Teacher Professional Learning in Finland and Ireland: Findings Report

Fostering inclusive quality education in Finland and Ireland

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN FINLAND AND IRELAND: FINDINGS REPORT

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Fostering inclusive quality education in Finland and Ireland

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) is an independent and self-governing organisation. EASNIE is co-funded by the ministries of education in its member countries and by the European Commission via an operating grant within the European Union (EU) education programme.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AVI	Regional State Administrative Agency (Finland)
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational training
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Ireland)
DES	Department of Education and Skills, Ireland (before 2020)
DoE	Department of Education, Ireland (since 2020)
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care (Finland)
ELC	Early Learning and Care (Ireland)
ESC	Extended Steering Committee
EU	European Union
FINEEC	Finnish Education Evaluation Centre
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals' Network
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
NCSE	National Council for Special Education (Ireland)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NQT	Newly qualified teachers (Ireland)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OKM	Ministry of Education and Culture (Finland)
SC	Steering Committee
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SG REFORM	Reform and Investment Task Force
TALIS	Teaching and Learning International Survey
TSI	Technical Support Instrument
VET	Vocational Education and Training

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KEY TERMS

- **Beginning teachers:** Beginning teachers are educators who are in the early stages of their teaching careers. They are often newly qualified and may still be developing their teaching skills and gaining experience in the classroom.

- **Capacity building:** Capacity building refers to the process of developing and strengthening capacity to meet all learners' needs. This process involves increasing the knowledge and skills of all education professionals (i.e. leaders, teachers and specialist staff) and enhancing collaborative practices within schools and across local communities. The ultimate aim is to transform teaching and learning and improve learner outcomes (EASNIE Glossary).

- **Compulsory school education:** This report refers to compulsory school education which covers International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels 1–3, i.e. primary, lower secondary up to the end of upper-secondary education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics). In Finland, compulsory education applies to all 6 to 18-year-olds. It includes pre-primary, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education (general upper secondary or vocational upper secondary education[1] and training) (Finnish National Agency for Education). In Ireland, compulsory education starts at the age of 6 and lasts until the age of 16, or until learners have completed three years of post-primary education (Department of Education).

- **Continuous/Continuing Professional Development (CPD):** CPD refers to the on-going process by which teachers and leaders enhance their capacity, skills and motivation to provide all learners with equitable opportunities for academic and broader success. Effective CPD includes activities connected to classroom practice and school improvement priorities. It involves working with other teachers and professionals within and beyond the school to extend knowledge and skills, equipping teachers to develop their practice to meet the diverse needs of all learners (EASNIE Glossary). CPD is considered in this report as part of the Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) continuum (see TPL definition below).

- **Continuum of support:** The continuum of support in teacher professional learning refers to a structured and comprehensive framework designed to provide education professionals with varying levels of assistance and resources throughout their careers. This continuum encompasses a range of professional learning opportunities to enhance the skills, knowledge and effectiveness of pre-service, beginning and experienced teachers, as well as support teachers, specialist teachers, teaching assistants, teacher educators and school leaders (EASNIE Glossary).

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- **Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC, Finland):** ECEC is part of the Finnish education system, and it is framed under the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) and the National core curriculum for ECEC (2022) (Finnish National Agency for Education). There are municipal and private ECEC settings, and allowance for home-schooling until the youngest child turns 3. There are fees in ECEC education (Eurydice).

- **Early Learning and Care (ELC, Ireland):** The compulsory school age in Ireland is 6 and all forms of pre-primary education are optional. However, children from the age of 4 can be enrolled in primary schools. Most ELC services in Ireland are delivered outside the school system. The DCEDIY is responsible, in the main, for pre-primary education and care (Eurydice).

- **Initial Teacher Education (ITE):** Pre-service training provided to student teachers before they have undertaken any teaching, eventually leading to a teaching qualification. It usually takes place in higher education institutions (EASNIE Glossary). ITE is considered in this report as part of the Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) continuum (see TPL definition below).

- **Teacher Professional Learning (TPL):** This report uses the term 'teacher professional learning' (TPL) to refer to both initial teacher education (ITE) and teachers' continuing professional development (CPD), including induction and in-school learning opportunities, as proposed in EASNIE's relevant TPL work. TPL for inclusion, in particular, involves reflective practice and personal competence development of all teachers, specialists and support staff involved in inclusive education, in the areas of valuing learner difference, learner support and working with others, in line with EASNIE's Profile of Inclusive Teachers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and aims of the report

The project 'Fostering inclusive quality education in Finland and Ireland' is funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument (TSI), the main EU programme offering tailored technical expertise to support member states to design and implement reforms. The project is implemented by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) in co-operation with the European Commission's Reform and Investment Task Force (SG REFORM), the Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland (OKM) and the Department of Education of Ireland (DoE).

Phase 2 of the TSI FIQUE-FIIE project is **a desk review of the professional development framework** of the two project countries. This includes analysing the policy frameworks and priorities for Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)[1] that are in place in the two countries, and how these are situated within national contexts (e.g. within different ministries, training providers or agencies).

Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) is a cornerstone of inclusive education, ensuring that all teachers – regardless of their career stage – develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to support diverse learners. Previous EASNIE work on TPL for inclusion has shown that effective TPL policies must provide clear guidance, resources and professional development pathways that enable all teachers to implement inclusive pedagogies in their classrooms. However, the extent to which TPL policies address the core components of inclusion varies across education systems, influencing both teacher preparedness and learner outcomes.

This report, as one of the key deliverables of the TSI project, aims to provide **evidence of the quality of the TPL framework in relation to inclusive education** within the two systems, Finland and Ireland, and to inform the identification of common strengths and challenges in the two countries.

This document constitutes the **findings report on the analysis of the TPL system of Finland and Ireland**, resulting from the desk review undertaken during the project's desk review phase. It was produced by a team of Country Analysts from EASNIE. The analysis was based on data and information received from the two ministries via a structured questionnaire. It was also supported by data collected from selected stakeholders from each country.

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[1] The term 'teacher professional learning' covers the full TPL continuum, from initial teacher education through to continuing professional development, including induction and in-school learning opportunities. Precise definitions of the key terms used in this report are provided in the Key Terms section.

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The project's Extended Steering Committee (ESC), in co-operation with other targeted stakeholders, as well as the project's Research Advisor, Professor Lani Florian, supported the development of the final report and reviewed its findings (see Annex 1: Acknowledgements).

The main findings from this report will feed into and complement the existing data collected from other project activities (i.e. legislative review of both country systems, stakeholder consultations) and will enable a full system analysis of the two countries.

