



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

Paper 90/15

4th June 2015

NIAR 213-15

Caroline Perry and Jake Wilson

Special educational needs in Finland

1 Introduction

Since 2000 Finland has performed strongly in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA),¹ and has been cited as one of the most efficient countries in terms of student outcomes in relation to money invested in education.² This paper provides a brief overview of the educational system in Finland and its approach to special educational needs (SEN).

2 Finnish education system

Early childhood education is available (subject to a fee except for families on a low income) for all children under the age of six with a further year of free pre-primary education provided for six year olds. Children in Finland start school at the age of seven and compulsory education lasts until the age of 17. At post-primary students have flexibility between general and vocational education.³

¹ OECD (2013) *Education policy outlook: Finland* Paris: OECD Publishing

² Dolton, P., Marcenaro-Gutiérrez, O., Still, A. (2014) *The Efficiency Index: Which education systems deliver the best value for money?* London: GEMS Education Solutions

³ OECD (2015) *Education Policy Outlook 2015: Making reforms happen* OECD Publishing

School autonomy over curriculum and assessment

National core curricula are determined centrally, however municipalities and schools have significant autonomy in drawing up local curricula.⁴ Assessment is mainly the responsibility of teachers who choose how to assess student progress. Indeed, the first national assessment is the Matriculation Examination taken at the end of post-primary education.⁵

Highly skilled and respected teachers

Teaching is a highly skilled and respected profession in Finland, attracting high calibre candidates who must go through a very selective process. All teachers must have a master's degree.⁶ Salaries for teachers are above the international average but lower than many other nations and the country has relatively high pupil: teacher ratios.⁷

Teachers have a great deal of autonomy, participating in drawing up local curricula, deciding on teaching methods and determining approaches to student assessment. They are required to participate in continuing professional development annually.⁸

No external inspection process

Finland does not carry out external inspections of schools, placing great trust in the effectiveness of teachers and principal.⁹ In fact, the term "accountability" does not exist in the Finnish vocabulary; instead, there is a strong sense of shared responsibility in education.¹⁰

3 Special education in Finland

Finland has relatively high rates of SEN identification with around 30% of students of compulsory school age receiving some form of additional support. Around 8% of these students are educated in full-time special education with the remaining 22% receiving part-time special education.¹¹

Emphasis on early identification and support

Finland's emphasis on early identification and support partly accounts for the relatively high rates of children with SEN.¹²

⁴ OECD (2013) *Education policy outlook: Finland* OECD Publishing

⁵ OECD (2013) *Education policy outlook: Finland* OECD Publishing

⁶ Murtagh, C. (2010) "Finnish lessons" *Holyrood*, 15th February 2010 pp. 52-53

⁷ Dolton, P., Marcenaro-Gutiérrez, O., Still, A. (2014) *The Efficiency Index: Which education systems deliver the best value for money?* London: GEMS Education Solutions

⁸ Finnish National Board of Education (2012) *Teachers in Finland – trusted professionals* Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education

⁹ Ministry of Education and Culture *Evaluation of education* [online] Available at:

http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Koulutus/koulutuspolitiikka/koulutuksen_arviointi/?lang=en

¹⁰ Murtagh, C. (2010) "Finnish lessons" *Holyrood*, 15th February 2010 pp. 52-53

¹¹ Graham, L.J., Jahnukainen, M. (2011) "Wherefore art thou, inclusion? Analysing the development of inclusive education in New South Wales, Alberta and Finland" *Journal of Education Policy* Vol. 26, No. 2. pp. 263-288

¹² Sahlberg, P. (2012) "Quality and Equity in Finnish schools" *School Administrator* September 2012 pp. 27-30

The focus on early identification begins long before children start school, with a network of child health clinics providing regular assessments of the social, physical and mental development of babies and pre-school children. Multi-disciplinary teams comprising a nurse, doctor, speech therapist and psychologist make evaluations with the aim of identifying development risks.¹³

During the transition from pre-school to primary the school holds a meeting involving the child, their parents and teachers from the pre-school and primary school. This involves collating information including their portfolio and screening records in speech, social and motor skills.¹⁴

Student welfare group

Many schools have a student welfare group comprising the principal, the full or part-time school psychologist, the school nurse and the special education teacher; it may also contain the class teacher, social worker and a student advisor.¹⁵

The group may meet weekly or monthly and it integrates information about students and the school from different sources. It includes a focus on students who receive part-time special needs services, monitoring their progress in relation to their individual education plan.

