

# INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECE) PROJECT

## EXAMPLE OF IECE PROVISION: FINLAND

### 1. Abstract

The Finnish example of implementing IECE describes the model of the city of Jyväskylä. Jyväskylä is Finland's seventh biggest city, with approximately 135,000 inhabitants. Teacher education (for early childhood education teachers, primary school teachers, and special education teachers) is one of the mainstays of the University of Jyväskylä. The city of Jyväskylä provides municipal day-care for about 7,000 children. All children aged from 0 to 7 years who receive early childhood education (ECE) in Jyväskylä can go to their closest day-care centre, irrespective of their individual support needs. There are no separate groups for children who need support. In this model, the working methods of early childhood special education teachers have been designed in a way that particularly supports inclusion.

Children start primary school at the age of seven in Finland, and all children under school age are entitled to ECE. ECE is regarded as a right of children irrespective of their need for support, the socio-economic background of their family or other family situation. ECE also includes pre-primary education for six-year-olds, which can be implemented at either day-care centres or schools. Pre-primary education is provided for in the Basic Education Act. The principle of inclusion is emphasised in the documents governing early childhood special education ([National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland](#), 2003, and the Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education, in press). These national regulations also guide local activities within Jyväskylä's inclusive education model. The city of Jyväskylä and its day-care centres have created their own detailed curricula based on the national documents. Based on the aforementioned curricula, all children, with their diverse support needs, receive an individual education plan. The child's support measures are planned to suit the group's activities so that they are easy to implement within the group and highlight participation and the child's social inclusion.

In compliance with the Act on Early Childhood Education, children are supported based on their individual support needs. In Jyväskylä, a so-called three-step support model is used. Officially the model is applied in Finland's pre-primary and basic education, but in Jyväskylä it also applies in ECE. All children receive *general* support as part of quality ECE, which includes the observation of children, educational environments and pedagogy as an integral part. The educator teams consist of ECE teachers and practical nurses. Some day-care centres have additional assisting staff. If a child is recognised as needing more support, observation of the child as well as



related planning and pedagogy are intensified, for instance, so that a consultative early childhood special education teacher also participates in creating an individual education plan for the child. If this *intensified* support is not enough, the child will receive *special* support. Special support usually implies that, in addition to the planning stage, early childhood special education teachers are involved in implementing the child's education and guidance. The support the child receives is evaluated regularly, and the child can return to general support when sufficient development has been achieved.

Finnish ECE teachers have completed a bachelor's degree, and other ECE staff also have adequate training. In addition to the bachelor's degree, early childhood special education teachers have completed a minimum of 60 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits in special education. The key idea of Jyväskylä's inclusive education model is to engage all educators in implementing early childhood special education. They are assisted in this task by consultative early childhood special education teachers and by early childhood special education teachers who work in regular day-care groups. In this way, special education expertise is not concentrated solely on specific, individual day-care groups.

The staff and children in ECE and early childhood special education can receive support from a network of state schools focusing on special education ([Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting](#)). This support can be, for example, consultative expert help or continuing education. In addition, state schools provide test and rehabilitation services for children with severe disabilities.

## 2. Inclusive features

All children in Jyväskylä can go to their nearest day-care centre, irrespective of their support needs. There are no separate groups for children who need support. At day-care centres, special attention is paid to caring for all children's individual needs. In this task, day-care centre staff are supported by two types of special education teachers. Consultative early childhood special education teachers provide consultation at more than one day-care centre. In addition, nearly every day-care centre has its own early childhood special education teacher, who works exactly where the children need support. The unique feature of this model is that almost every day-care centre has its own early childhood special education teacher, irrespective of how many of the children have been officially recognised as needing support. This is also a means to proactively prevent emerging support needs. In Jyväskylä, there are 33 early childhood special education teachers who work at day-care centres and six consultative early childhood special education teachers. In special cases, the staff can also request consultative help from the national specialist



network, Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting.

As a rule, the day-care groups (of about 20 children) are divided into smaller groups for daily activities. There are both temporary small groups and more permanent small groups, in which children interact with the same peers for a longer time. The temporary small groups are created based on situational needs. Children with support needs are divided evenly into the small groups; no separate small groups are created for them. Division into groups is based on children's developmental and social needs, age, and the wishes of the child and parents. The small groups increase interaction among children, as well as between educators and children.

The *general* support given to all children is based on observing the children and evaluating the learning environment and pedagogy. The observations made by parents and educators are discussed jointly, after which it is agreed, for instance, how children's strengths are taken into account. The agreed issues are recorded in the child's individual education plan. General support refers to, for example, training a child's social, linguistic and motor skills in everyday situations through play and motion. The educators highlight sensitive interaction with children, who are guided to recognise their own emotions and to name them. One of the aims is also to proactively prevent bullying.

*Intensified* support is provided for children who need individual support in more than one developmental area. Intensified support is designed specifically for an individual child collaboratively by parents, the ECE teacher who works in the group and the early childhood special education teacher. Even when a child receives intensified support, their active participation in the activities of the entire group and the small groups is supported in various ways. Also here, the child's individual education plan is the foundation for implementing inclusive education. The educators aim to design the physical and interactive environment to suit all children. For example, images or other alternative communication methods are used in addition to verbal communication. In supervised activity sessions, images are used to illustrate instruction, and individual communication portfolios to be used in all situations are created for the children.