1.2 Report structure

The report is comprised of four main sections:

- **Section 1** is the introduction, which provides the background, the main aims of the report, the target audience and the methodology used for the desk review.

- **Section 2** and **Section 3** include an overview of Finland's and Ireland's TPL framework, respectively. Specifically, they present the focused analysis of the TPL information and policy priorities of Finland and Ireland and go further to explore issues around inclusive orientation of TPL policy and practice in both countries. Both sections conclude by presenting the main strengths, challenges and areas for development for TPL in each country, as these have emerged from the analysis findings.

- **Section 4** provides a snapshot of each country's evidence in relation to European TPL standards, as these have been identified in EASNIE's work on TPL for inclusion and are reflected in the main areas of the review's analytical framework. It also identifies common issues for both countries, drawing parallels with EU and international priorities in relation to TPL for inclusion. It concludes by suggesting policy options as ways to strengthen the quality of TPL provision in Finland and Ireland.

1.3 Methodology

Two methodological options were suggested to the countries for this desk review: the top-down approach (EASNIE-led) and the co-development approach (ministry-led). The countries preferred the top-down approach, which entailed the following phases:

1. Developing the questionnaire/country information collection template

The EASNIE team developed a structured questionnaire, using the TPL policy self-review tool as a basis to develop the questions. The TPL policy self-review tool is a comprehensive

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resource emerging from an analysis of a range of research papers and influential documents on the topic prepared by international and European organisations. It indicates different policy priorities and specific elements that are considered important for developing policy that effectively supports TPL for inclusion. The EASNIE team used this tool as the main analytical framework for the development of the questionnaire, as well as for analysing the country information received.

The questions of the country information collection template were divided into three sections:

- Section 1: Direct providers – Targets – Outcomes

- Section 2: Concepts, tools, methods

- Section 3: Policy vision, goals, principles, continuum of support, capacity building, and monitoring

The questions included under each section aimed to collect information on initial teacher education and on continuous professional development. The information collection template is available in Annex 2.

2. Collecting resources

EASNIE compiled an initial list of resources for analysis. The initial lists included as a basic source the recent Country System Mapping (CSM) reports of Finland and Ireland, produced by the Agency, which identify, map and analyse the key features of the TPL framework of the two countries (completed in September 2023). It also included recent information on TPL from Eurydice (updates from 2023 and 2024). In addition, some government policy documents available online were consulted. Each country reviewed the suggested list of resources and provided additional national resources and/or academic literature for further analysis.

3. Answering the questionnaire

The EASNIE team pre-populated the questionnaire. Then it contacted the countries and asked them to review the information provided. The countries clarified information, deleted outdated information or added new information in the questionnaire. The countries also added comments that were considered in the next phase.

4. Drafting the report

Following the population of the grid with relevant information from the agreed resources, the team produced a first draft of the report and compiled some key emerging findings for each country. It then used the review's analytical framework (i.e. the seven key policy areas of the TPL policy review tool) to map out the key findings and identify common issues for TPL in Finland and Ireland.

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5. *ESC review and Stakeholder consultations*

The draft report was then sent to the ESC members for their written comments. The feedback received was discussed and clarified during online focus groups with targeted stakeholders in each context – selected and recruited by the SC members.

6. *Final report*

Finally, the EASNIE team produced the final draft of the TPL report. A dedicated online meeting with the SC members was held to validate the findings and finalise the report.

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2. TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FRAMEWORK IN FINLAND

2.1 Initial Teacher Education

Policy vision

The [Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026](#), outlined by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2022), sets forth Finland's vision for both Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuous Teacher Education (CPD). This comprehensive plan is structured around four main objectives, each aimed at enhancing the quality and effectiveness of teacher education. These objectives emphasise collaborative efforts among higher education institutions, the integration of research-based approaches, continuous professional development, and the inclusion of management competencies. Specifically, some links between its four main objectives and ITE are the following:

- Objective 1, 'interest and staying power through foresight and student admissions' (p. 4) expects that higher education institutions will work collaboratively, using a research-based approach, to develop student admissions in ways that consider the international dimension.

- Objective 2, 'teachers' competence development is research based and continuous' (p. 4), entails among other issues the need for higher education institutions (HEI) to consider models for teacher competence, and supervise practice in different environments. Collaboration between HEIs is expected to achieve common pedagogical qualifications. Induction training is also an expectation.

- Objective 3, 'robust teacher education and continuous teacher learning by means of co-operation and networks' (p. 4) expects HEIs to collaborate to strengthen the quality of ITE and the competences of teacher graduates.

- Objective 4, 'skilful management to help educational institutions become learning and evolving communities' (p. 4) expects HEIs to include management competences in teacher education.

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By addressing these key areas, the Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026 seeks to prepare educators to meet the evolving demands of the educational landscape and teacher education in the context of the 2020s. It builds on the vision of creating the best competence together, as outlined in the previous programme published in 2016 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022).

The development and implementation of the Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026 is facilitated by the Teacher Education Forum. This Forum was set up by the Ministry of Education and Culture and represents universities, providers of education, teacher unions, student teachers, the Finnish National Agency for Education, the Ministry of Education and Culture and other relevant stakeholders such as the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities and the Trade Union of Education (OAJ) (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023a).

During the previous term of the Teacher Education Forum, the OVET project, co-ordinated by the University of Turku, developed a comprehensive teaching model (MAP) for class teachers, subject teachers, early childhood educators, special education teachers and study advisors. This model views teaching as a multifaceted expert profession encompassing a broad range of competencies. The process model of teaching serves as the national foundation for teacher selection in Finland and underpins teacher education, the induction phase and on-going professional development.

For the term 2024–2027, the implementation of the Programme is currently co-ordinated by the University of Helsinki, with funding from the Ministry of Education and Culture (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023a). According to the Ministry of Education and Culture (2024), at the beginning of the new term, the Forum's concrete task is to determine how teacher training takes into account teachers' skills needs related to digitalisation and its pedagogical utilisation, which may be related to, for example, the use of artificial intelligence in teaching. The Teacher Professional Development Programme 2022–2026 will also be considered when the Forum prepares a research-based quality assurance system for teacher education (University of Helsinki, 2025).

The Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026 has been considered in the applications for funding for teacher training at the Finnish National Agency for Education. The 2024 call for applications explicitly mentioned that the main themes for funding TPL activities are the following:

- subject and sector-specific competence;
- language-aware teaching and operating culture;
- evaluation skills; strengthening digital skills;
- strengthening sustainability expertise;
- developing an inclusive operating culture;
- continuous learning;
- developing a communal operating culture and leadership skills (National Board of Education, 2024).

