finally, Given and Saumure (2008) imply that research has confirmability when the interpretations and results match the data (e.g., researchers work together during the data analysis and organize data validation meetings). In this section, I specifically focus on trustworthiness in Studies I and II. Additionally, I will briefly discuss the trustworthiness of the methods of phenomenography (Study I) and of narrative approaches (Study II). In Study III, sequential mixed methods were utilized in the analysis of the survey data (see section 2.3), and in this section of the thesis I discuss how I ensured the trustworthiness of the qualitative field report data in Study III (under the subheading “collaboration of researchers”). Generally, the valuable and constructive feedback given by reviewers from international peer-reviewed journals (Studies I-III) helped to ensure that the original publications met scientific standards as well as trustworthiness.

To begin, in the original publications I ensured credibility and dependability by describing in detail each step I took during the research process, including the data collection and the analysis. This made certain that the reader can clearly see what and how I conducted each individual study. Furthermore, in Studies I and II, I frequently utilized peer debriefing (Su’o’ng & Nguyen, 2008) to discuss the methods and major themes that emerged. Peer debriefing refers to situations in which a researcher talks to peers who are not directly involved in the research (e.g., other researchers, colleagues, doctoral students, etc.), thereby facilitating an investigator’s thinking through the research process. For example, frequent

peer debriefing took place at work with colleagues (e.g., those with whom I shared an office at the university), during research seminars, and at national and international conferences. This method facilitated the conformability of the findings.

In Studies II and III, I used triangulation to cross-check the findings across the data sources (Creswell, 2003). In Study II, the data consisted of interviews and documentation on the participants' life transition histories (e.g., report cards, teachers' notes about students, etc.). In Study III, the survey material provided general data patterns, and the qualitative field report analyses helped me to probe further into those patterns and triangulate the findings across data sources (Creswell, 2003). In Study II, I also utilized a member check (Schwandt, 2007), because there were some unclear patterns that I could not resolve by re-examining the data sets. For these reasons, a former teacher and a 29-year-old participant were contacted and asked to clarify the interpretation. The teacher provided supplemental information regarding transitions in educational settings in childhood, and the participant explained the unclear information related to her employment.

### 3.4.1 Phenomenography

In Study I, I used phenomenographic methods of analysis. As I described in the original publication, the aim was to obtain the students' conceptions of their sense of belonging, both in general and in special school placements. The conceptions investigated in Study I are based on individuals' relationships in the world around them through which perspectives, contexts, and experiences are constructed (Marton 1981, 1986). Although conceptions are directed toward phenomena and reflect how a person experiences those phenomena, the way I presented the results in the original publication might imply that I have not been solely examining students' conceptions of the phenomenon being studied. For example, I have sentences such as "The pupils had also *experienced* feelings..." (Study I, p. 9) and "Pupils *had* regular meetings with the headmaster..." (Study I, p. 11). The first example suggests that the study aim would have been to describe *experiences*, and the second seems to describe what *actually happened* instead of the conception of the experience. The use of such expressions in the results might confuse the reader with regard to the trustworthiness of the phenomenographic analysis in Study I, as well perhaps weaken the actual students' conceptions that I set out to describe respectfully. Using language that demonstrates more clearly the differences and similarities in the students' conceptions would have avoided this potential shortcoming (e.g., "students emphasized...", "students were in agreement...", "Students talked about regular meetings with the headmaster...", etc.). In sum, in Study I, I aimed at being as trustworthy as possible with the conceptions that students shared about their

sense of belonging in different school placements, particularly since listening to the voices of individuals with special needs still remain under-researched. Furthermore, I used frequent meetings to discuss the conceptions with the other researchers until we reached consensus. I will discuss this collaboration among researchers and specifically investigator triangulation in more detail under the subheading “Collaboration of researchers (3.4.3)”.