Commitment to inclusion

Finland is committed to the principle of inclusion in regard to SEN, emphasising early diagnosis and intervention to enable most students to succeed in mainstream schools.¹⁶ Municipalities and schools must aim to include pupils with SEN in mainstream education, if necessary providing teaching for special needs education in small groups. They may only consider education in a special class or school where these approaches have not worked.¹⁷

SEN assessment mainly the responsibility of teachers

The identification of SEN is not based on specialised assessment or diagnosis. In the first instance, parent and teacher observation determines whether additional support is necessary. A team with responsibility for the education plan then defines the required services with the parent and student, after consulting with the special education teacher and preferably the school psychologist.¹⁸

¹³ Sabel, C., Saxenian, A., Miettinen, R., Kristensen, P.H., Hautamäki, J. (2010) *Individualized service provision in the new welfare state: Lessons from special education in Finland* Report prepared for SITRA

¹⁴ As above

¹⁵ As above

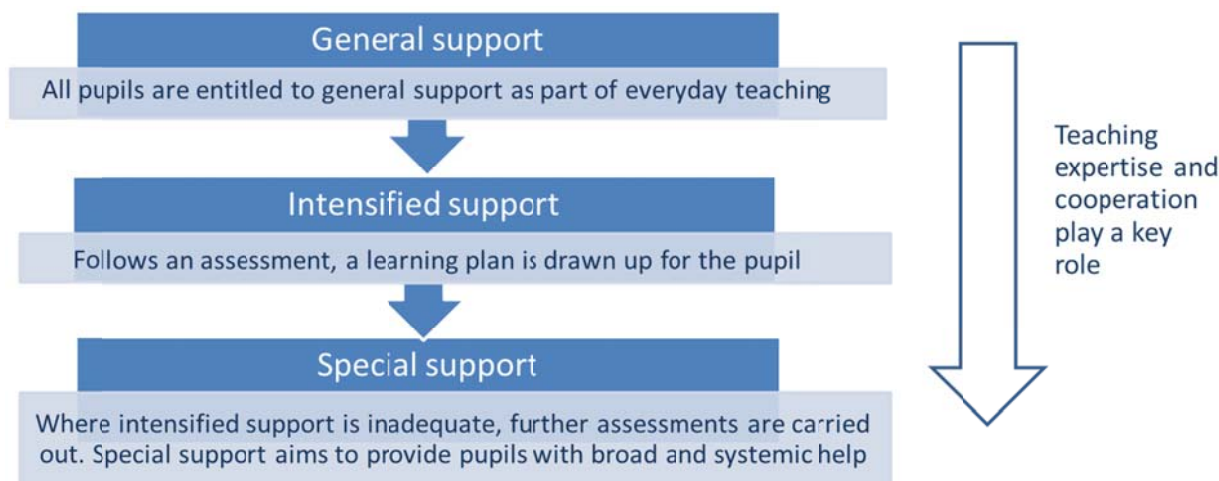
¹⁶ OECD (2010) *Strong performers and successful reformers in education: Lessons from PISA for the United States* OECD Publishing

¹⁷ European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2015) *Finland – Overview* [online] Available at: <https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/finland>

¹⁸ Graham, L.J., Jahnukainen, M. (2011) "Wherefore art thou, inclusion? Analysing the development of inclusive education in New South Wales, Alberta and Finland" *Journal of Education Policy* Vol. 26, No. 2. pp. 263-288

Authors describe this approach of providing support without the requirement of a formal diagnosis as proactive and positive in terms of avoiding “stigmatising” labels. By providing support in the early years of education academic difficulties may not become entrenched.¹⁹

Figure 1: Overview of assessment and provision for SEN²⁰



The class teacher provides general support which may include differentiated teaching. Intensified support refers to remedial support by the class teacher, co-teaching with the special education teacher and individual or group learning with a part-time special education teacher.²¹

Assessing students’ support needs forms a key aspect of a teacher’s work. A child’s teacher (possibly in conjunction with other experts) writes up the pedagogical assessment carried out for intensified support. It considers:²²

- The pupil’s learning as a whole;
- Support provided for the pupil and an assessment of its effects;
- Pupil’s learning abilities and SEN;
- Teaching and learning and other arrangements to be made in order to support the pupil.