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The development of an inclusive operating culture, which is one of the priority areas, relies on four values:

1. valuing the diversity of learners – the diversity of learners is seen as a resource for education;

2. supporting all learners – teachers have high expectations for the progress of all learners;

3. collaboration with others – collaboration and teamwork are essential tools for all teachers;

4. personal professional development – teaching is learning, and the teacher takes responsibility for their own lifelong learning (National Board of Education, 2024).

By embracing these values and priorities, the Teacher Education Development Programme drawn up by the Teacher Education Forum in 2016 and 2022 aspires to 'keep teacher education strong, attractive and internationally respected' (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023a, para. 5).

Direct providers

ITE programmes are provided in eight Universities in Finland, and they lead to formal qualification for ECEC teachers, primary education teachers (grades 1–6), subject teachers (grades 7–9), and special education or special class teachers (grades 1–9) (European Agency, 2023; Eurydice, 2023; Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023).

These universities are:

- University of Helsinki

- University of Eastern Finland

- University of Jyväskylä

- University of Lapland

- University of Oulu

- Tampere University

- University of Turku

- Åbo Akademi University.

Admission in initial teacher education programmes is highly competitive and there is a highly selective process (Byman et al., 2020). According to the National Selection Co-operation Network in the Field of Education, in 2020 'class teacher programmes taught in Finnish (8 programmes) accepted just 5% to 13% of applicants and those taught in Swedish (3 programmes) accepted only 16% to 30% of applicants. The acceptance rate for

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special needs education programmes taught in Finnish was 3% to 7% (5 programmes) and in Swedish 26% (1 programme)' (in Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023, p. 202).

Data from Vipunen presented by the Finnish National Agency for Education (2024) and the Ministry of Education and Culture and Finnish National Agency for Education (2022) suggest that the intake of applicants in 2022 was:

- class teacher education: below 20% of applicants;
- subject teacher education: 10–50% of applicants;
- vocational teacher education: below 40% of applicants.

The variation in acceptance rates stems from a set quota of new students for each teacher education programme (Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023).

Both graduates of general upper secondary education or vocational education and training can apply for initial teacher education programmes. The selection process entails two phases (Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023). In the first phase, 60% of applicants can enter universities based on their matriculation exams (in Finnish, English, Mathematics, and another subject chosen by the applicant), and 40% are selected based on their results in VAKAVA, which is an entrance exam. It is noted that graduates of vocational education and training do not have matriculation exams, so they can only be accepted through VAKAVA exams.

The second phase is unified across Finnish universities, and it assesses applicants' non-cognitive characteristics by using a Multiple Mini Interviews (MMI) method. Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen (2023) note that 'the current selection model does not necessarily select "the best of the best" among the applicants in terms of their scores, because it heavily favours new high school graduates and first-time applicants' (p. 204), and it reduces the autonomy of teacher education programmes.

Structure of initial teacher education

According to Eurydice (2024), in Finland 'teacher training can be either concurrent, with pedagogical training integrated into the master's programme, or consecutive, with the pedagogical training completed after the initial degree' (Section 9. Teachers and education staff, para. 5).

ECEC teachers teach children aged 0–5. Class teachers teach in the first six grades of basic education, whereas subject teachers usually teach in the last three grades of basic education and at upper-secondary level. Schools can also use subject teachers in primary schools. Special teachers teach in all levels of education. All teachers in pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education are required to have a bachelor (180 ECTS) and master's degree (120 ECTS), except for early childhood education teachers who are required to have a bachelor's degree (180 ECTS) (Eurydice, 2023).

Most student teachers may choose Special Education as a minor (25 ECTS) and qualify as special education teachers by completing an additional 60 ECTS of special education studies after their teacher training (Takala and Sirkko, 2022).

The working methods used in the teacher education and educational institutions emphasise a learner-oriented, research-based and whole-school approach. In addition,

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key issues are the new and diverse learning environments, team-teaching,
cross-disciplinary approaches and teachers' leadership skills (Eurydice, 2024, Section 9.
Teachers and education staff, para. 5).

Content of ITE

In Finland, the content of ITE varies across the higher education institutions. According to
the Ministry of Education and Culture (2023b), it is important to focus on guiding learners

> who need a greater level of support, the development of learning
> environments, the utilisation of digital technologies, issues related to a
> multicultural society, cooperation between school and home, and with the
> world of work (p. 2).

Particularly the goal of technology use is among the priorities of some universities which
offer optional courses on technology for teacher educators (e.g. University of Helsinki
offers) so that they can engage their students in the use of technology for education
(Byman et al., 2020).

The teacher education institutions have autonomy over the content of their programmes.
Finnish university studies always comprise basic subject studies, intermediate studies[2]
(bachelor's degree) and advanced studies (master's degree). There are some required
studies depending on the qualification (e.g. ECEC teacher must complete studies that give
the teacher professional skills for tasks in ECEC). In addition, there are minor subjects the
student can freely choose and include in the degree.

Subject teachers are educated on the subject they intend to teach and are enrolled in
science or arts departments. Subject teachers for home economics and craft (textile or
technical work) constitute an exception and they are educated in Departments of
Education. The content of education for special needs teachers covers inclusive education
issues and issues linked with the education of children with disabilities. Student teachers
in special education also learn about the role of home, school and society in the
development of children (Eurydice, 2024, Section 9.1).

Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen (2023) note that class teachers' bachelor degrees
(180 ECTS) include a pedagogical studies dimension which comprises modules on
psychological, philosophical and sociological aspects of educational sciences, curriculum
development, assessment, inclusion/inclusive education, SEN and a placement. Subject
teachers and special teachers need to major in one subject and in special education
respectively (120 ECTS) and then they are expected to receive a basic and intermediate
education qualification (60 ECTS), in which they are enrolled in pedagogical studies and
school placement.

Teacher education programmes in Finland engage student teachers with content that can
be considered relevant to inclusive education to some extent, such as differentiation,
behaviour management and co-teaching. According to a review of teacher education
syllabi conducted by Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen (2023), universities address

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[2] The term 'intermediate' study in Finland refers to a study module of a university subject (or equivalent)
that is completed after basic studies (Source: TEPA Term Bank).

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differentiation in different ways, but they all offer an introductory rather than an in-depth understanding of the topic. The researchers note that for class teachers, the mandatory courses focus on supporting learners with diverse educational needs (e.g. courses in special education, inclusive education, or related topics, such as differentiated instruction, modified learning environments).