### **3.4.2 Narrative approach**

In Study II, I utilized narrative research methods. Narrative approaches attempt to provide a real sense of what an individual’s world is like through rich detail and through how the actual life events have evolved (Bruner, 1986). This type of research helps us to understand better individuals’ experiences, actions, and relationships with their environment (Creswell, 2003). I used Polkinghorne’s (1995, pp. 16-18) seven categories of narrative analysis to create the life transition narratives of two females with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Although in the original publication (Study II) the narratives do not follow the traditional and authentic story format (as suggested by Polkinghorne, 1995), originally the findings were presented as authentic chronological narratives without any interruptions in the stories that might have arisen from contrasting the narratives with existing research on the topic. During the article’s review process, I had to “let go” of the authentic stories and change them into thematic summaries of life transition events. I believe that this might have weakened my original aim of bringing the authentic stories “to life” with their rich detail. It was unfortunate and disappointing that I could not fulfill my original goal, owing to the changes I was asked to make during the review process. Although in narrative research the goal is to contextualize the stories by comparing and contrasting the narratives with existing literature on the phenomenon being studied (Polkinghorne, 2007), this could perhaps have been done differently without breaking the flow of authentic life transition narratives. Overall, the narrative approaches helped me to understand the individuals’ life events and how certain events had evolved. Although my understanding was greatly enhanced, I was disappointed to find that there is no simple solution to avoiding the biases that the participants shared about social supports in school and in adulthood. Nevertheless, the narratives provide hypothetical contributions to the literature and ideas for further studies.

### **3.4.3 Collaboration of researchers**

In working on this thesis, specifically during the data collection and the analysis for the original publications (Studies I-III), I collaborated with other researchers from the VETURI project. In terms of trustworthiness in analyzing the qualitative data, I frequently utilized investigator triangulation (Flick, 2006),



during which various researchers discussed each step of the data analysis and the emerging themes. For example, in Studies I and II, I organized official data validation meetings, during which the major themes were discussed and the findings cross-checked across the data sources. Any disagreements were discussed until the team of researchers reached consensus. During both Studies I and II, the researchers met at least two times. Usually during the first meeting we did not reach consensus, but we were able to share ideas, and then each researcher went back to the data independently. This ensured that the data sets were thoroughly analyzed. During each meeting, we were able to analyze the data even more thoroughly. Eventually, we always achieved consensus. In Study III, after each visit to a school ( $N = 12$ ) and with a focus group (e.g., conversations with teachers at the school, the VETURI project's training sessions), the researchers met to discuss their observations. These discussions resulted in a report that required reaching consensus. Although the qualitative data sets in this thesis (particularly in Studies I and II) are small, the collaboration and frequent investigator triangulation have allowed us to probe deeply into the data. The small interview data set has allowed us to bring out the authentic voices of individuals with intensive special education needs. However, one should be cautious in interpreting the results: making generalizations based on the findings of this thesis is not recommended.

Overall, collaboration with other researchers (e.g., during investigator triangulation) has been a truly enriching experience and has enhanced my thinking about the research topic. Each and every one of the other researchers facilitated my thinking and helped me to see the topic from different perspectives. However, I also believe that in the beginning stages, my thinking was easily led into the disciplines of the other researchers, such as disability studies and educational policy. However, throughout conducting this research, I have found my own ways of thinking. The process of analyzing data and gaining a better understanding of students with diverse needs by listening to their voices has deepened my knowledge. Furthermore, I inevitably had a pre-understanding of the topic before undertaking this thesis. Ideas about belonging and about inclusive schooling and ensuring equal opportunities for all, regardless of disabling conditions, have always been important to me. Moreover, when I began my work as a Ph.D. student in the research project, I was committed to the project's goals and "shared mindset" (see, e.g., Nevanen, 2015), which might also have affected my pre-understanding at the time. This is unavoidable. I was devoted to the project's ideas of belonging and inclusive schooling for students with intensive special education needs. Although I shared the mindset of inclusive education when I began with the project in April of 2012, it was not easy to assess my pre-understanding at a time I was deeply involved in the project's objectives (see Nevanen, 2015). I was immediately drawn into planning the project's overall goals and carrying out data collection using the

national survey, as well as collecting the survey data.<sup>12</sup> Yet during my Ph.D. studies, how I perceive a sense of belonging for those with special needs has shifted to listening to the individual's voice with regard to where he or she feels that they belong, whether in a general school or a special school setting. Although I believe in inclusive schooling, we must not forget the individual's own voice in making decisions about their education and where they can feel a sense of belonging. The findings of this thesis show that, hypothetically, both general and special schools can have climates that support belonging and acceptance. Furthermore, I believe that each individual has endless opportunities for success, and we all have various strengths, which, especially in schools, might not be used as effectively as they should be.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

All the standard ethical guidelines were followed in carrying out this thesis (see Check & Schutt, 2012). In Study I, the students were told in detail that any involvement was voluntary and what that involvement would entail. Since the participants were minors (under 18 years of age), they and their families received formal consent letters, which included information about the voluntary participation, the purpose of the research, and characteristics of the interviews (interview themes, duration, public scrutiny, etc.) and the confidential nature of the research. The families also learned that the audio-taped interviews would be shared only with the researchers of Study I.