At the *special* support stage, the pedagogical support given to a child is intensified further. The education plan also becomes increasingly individual. In addition to parents and day-care staff, other relevant experts (e.g. a speech therapist, a physical or occupational therapist) participate in creating the plan. A special needs assistant can be placed in the child's day-care group, or the number of children in the group can be reduced. In order to guarantee the child's equal opportunities to participate in the group's activities, the educators in the group must co-operate closely and commit to implementing the support measures designed for the child.



An early childhood special education teacher is thus available to the educator team at all the stages in which inclusive education is implemented, starting with planning and ending with the educators' self-reflection on their educational activities.

### 3. Inclusive highlight

A highlight of the city of Jyväskylä's inclusive early childhood special education model is the way it utilises the expertise of early childhood special education teachers. The starting point is that every single educator works with children who need support and receives support from early childhood special education teachers. The early childhood special education teachers serve either as consultative early childhood special education teachers within a larger area of the city, or at just one day-care centre, where the job description focuses more on work in the day-care groups than on consulting the educators. In both jobs, emphasis is on the fact that through their special expertise, early childhood special education teachers bring a special education perspective to the observation and assessment of children, as well as to planning and education.

The model also highlights flexibility. The demand for resources is not assessed based on children's diagnoses, but instead depends on the expertise of consultative early childhood special education teachers and the early childhood special education teachers who work in the day-care groups. Consultation is also offered where it is most needed. The staff's job descriptions are modified dynamically when necessary. The varying situations of day-care centres are taken into account, and the evaluations performed even weekly enable quick and flexible solutions.

*Consultative early childhood special education teachers* plan collaboratively with the representatives of ECE administrators (e.g. directors, heads of day-care centres) the allocation and co-ordination of resources needed in early childhood special education. All of them are in charge of their own area in the city. Within their areas, they collect information on the need for early childhood special education and plan where the early childhood special education teachers working at day-care centres will be placed. The consultative early childhood special education teachers serve as experts in different working groups and actively co-operate with various stakeholders. They evaluate the educational needs of educators and organise training, as well as co-ordinate matters related to the transition to school of children who receive support. One of the consultative early childhood special education teachers co-ordinates the ECE of immigrant children and one trains special needs assistants.

*Early childhood special education teachers based in day-care groups* are employed at the day-care centres that show the most demand at that moment. By working



without a group of their own at day-care centres, precisely where their contribution is most urgently needed, these teachers promote the implementation of high-quality basic early childhood special education. This approach also proactively prevents the need for support. When a child does not need to join a special group in ECE, they have better opportunities to follow an inclusive path that will also lead to societal inclusion. The early childhood special education teachers who work at day-care centres also act in the groups as parallel teachers, consulting and teaching both the whole group and the small groups. By doing so, one of their important tasks is to provide an example of good pedagogical methods.

A significant part of the work of both aforementioned types of early childhood special education teachers consists of their own continuing education and the training they offer to other staff based on it. Our early childhood special education teachers have received continuing education on such themes as multiculturalism, collaboration with families, the autism spectrum, and encountering violence.

Their work emphasises collaboration with parents, the educators of day-care centre groups, superiors, children's therapists, and future teachers.

#### **4. Other evidence of quality IECE**

Jyväskylä's IECE model is implemented according to the national guidelines in the entire city, and thus with the support of authorities and political decision-makers. The co-operation partners include the [University of Jyväskylä](#) and the [Niilo Mäki Institute](#) in Jyväskylä, which focuses on research into learning difficulties. Co-operation is also carried out with the [Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting](#), which operates in Jyväskylä under the Finnish National Board of Education, particularly when children have support needs related to vision, hearing, language and interaction.

The implementation of early childhood special education is as family-oriented as possible. Co-operation with the family begins even before a child begins to attend a day-care centre. At first, the educators meet the family at the child's home or in another venue if the family so wishes. If necessary, an early childhood special education teacher is included in the meeting. The inclusiveness of early childhood special education from the family perspective is demonstrated by the feedback received from these families. For example, they have said that their child's early childhood special education is the only thing in their lives that has been organised in a 'normal' way. All families have the opportunity to reply to a satisfaction survey twice a year. A parents' group with representatives from different day-care centres meets monthly. When the educator teams evaluate their own actions, they also reflect on how parents' inclusion is achieved.



The consultative early childhood special education teachers co-ordinate the transition to school of children who receive support. The transition is planned thoroughly for the whole year preceding the beginning of school. There is a citywide plan that provides details on what happens monthly and who is in charge. For example, in September, ECE teachers and early childhood special education teachers visit the first-year classes. In January, the consultative early childhood special education teacher describes the support needs of the following autumn's school starters to the school's teachers and special education teachers. School teachers have provided positive feedback after the children with support needs have entered school. In this multidisciplinary co-operation, different experts give feedback to each other, discuss addressed drawbacks, and agree on implementing improved practices. In educator teams, the aim is to shift the focus increasingly from child-specific definition of support to the regular evaluation and planning of the educators' activities, the learning environments they provide for children, and the pedagogies they implement in the child groups.