Coursework varies from 3–6 ECTS (1 to 2 modules), to 10 ECTS. The situation for subject teachers is similar, although two university programmes have no courses explicitly related to special educational needs. Six university programmes for subject teachers provide one relevant course (5 ECTS) and two programmes provide two courses (10 ECTS). Furthermore, teacher programmes (class teachers, subject teachers and special teachers) do not adequately cover the issue of behaviour management and support. Another finding is that co-teaching is not high in the priorities and relevant literature of teacher education syllabi. In particular, co-teaching 'is explicitly presented in aims and scopes in at least four class teacher education programmes, two subject teacher education programmes and two special education teacher education programmes' (Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023, p. 213).

Pulkinen, Pirttimaa and Vitala (2024) suggest that inclusive education should be equally integrated in all ITE programmes, and more attention should be paid to explaining why inclusion is necessary. Other studies also provide information about the content of ITE programmes in relation to inclusive education. For example, Äikäs et al. (2024) examined the curricula of studies for early childhood education, classroom and subject teachers that were in force in the autumn of 2021, looking for modules focusing on inclusive education. Their findings suggest that the content of inclusive education varies and it is sometimes marginalised. They note that there are up to two courses with a special education content, whereas in some programmes, inclusive education or inclusive education and special education are not part of the content.

Pihlaja and Ojala (2023) reviewed ITE curricula for ECEC in 2021–2022 and found that each programme (of 180 ECTS) included one or two special education modules ranging from 5 to 11 ECTS. Special education content was stated in the objectives of the modules. The authors suggest that special educational content should be strengthened, and they note that the development of multiprofessional co-operation skills is important in teacher education. Finally, they suggest that ITE programmes should offer opportunities for collaboration between ECEC student teachers and special education student teachers.

Mäkihonko et al. (2023) examined the content of vocational teacher education in five universities to identify special education content. They found that all five universities included courses that either fully or partially focused on special education. The content focused on identifying the need for special support. The authors suggest that if universities collaborated, variation in special education content in ITE programmes would be minimised.

Some relevant examples from different universities are the following. In Tampere University, there is a course entitled 'KAS.VAR.110: Inclusion and belonging in ECEC' (5 ECTS) which is concerned with the inclusion of children with disabilities and the inclusion of children who belong in other marginalised groups (e.g. ethnicity, class, poverty). Another course, entitled 'KAS.KAY: 200 Inclusive Education' (5 ECTS) was in place in Tampere University during the academic year 2023/2024.

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The University of Helsinki Curriculum of teacher education includes the course 'Inclusion and need for support' (5 ECTS) for students in special pedagogy in educational science. As part of pedagogical studies, there is one 5 ECTS course to support learning and well-being, which is mandatory for all pedagogical students from early childhood education and care to adult education. The content is on special pedagogy. Inclusion is also discussed as separate lectures. Optional studies are offered by module, within which there are different courses. In other words, these are offered to all faculty students. One of these modules is 'Inclusive education'. It has included three 5 credits courses in recent years, with the following themes: the contribution of disability research to inclusion in education and training; multi-sectoral and multi-actor co-operation; skills in constructive empathetic interaction.

The University of Eastern Finland (UEF) offers a minor (25 ETCS) on 'Educational Leadership' as a university qualification that includes six courses. It also offers several courses with inclusive education orientation for the majority of student teachers, including class teachers, subject teachers, early childhood teachers and special teachers. The courses are included in the qualification studies (Multidisciplinary Study Programme in Basic Education), with the examples of 'Equality and Diversity in Education' (FS00CE98 – 5 ECTS) and 'Special Educational Approaches to Pedagogical support' (FK00CD06 P – 5 ECTS).

The master's degree in class teacher education has a general objective of inclusive and integrated principles in building learning environments and support for well-being. The special needs education teacher degree programme includes a course entitled 'Inclusive learning environments' (FK00CH21 – 2 ECTS) and 'Special education teacher as an expert of support and multiprofessional actor' (4 FK00CD12 – 4 ECTS). In addition, early childhood teacher education offers courses focusing on inclusive and special education: 'Learning, development and well-being, specific part (early education)' (FS00CG06 P – 2 ECTS) and 'Towards inclusive and healthy work community' (FS00CM44 – 5 ECTS).

Notably, there is currently a curricula reform in all teacher training programmes in UEF, and next semester, inclusive education will be further strengthened in teacher education with at least two courses that are obligatory for the majority of student teachers. However, it is notable that the class teacher and special teacher programmes are provided in different schools – school of applied educational science and teacher education, and school of educational sciences and psychology, respectively – perhaps maintaining the dualistic nature of general and special education settings in the Finnish education system.

The University of Oulu describes its focus on inclusive education in its special education programme (and in research) as follows:

> The programme includes studies in education and professional studies in special education. The main discipline of science in the programme is education, major in special education. The programme focuses on inclusion (= full participation and equality), lifelong learning, sense of community, emotional and interaction skills, and the meaning of collaboration.

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Some examples of relevant courses offered by the University of Oulu include: 'Society and Inclusive Education', 'Practice 1: Learning Environments in Special Education', 'Special Education and the Course of Life'.

Paju, Räty, Pirttimaa and Kontu (2016) note that despite the legal changes towards inclusive education in Finland, initial teacher education for class teachers, subject teachers and special teachers has not changed to this direction. This leads to a diversity of theoretical and practical backgrounds among teachers, which explains why some studies suggest that Finnish class teachers and subject teachers do not feel as competent to teach diverse learners compared to special teachers who feel better equipped. Paju et al. (2016) suggest teacher education programmes (i.e. class, subject and special teachers) should collaborate to better prepare all teachers for inclusive education. Mijalovic (2023) suggests that 'all class and subject teachers must also cover a certain amount of special needs education during their studies' (p. 165).

Teaching practice/school placement

Student teachers in Finland undergo a school placement in the teacher training schools (*normaalikoulu* in Finnish) which are part of universities or at affiliated schools (Byman et al., 2020). For example, the University of Helsinki has two teacher training schools, the Helsinki Normal Lyceum and the Viikki Teacher Training School (University of Helsinki, 2024). According to Byman et al. (2020), teacher training schools have a high level of autonomy. Teacher training schools also participate in the development of ITE, and they collaborate with university departments and national and foreign educational institutions. Experienced teachers based in these schools are appointed as mentors and they have an additional counselling qualification (Mijalovic, 2023). They are part of university personnel, they have at least MA degrees, and many of them have doctoral degrees (Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen, 2011 in Byman et al., 2020).