In Study II, the two participants were contacted via email, and the purpose of the research was explained, along with the voluntary nature of their involvement and the characteristics of the interviews. They were also informed that the interview data were to be shared only with the research team of Study II. In both Studies I and II, the participants received detailed explanations, including of their right to ask questions about the research and to withdraw at any time. The participants were told multiple times what their involvement meant and that it was voluntary in nature. In other words, throughout the research process I made very sure that I respected the participants' self-determination in making their decisions (see, e.g., Martin & Marshall, 1995; Wehmeyer, Kelchner, & Richards, 1996).

In Study III, the survey respondents and the schools were all informed of the voluntary nature of the participation and the confidential nature of the research. Additionally, the site observation school personnel had the right to ask questions related to the research and to withdraw at any time. In all of the original studies (I-III), the participants were informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of

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<sup>12</sup> The project's survey data collection was gathered as directed by the Finnish Ministry of Education for baseline and compliance purposes (see Kokko et al., 2014).

the research. To ensure and protect that anonymity, all identifiable information was removed, including all names of people, places, institutions, and other identifying information.

### **3.6 Limitations and recommendations for future research**

Although the findings contribute to our understanding of sense of belonging in school and post-school life for students with intensive special education needs, this thesis has several limitations that should be carefully taken into account (Studies I-III). While in Study I the interviews provided extensive knowledge about the students' conceptions of sense of belonging, the purposeful participant sampling process might have created some limitations. More comprehensive data in the form of interviews with school personnel, field observations, and archival data (e.g., policy manuals) could have brought Study I to a more definitive completion. As for Studies I and II, the participants could have been interviewed more than once. This might have enabled me to gain the participants' trust more effectively, helped the interviewees to feel more at ease (see, e.g., Seidman 1991), and provided more extensive data sets. Furthermore, in Study II, both participants could have been contacted to confirm the findings; only one was contacted when unclear data patterns appeared. Contacting both participants and allowing them to read the narratives might have facilitated the cross-checking of information and clarified possible issues. Nevertheless, in Study II, the research team and I established the participants' trust by e-mail, explaining the interview procedure in detail. Moreover, the interviews provided in-depth information and covered participants' life transition stories, since I asked several questions to ensure that the participants provided accurate responses.

Using semi-structured interview techniques as a data collection method might have created some additional limitations. In Study I, two researchers interviewed the participants. This might have affected the questions asked. For example, the researchers' personal interests in specific factors of sense of belonging were apparent in some of the data. Although these interests may allow the data to be used for multiple research purposes, when the data were initially analyzed, I observed differences between the ways the two researchers focused on the themes, with one emphasizing some themes more than the other. Future studies should involve the researchers in careful planning of the interview protocol, which would include each interviewer using similar questions based on the literature appropriate to the subject.

In Study III, there were also several limitations. First, the analysis was conducted as a post hoc data collection and was thus based on a data set gathered as directed by the Finnish Ministry of Education for baseline and compliance purposes. The attempt was to make sense of the reported findings filed with the

ministry by utilizing the conceptual lens of the implementation literature. Second, although the survey return rate ( $N = 526$ ) was considerably high in a country with a small population such as Finland's and all regions were represented equally, official data on schools for students with intensive special education needs could not be obtained, because current official statistics do not include student information based on diagnoses. The most recent statistics from 2010, before this legislation was enacted, estimated then that the number of students with significant disabilities was 1,355. Because of the legislation, which requires that teachers provide support for students based on their educational needs, statistics based on diagnosis are no longer gathered. Therefore, it is challenging to make any (percentage) estimates of how many schools and teachers of students with significant disabilities the survey reached, given that the number of respondents could not be compared with the number of students having the most intensive needs.