Before making a decision on special support, the education provider must make a pedagogical statement on the pupil. The provider bases this assessment on a

¹⁹ Graham, L.J., Jahnukainen, M. (2011) “Wherefore art thou, inclusion? Analysing the development of inclusive education in New South Wales, Alberta and Finland” *Journal of Education Policy* Vol. 26, No. 2. pp. 263-288

²⁰ Adapted from: European Commission (2015) *Finland* [online] Available at: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Finland:Overview>

²¹ Sahlberg, P. (2012) “Quality and Equity in Finnish schools” *School Administrator* September 2012 pp. 27-30

²² European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2015) *Finland – Overview* [online] Available at: <https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/finland>

statement from the child's teacher regarding their learning progress and a statement on the intensified support they have received.²³

Special support includes a wide range of special education services. At this stage the pupil's school is decided, and may involve mainstream classes, a group-setting in a separate room or in a special school. Special support is more frequently provided in segregated settings.²⁴

Part-time special education

A key means of supporting inclusion in Finland is its system of "part-time" special education. This occupies only part of the pupil's time and is temporary, with the pupil remaining in mainstream education.²⁵ Typically, students participate for one or two hours weekly for a period of between four and ten weeks.²⁶

The system is "fairly unique" and aims to support a pupil's transition from this parallel approach to a fully comprehensive model, with significant resources provided for the early years of school. The idea is that children do not need to "wait to fail" in order to receive additional support.²⁷

Special education teachers

Each school has access to a "special education teacher," who plays a similar role to the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) in Northern Ireland.²⁸ Schools with over 300 pupils have a full-time teacher, while smaller schools share the services of a special education teacher.²⁹ They work closely with class teachers to identify students in need of additional support, and to provide such support.³⁰

In addition, each comprehensive school has a multi-agency care group comprising the principal, the special teacher, the school nurse, the school psychologist, a social worker and the teachers whose students are being discussed. Schools often invite parents to such meetings.³¹

²³ European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2015) *Finland – Overview* [online] Available at: <https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/finland>

²⁴ Takala, M., Ahl, A. (2014) "Special education in Swedish and Finnish schools: seeing the forest or the trees?" *British Journal of Special Education* Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 59-81

²⁵ Takala, M., Pirttimaa, R., Törmänen, M. (2009) "Inclusive special education: the role of special education teachers in Finland" *British Journal of Special Education* Vol. 36, No. 3, pp. 162-172

²⁶ Graham, L.J., Jahnukainen, M. (2011) "Wherefore art thou, inclusion? Analysing the development of inclusive education in New South Wales, Alberta and Finland" *Journal of Education Policy* Vol. 26, No. 2. pp. 263-288

²⁷ As above

²⁸ Takala, M., Pirttimaa, R., Törmänen, M. (2009) "Inclusive special education: the role of special education teachers in Finland" *British Journal of Special Education* Vol. 36, No. 3, pp. 162-172

²⁹ Graham, L.J., Jahnukainen, M. (2011) "Wherefore art thou, inclusion? Analysing the development of inclusive education in New South Wales, Alberta and Finland" *Journal of Education Policy* Vol. 26, No. 2. pp. 263-288

³⁰ OECD (2010) *Strong performers and successful reformers in education: Lessons from PISA for the United States* OECD Publishing

³¹ OECD (2010) *Strong performers and successful reformers in education: Lessons from PISA for the United States* OECD Publishing

Special schools as national development centres

In Finland there are six state-owned special basic schools, primarily intended for young people with hearing or visual impairments or with a physical or other impairment. The schools act as national development centres providing expertise to other schools, and also offer temporary education and rehabilitation to pupils from other schools.³²

The country also has seven separate vocational special schools intended for students with the most severe disabilities or chronic illnesses.

Flexibility in the school starting age

There is flexibility in the school starting age for pupils with SEN. Pupils may start one year earlier if the typical nine years of compulsory education is not possible, and compulsory education will then last for 11 years. Pupils with SEN may also start education one year later, if deemed appropriate on the basis of psychological or medical examination.³³

4 Comparisons to Finland's education system

While Finland is widely regarded as an educational success, it is important to take into account the cultural, social, linguistic and demographic differences between Finland and other jurisdictions.³⁴ For example, Finland is a highly equitable society with a self-regulating "comprehensive" education system.³⁵

The evidence also highlights issues that Finland faces in regard to education, in particular large performance gaps between girls and boys and between native students and students with an immigrant background.³⁶

³² European Commission (2015) *Separate Special Education Needs Provision in Early Childhood and School Education* [online] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Finland:Separate_Special_Education_Needs_Provision_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education

³³ European Commission (2015) *Finland* [online] Available at: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Finland:Overview>

³⁴ Stewart, W. (2012) "Dissemination or contamination?" *Times Educational Supplement*, 14th December 2012 pp. 24-28

³⁵ Dolton, P., Marcenaro-Gutiérrez, O., Still, A. (2014) *The Efficiency Index: Which education systems deliver the best value for money?* London: GEMS Education Solutions

³⁶ OECD (2015) *Education Policy Outlook 2015: Making reforms happen* OECD Publishing