Both the bachelor's and master's degrees include school placement (Mijalovic, 2023), although in some universities in the education of subject teachers, the pedagogical studies and teaching practice are in the master's degree stage. According to Eurydice (2024), school placement may be included in basic, intermediate and advanced studies. It consists of an orientation practicum (familiarisation with teaching and learners; teaching in pairs or alone) as part of the subject studies in education and of an advanced practicum (students develop lesson plans and teach different subjects, they use basic forms of instruction, they assess instruction and learning, and they reflect on their teaching). It is noted that student teachers may teach alone and/or alongside other student teachers, and that 'the number of practice lessons varies according to the nature of the subjects, the standards of teaching methods, the practice needed by the trainee and the school's resources' (Eurydice, 2024, Section 9.1). Student teachers may have school placement periods during their studies, some of which can be done in teacher training schools, whereas early childhood student teachers are placed in local ECE settings (Takala and Sirkko, 2022).

The number of ECTS dedicated to school placement varies across universities. For example, according to the University of Helsinki website (2024), student class teachers are placed in the Teacher Training School 'Helsinki Normal Lyceum'. They undergo a school placement of 10 ECTS in the bachelor's degree and another 10 ECTS in the master's degree. Student subject teachers also have supervised and advanced school placement,

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but the number of ECTS is not mentioned. Student teachers studying to become special teachers have two school placement periods of four weeks each. One of the periods takes place in primary school and the other in lower secondary school. Student teachers from all programmes (class teachers, subject teachers, and special teachers) are placed in the school at the same time, and they are expected to collaborate to plan and implement two co-teaching lessons (i.e. co-teaching between a class student teacher and a student special teacher, and co-teaching between a student subject teacher and a student special teacher).

Takala and Sirkko (2022) note that Finland's teacher training schools 'seldom have students with severe intellectual impairment and only a few pupils with other disabilities' (p. 391), which restricts student teachers' teaching experiences. In contrast, early childhood education settings have children with diverse profiles, and they provide more opportunities for student teachers to experience teaching in diverse populations. Research evidence mentioned earlier (e.g. Honkasilta, Pihlaja, and Pesonen, 2024; Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023; Paju et al., 2016; Takala, Pihlaja and Viljamaa, 2023) regarding student teachers' narrow view of/unpreparedness for inclusive education and positive views of segregation is also important for future decisions on updating ITE programmes in Finland.

Capacity building for inclusive education

The research-based nature of ITE is highly praised since:

> … the objective is to produce teachers with a research orientation in their work who are capable of independent problem solving and have the capacity to apply the most recent research to the fields of education and the subjects taught (Byman et al., 2020, p. 3).

Mikkilä-Erdmann, Warinowski and Iiskala (2019) point out that ITE in Finland has some special characteristics that make it successful in terms of capacity building, such as the ITE curriculum, the development of empirical research skills, and the experience that student teachers gain during the school placement in teacher training schools.

Capacity building for inclusive education is part of ITE programmes, and it is promoted through the three things that characterise ITE in Finland, namely the focus on the art of teaching (e.g. planning, teaching, providing support, social, ethical and moral skills), research-based (linking teaching and research so that they can solve problems independently and use research for teaching), and mentored teaching practice (Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023; Education Finland, 2024).

However, there is research evidence to suggest that Finnish student teachers and graduating teachers feel unprepared to teach all learners, including learners with disabilities (Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023; Paju et al., 2016). At the same time, student teachers and graduating teachers feel that they have few opportunities to teach/support learners with disabilities during their school placement (Saloviita and Tolvanen, 2017 in Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023).

The study by Takala et al. (2023) suggests that Finnish student teachers do not have a clear understanding of inclusive education, as they believe that it is about educating large

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groups of learners with minimal resources and no training. Takala et al. (2023) note that class student teachers and subject student teachers are not aware of flexible arrangements and co-teaching as ways to promote inclusive education.

Paju et al. (2016) observe that even though there is a series of changes to promote inclusive education in Finland, ITE programmes were not substantially modified to accommodate these changes. They also note that the fact that student teachers follow different ITE programmes (to become class teachers, subject teachers to special teachers) strengthens 'professional diversity' (p. 811) and cultivates the belief that not all teachers are adequately equipped to teach all learners.

Honkasilta, Pihlaja and Pesonen (2024) refer to previous research that affirms that both pre-service and in-service teachers feel generally unprepared for implementing inclusion in education. The authors suggest that the negative or 'polarised' views on inclusive education are not solely based on attitudes, but on teachers' experiences regarding access to adequate resources and support.

Overall, Finnish researchers suggest that ITE should be improved to equip student teachers with the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills to support learners with disabilities (Paju et al., 2016; Takala and Sirkko, 2022). They also suggest that the student teachers should get familiar with the core values of inclusive education and understand equity and equality as they are stated in the UN CRPD.

Some researchers suggest that ITE curricula should emphasise more the education of children with disabilities and offer more opportunities to student teachers to experience diversity during their studies (Takala et al., 2023). Paju et al. (2016) note that ITE programmes for subject teachers need to give even more emphasis to pedagogical studies and inclusive education, and they conclude that:

> … co-operation among different training programmes, as well as confidence in using the existing, excellent teacher training, will lead to more effective teaching of every pupil in the mainstream class (p. 811).

Monitoring and quality assurance

Data from international studies suggests that a significant percentage of Finnish teachers are highly qualified compared to the situation in other countries. OECD (2020) reports on data from PISA 2018 and TALIS 2018, and comments that ITE in Finland relies on a system of highly competitive exams, and that ITE programmes combine theory and practice. Additionally, OECD (2020) observes that all teachers in basic and general upper secondary education have a master's degree.

According to TALIS 2018:

> 87% of Finnish teachers had completed formal ITE covering content, pedagogy and classroom practice in some or all subjects taught, compared to an OECD average of 79% (in OECD, 2020, p. 14).

Based on national data collection (2019), teachers and principals in Finland even have higher qualification percentages, although they vary by teacher group. Despite this, Finnish teachers felt less well prepared for all ITE components, compared to teachers in

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other countries. They also did not have opportunities to participate in induction programmes and about three quarters of them had no access to mentoring. This data suggests that ITE programmes need to be improved, and that induction and mentoring phases should be introduced to draw the link from ITE to teaching.

Research data may inform monitoring and quality assurance of ITE programmes. It is important to consider existing research evidence to reflect on the extent to which the way the three components of teacher education in Finland (i.e. art of teaching, research-based, mentored teaching practice) are incorporated in ITE programmes prepares teachers adequately for inclusive education.

Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen (2023) note that:

> … while the research-based focus of pre-service teacher training may lead one to assume that there is widespread use of evidence-based instructional practices in Finland, there is no research, to date, to support this assertion (p. 211).

There is research to suggest that Finnish teachers often have difficulties to draw the link between teaching and research, and differentiate teaching, particularly for learners with learning difficulties (Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023).

According to Aspfors and Eklund (2017):

> … newly qualified teachers found that pre-service research activities decreased time spent on other important topics, including learning about specific approaches to supporting SEN students (in Gagnon, Honkasilta and Jahnukainen, 2023, p. 208).

Furthermore, the survey conducted with 277 student teachers (class teachers, subject teachers and special teachers) by Takala et al. (2023) showed that class student teachers and subject student teachers were very negative about inclusive education. What is worrying is that they mentioned that learners may suffer in inclusive settings and that there are good aspects to segregation. The researchers mentioned that the common view was that 'yes it's good, but', and they suggested that 'future teachers need more knowledge about and a better understanding of inclusion and diversity' (Takala et al., 2023, p. 1056).

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2.2 Continuous Professional Development

Policy vision

The policy vision for CPD is included in the general vision for TPL, outlined in the
Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026 (Ministry of Education and
Culture, 2022). Besides teachers' core education and induction, the programme covers
continuous professional learning as well. Some links between its four main objectives and
CPD are the following:

- Objective 1 'interest and staying power through foresight and student
  admissions' expects that direct providers of CPD will provide training concerning
  teachers' and directors' well-being, and continuous competence development.
  HEIs are also expected to promote flexible transitions for teachers in their
  careers 'by enabling them to acquire qualifications and competence at different
  stages of their careers, also while working'.

- Objective 2 'teachers' competence development is research based and
  continuous' expects that competence development will be promoted through
  continuous learning and through the collaboration of HEIs.

- Objective 3 'robust teacher education and continuous teacher learning by means
  of co-operation and networks' expects the collaboration of HEIs for CPD.

- Finally, Objective 4 'skilful management to help educational institutions become
  learning and evolving communities' expects that HEIs develop leadership skills
  studies for directors of schools and educational institutions, as well as directors
  of units in ECEC (p. 4).

The Programme also names the following as the major state priorities:

> … those related to climate change, strengthening inclusion and active
> citizenship, changes brought about by digitalisation, changing competence
> needs and the impact of demographic development, regional segregation,
> migration, and non-discrimination and equality (accessibility) (Ministry of
> Education and Culture, 2022, p. 6).

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It also lists three main areas of teacher competences for the whole TPL career path:

- *Broad-based core competence,* including:
    - in-depth competence in one's own field;
    - pedagogical and didactic competence;
    - competence related to the curriculum;
    - knowledge about learners and how to support different learners;
    - expertise in values, culture, emotions, interaction and co-operation;
    - research competence and critical thinking;
    - sustainability expertise, and management of diverse learning environments and digitalisation and related pedagogy.
- *Expertise and action that create new outcomes*, including:
    - creative, inquisitive, bold, enterprising and inquiry-based approaches to work when facing challenges and developing teaching;
    - competence related to examining and solving wicked problems and adapting to them;
    - developing innovations for and introducing innovations into the curriculum, teaching, guidance, learning, and education and training in co-operation with networks and partnerships;
    - collaborative competence in local and global contexts.
- *Developing one's own competence* and the educational institutions, including:
    - continuous learning and career planning;
    - use of research, assessments (including self-assessments) and feedback in developing oneself and the work community;
    - leadership and management and community competence required for creating collaborative values, practices and procedures (Ibid., p. 3).

In sum, the Teacher Education Development Programme, as the key document that sets the policy vision of TPL, envisages education as 'goal-oriented collaboration' and aspires to develop broad-based teacher competences that can support learning in different stages of life, in a rapidly changing world.

Direct providers

CPD in Finland is provided by a range of providers, such as universities, teacher unions (e.g. the OAJ), the Finnish National Agency for Education, local authorities and municipalities, commercial actors and others (European Commission, 2023).

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There are three types of CPD: self-motivated, employer-funded, and state-funded CPD linked to education policy and priorities. Employer-funded CPD is funded by the employer, concerns individual teachers or the teaching personnel of a school or a municipality, and takes place during working hours (Eurydice, 2023, Section 9.3).

According to Eurydice (2023), local authorities or joint municipal authorities have a responsibility for CPD, and they have education departments within their local administration. The heads of education departments are responsible for these education departments. Therefore, CPD opportunities differ across municipalities. Even though the national government requires that municipalities fund at least three days of mandatory professional development each year, 'interpretation of the requirement varies widely' (NCEE, 2024, Teacher Development section): the national government does not regulate the type or content of professional development offered to teachers; according to TALIS data, the average Finnish teacher spends seven days a year on professional development; some municipalities arrange 'large, multi-school training events [with] others leaving it up to schools to develop in-service programs' (NCEE, 2024).

An example of a CPD provider at local level is the Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVI) in Lapland, which has organised the annual Preschool and Early Primary Conference (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017). This is an important conference, since it brings together the ECEC and primary school teachers of Northern Finland. The Regional State Administrative agencies of Lapland and Northern Finland have also organised, for example, a training on support for learning in vocational education and training, one of which is entitled 'multiple faces of inclusion'. However, in 2024, the Ministry of Education and Culture announced budget cuts in CPD, and thus it remains to be seen how CPD will continue. The Finnish National Agency for Education is also responsible for CPD (European Agency, 2023). It collaborates with the Ministry of Education and Culture, and its board is comprised of political decision-makers, local authorities, teachers and social partners, whereas since 2018, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre and the Matriculation Examination Board have acted as independent agencies within the Finnish National Agency for Education. The Finnish National Agency for Education assists the Ministry of Education and Culture in policy-making and implementation, therefore its role in CPD is important (Eurydice, 2023, Section 1.2). The Purje network co-ordinated by the Finnish National Agency for Education develops the practices for organising support in early childhood education and care, pre-primary education and primary and lower secondary education. The network supports the implementation of curricula and strengthens the structures, processes and forms of co-operation related to the planning, implementation and assessment of support for early childhood education and care, pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education.

Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting also provides CPD. It offers courses and seminars at national, regional, local and school level (European Agency, 2023). The courses offered to schools are tailor-made, and they may be short or long-term. Valteri in-service training includes methods and operating models for solving everyday learning situations, up-to-date professional knowledge for personnel in the education and teaching sector, and common consideration and solutions for developing flexible and diverse learning support for everyone in a comprehensive school.