Although one of the main purposes of this thesis was to listen to the specific voices of students with intensive special education needs, further data collection could have provided a deeper and richer framework for contextualizing their voices. Although the results of Study III provide a hypothetical framework for this contextualization, the study's findings might not particularly help in putting the students' conceptions and experiences of a sense of belonging into context (Studies I and II) in their respective schools. Therefore, making generalizations based on the results of this thesis is not recommended. Future research should involve further data collection, which concentrates on capturing the cultural and pedagogical aspects of the schools, their collective values and norms of student differences, collegial relationships, educational practices and arrangements, disciplinary rules and policies, as well as the educators' professional preparation for responding to student differences (Study I). Furthermore, interviewing teachers about their values and beliefs would benefit the overall analysis of the students' voices by bringing the work to more definitive completion. Further research should investigate larger populations of students with intensive special education needs and their experiences of sense of belonging in different school placements and in post-school life. Larger data sets would facilitate making more generalizable suggestions for educational policy development. Perhaps this type of exploration would also help us to understand better why students with intensive special needs might undergo various school placements (general and special) during their comprehensive education in Finland (see Saloviita, 2012).

Specifically, with regard to Study II, future research should be carefully planned to ensure that the participants can be involved throughout the process and possibly be interviewed more than once. Another area of further research would be to study in detail the particular challenges related to womanhood, ASD, and a sense of belonging. It would also be interesting to use comparative research methods to investigate life transitions, the role of social support, and

sense of belonging among females with ASD in different cultural contexts. Further research could use an educational policy implementation lens in order to understand why educational planning might not place enough emphasis on post-school transition support, which could more efficiently improve individuals' sense of belonging, for example, by studying governmental mandates and documentation regarding transition planning in Finland. Research of this nature would benefit and inform policymakers about the current state of social support and how to make improvements.

Although Studies I and II have limitations, future research studies should be based on the voices of individuals with intensive special education needs. Listening to these voices still remains an under-investigated area. Especially given the findings of Study II, I highly recommend utilizing qualitative narrative research methods, because currently there are not many international studies available that shed light on the lives of individuals with intensive special education needs. Conducting more narrative research with a valid life perspective about women with autism is particularly needed.

Study III demonstrated the complexity of how the three-tiered support legislation was implemented across Finland. Future research should investigate under what conditions the three-tiered model has the potential to work best (Honig, 2006). For example, a longitudinal follow-up study could examine the implementation across regions and the variation in placements of those students with intensive special needs. This type of research would not only provide information for schools and municipalities in Finland (the implementers) and for the Ministry of Education (the policymakers), but it would also improve the literature on broader policy implementation. These findings could expand the policy literature on how schools can improve their climate so that all students can experience sense of belonging. In addition, it would be beneficial to gather international data by designing a comparative study across nations on the organization of education and services for students with intensive special education needs. This would substantially contribute to the literature on what works, why, and under what conditions.

### **3.7 Conclusions**

The results of this thesis provide preliminary discoveries on sense of belonging for students with intensive special education needs and the extent to which their belonging can be supported in school and post-school life. The findings suggest that students with intensive special education needs can hypothetically feel a sense of belonging in school placements (general and special) in which adults collaborate to create an accepting and supportive climate with individualized pedagogical arrangements. In contrast, poor school climates and lack of individualization of support seem to prevent students from feeling that they

belong. Furthermore, in the post-school phase, it appeared that positive experiences during emerging adulthood (between ages 18 and 25) seemed to matter the most in generating a strong sense of belonging to communities and later in life. Hence, individuals with intensive special education needs should be provided with more support in the post-school transition phase and in the post-school life of emerging adulthood. For example, support groups for individuals with disabilities are of utmost importance in facilitating the transition, community integration, and feelings of belonging to society.

Although the students with intensive special needs who were interviewed for this thesis shared their voices in regard to belonging, both in school and in post-school life, and teacher perceptions were also used to contextualize those voices, drawing generalizations from the results is not recommended. One should be cautious about the findings, because the thesis has also shed light on several limitations that prevent making definitive statements. Further study of school cultures and the role of teachers' values and beliefs is unquestionably needed for a better understanding of a school climate that supports a sense of belonging for all students. For example, interviewing teachers about their values and beliefs would provide a deeper and richer framework for contextualizing the students' voices. Furthermore, larger data sets of students' voices would greatly benefit our ability to draw more generalizable conclusions.

Finally, and most important, schools should employ adults whose values include the belief that every child has strengths and can succeed, thereby supporting students with intensive special education needs in multidisciplinary collaboration to feel a sense of belonging already during their early years of school and beyond. While further study is still needed, this thesis has provided an encouraging contribution to this under-researched area of sense of belonging for students with intensive special education needs.

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