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Some of the training topics related to inclusive education include 'attachment to school, support for attendance' and 'inclusive practices in early childhood education and care/school'. Other topics focus on specific groups of learners, e.g. a child on the autism spectrum in early childhood education/school, challenging behaviour, taking into account a visually impaired learner in a group, attention to a hearing-impaired learner in a group, supporting language development in early childhood education, support for learners with special needs, multicultural school and multilingual learners, etc. There are also process-based courses available, which may include consultations and workplace consultancy (European Agency, 2023).

Valteri is funded by the Finnish National Board of Education and so some of the courses are free of charge (European Agency, 2023). Valteri announces the topics and content of the courses in a course calendar on its website. According to the Valteri website (2024), CPD opportunities entail:

> … methods and operating models for solving everyday learning situations, up-to-date professional knowledge for personnel in the education and teaching sector, common consideration and solutions for developing flexible and diverse learning support for everyone in a comprehensive school.

Valteri offers various free guides on its website, for example to support diversity – tools for developing a Nepsy-friendly school environment – that enable the identification and assessment of the characteristics of high-quality basic education common to all. It supports the inclusion and learning of all children, helping to set development goals for schools. In addition, Valteri offers both free and fee-paying online training for early childhood education and care and pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education professionals.

The National Teacher Education Forum concerns higher education institutions responsible for teacher education and key stakeholders (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023b). The Teacher Education Forum, appointed in 2016 by the Ministry, aims to guide the development of pre- and in-service teacher education across higher education institutions. The Forum published its second Teacher Education Development Programme, for 2022–2026, in May 2022 (Eurydice, 2024, Section 9.3).

Teacher unions, representing teachers working in different levels of education, offer CPD opportunities. Some of these teacher unions are:

- the ECEC Teachers' Union in Finland (VOL)
- OAJ General Education Teachers
- OAL Vocational Educators and Trainers (OAO)
- Union for University Teachers and Researchers (YLL)
- Association for Experts in the Education Sector (Opsia)
- Teacher Student Union of Finland (SOOL)
- Retired Teachers in Finland (OSJ).

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The National Board of Education also provides CPD opportunities, and many of the topics are concerned with transitions (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017).

Teachers' professional learning is also supported in various school, district and national-level projects, events or activities. Examples of effective and long-term networks are the Innokas and networks. The Innokas network provides training and support to over 600 schools. The LUMA network is supported by all Finnish Universities and provides professional learning opportunities to teachers, as well as courses to students focusing on mathematics, science and digital technology. The LUMA strategy and implementation plan can also play a key role in the Teacher Education Forum's tasks (LUMA Centre Finland, 2025).

However, not all the networks and projects are effective and long term. There are key challenges in the 'project-based approach' for TPL including quality assurance issues, competitive funding and the fragmented nature of those types of TPL initiatives (Lavonen, Mahlamäki-Kultanen, Vahtivuori-Hänninen and Vesalainen, 2023).

Finally, CPD can also take place in the form of teacher mobility programmes. In these programmes, pre-primary, primary and secondary schools get funding to send staff to participate in learning mobilities in other European countries. The learning mobilities may consist of in-service training, which can take the form of a structured course, a job shadowing period in the field of school education, or teaching in a partnering school or pre-primary institution (see Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019). The Finnish National Agency for Education (Opetushallitus) also co-ordinates programmes that promote partnerships between higher education institutions in Finland and other countries (Eurydice, 2023, section 13.5).

Beginning teachers/induction

According to the Education and Training Monitor 2023 (European Commission, 2023), in Finland, support for beginning teachers is not compulsory, but it is recommended. There is no national programme or regulations for induction, but induction programmes are organised at local level and funded by the local authorities (Eurydice, 2023).

Every municipality and education provider uses their own model to support teachers in their induction phase (Lavonen et al., 2023, p. 5). In order to support new teachers, there have been national projects and pilots focusing on mentoring (Niemi, 2015). For example, the national government has supported the Finnish Network for Teacher Induction 'Osaava Verme' for many years (Heikkinen et al., 2018). The aim of the Osaava programme was to develop a continuum of teacher professional learning that would coherently support teachers' learning over the course of their careers, including creating a new approach to induction (NCEE, 2016). Osaava Verme is a collaborative network between the Finnish teacher education institutions, including the vocational teacher education institutions and teacher education departments of universities. Almost 1,000 mentors have been educated during the past decade (Lavonen et al., 2023, p. 5).

The Ministry of Education and Culture (2023b) acknowledges that 'learning does not end with graduation', so it ensures that Finnish teachers have access to online learning and there are tutor teachers to support them. The tutors may support teachers using

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educational technology in teaching and learning (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023b).

Another model for supporting new teachers' entry into the profession is 'Peer-Group Mentoring' (PGM) which emphasises autonomy (that is, an independently acting teacher) and equality. 'In contrast to a mentor–teacher relationship, PGM is characterised by an equal relationship among participants and provides an opportunity for collective reflection on teachers' work' (Hansen et al., 2023, p. 171).

The Teacher Union for Teachers (OAJ) also offers the NOPE training to teachers who are under 35 years of age and have less than five years of teaching experience. This is a two-day professional development training, and it is organised at local and regional level. Members of the OAJ can register and participate as part of their membership (OAJ, 2023 and 2024).

Despite the abovementioned initiatives, it appears that Finland lacks a stipulated mentoring system. As Niemi (2015) notes, 'over 60% of primary schools do not provide any formal induction, although it is considered useful for new teachers' (p. 289). The TALIS survey 2018 called for a national solution for induction and mentoring in Finland, with clearer responsibilities of the different induction providers (Taajamo and Puhakka, 2019 in Pennanen, Markkanen, and Tynjälä, 2020).

Finnish beginning teachers often face challenges related to the theory–practice gap. They feel unprepared for the everyday working life and inexperienced to deal with diverse learner needs (Mijalovic, 2023, p. 173). According to the report 'Equality and Participation in Education' by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (2021), the content of teachers' pedagogical studies varies by university, and this necessitates the improvement of teacher assessment competence through CPD. This is crucial because the methods teachers use to assess learners vary significantly, posing one of the key challenges in promoting equality and participation across schools.

Experienced teachers

In Finland, teachers are expected to participate in CPD on an annual basis, as part of their agreement on salaries at most levels of education (Ministry of Education and Culture and Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). According to Eurydice (2024), the duration of annual CDP varies depending on the level of education. Teachers participate in mandatory CPD training for one or five days a year, according to the relevant statutes and collective agreements. For example, in ECEC, the right and duty of personnel to CPD is regulated in the Act on ECEC (540/2018), but at other levels both employers and teachers are responsible for CPD (Eurydice, 2023). Participation in CPD does not provide teachers with formal benefits, such as salary increases or promotions. Teachers' motivation to pursue TPL opportunities is mostly intrinsic, for upskilling their knowledge, competences as well as their professional well-being (Eurydice, 2024, Section 9.3).

The state funds CPD activities which fall within the priorities of education policies and reforms (Eurydice, 2024). The Finnish National Agency for Education and the Regional State Administrative Agencies are the responsible bodies to channel related funds. Education providers (i.e. municipalities, universities, teacher training schools and other institutions with special expertise) can apply for funding (Eurydice, 2024, Section 9.3).

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Many higher education institutions implement CPD activities funded by the Finnish National Agency for Education. For example, the Haga-Helia University of Applied Sciences organises a CPD programme entitled Inclusion – joy of learning for all. The objective of the training is to strengthen teachers' inclusive working methods and culture and thus support the well-being, completion of studies and employment of all students as well as their success as citizens. The objective of the training is also to train teachers on a broad front and by different types of training in the field of joint teaching within the framework of inclusion themes and to offer everyday tools for guidance.

The University of Jyväskylä, in co-operation with Valteri Center for Learning and Consulting, has also organised several training modules for the teams responsible for organising support, called 'Support for support providers'. Some of the themes of the training package for 2023–2024 were:

- How is inclusion managed? Do the values and attitudes that enable inclusion require clarification and concretisation?

- How does three-tier, gradually strengthening support guide the implementation of support?

- How do shared leadership and expertise serve inclusion management? How do you lead a renewing, inclusive operating culture?

In the TUVET project (1 December 2018–31 December 2021), the Ministry of Education and Culture collaborated with universities to produce research-based information on learners who needed specialist interprofessional support. The project was implemented by the University of Eastern Finland, the University of Helsinki and the University of Jyväskylä in co-operation with the learning and guidance centre Valteri. The information produced by the project can be used in teacher education in ITE and CPD. The project organised CPD activities open to all, the starting point of which was inclusive education and supporting learners with significant support needs in mainstream classrooms. The project produced literature reviews on research-based teaching methods.

The report on 'Equality and participation in education' (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2021) identified a series of challenges in relation to equality and suggests that 'learners' equality can be influenced through teacher education' (p. 38). It notes that differences related to gender and sexuality are not systematically addressed in teacher education, and there is dominant presumption that equality prevails in Finland. Given those findings on equality and participation, the report details how teacher education can contribute to improve the situation. It suggests that since schools and teachers in Finland have increased autonomy, they can create equality or inequality through their work.

Among the report's recommendations is that competence in teaching should be developed systematically and:

> … in addition to competence related to pedagogy and school subjects, the perspective of equality should also be incorporated in teacher education and competence development (p. 64).

In addition, the report recommends that 'the effectiveness and delivery of teaching, guidance and education should be monitored, evaluated and developed systematically'

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(p. 64). According to the report findings, it is not helpful to focus on short-term projects, but it is important to develop a long-term and systematic approach so that activities are effective at national level.

Teacher educators

Teacher educators in Finland are not a homogenous group. Academic staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as school head teachers fall within the group of teacher educators (Byman et al., 2020).

Teacher educators in higher education institutions

Teacher educators who are based in HEIs are expected to have the qualifications required by each HEIs. To support that aim, the HOHTO project, funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture, was carried out in 2021–2022 to develop the personnel competence of teacher education. The aim of the project was to increase the understanding and competence of teacher educators in inclusive education and special pedagogy. The project was carried out in networks where both teacher educators in early childhood education and care and teacher educators working in class and subject teacher education received support for strengthening their competence. The aim was for teacher educators to be better able to take into account the starting points of inclusive education in their teaching and to apply interactive digital teaching methods in their work.

Senior lecturers in Finland are generally required to hold a doctoral or other postgraduate degree and they must complete pedagogical studies. Most of them also have a teaching qualification (for early childhood education, classroom teaching, or subject teaching), as well as some working experience in early years or school settings. There is no specific requirement for teacher educators to be competent in the use of ICT, hence skills and knowledge in this area vary a lot (Byman et al., 2020).

Professional development is the responsibility of each individual teacher educator. There are a number of development and research projects concerning the educational use of technology being carried out in the teacher education unit (Ibid., p. 435).

Ten Finnish teacher training schools form part of the eNorssi network. Teachers based at the training schools are part of university personnel who provide supervised training and carry out research, experimentation and other professional development activities. Developing pedagogical support (*KePeTu*) is one of the eNorssi network's working groups. The working group has brought teachers in the eNorssi network from all over Finland together to discuss pedagogical support and related models. The aim is to develop and share effective practices for teaching staff and teacher trainees and to jointly create new practices related to pedagogical support. The working group has published a professional publication on joint teaching, assessment and guidance, which have been examined from the perspective of pedagogical support.

Teachers at training schools have at least MA degrees, but also many of them have a doctoral degree (Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen, 2011 in Byman et al., 2020). According to Byman et al. (2020), there is limited research in relation to teacher educators and their professional development needs (p. 435). A previous study highlighted that the different groups of teacher educators have different professional development needs and interests. The study revealed that teacher educators, and especially senior lecturers, face significant

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challenges for professional development in light of their heavy workload, lack of time, and overly fragmented job descriptions and multiple demands. The same study revealed that senior lecturers were highly interested in professional development in the areas of students' scientific mentoring, assessment, academic writing, qualitative research skills and empirical research. They considered that the best ways to realise these interests were to participate in research with other colleagues, read relevant literature, attend seminars and congresses, engage in informal discussions with colleagues and write publications (Byman et al., 2020, p. 446).

Head teachers as teacher educators

In Finland, the level to which head teachers can respond to their role as teacher educators varies. Head teachers in Finland are hired by municipalities, and must be qualified to teach and have one of the following qualifications:

- a Certificate of Educational Administration issued by the Finnish National Board of Education (it certifies knowledge of Finnish educational law and policies);

- completion of a programme in Educational Leadership at a university;

- or proven experience in educational administration (Ministry of Education and Culture and Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022).

However, most of them become head teachers because of their experience in educational administration (Ministry of Education and Culture and Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). The university programmes on Educational Leadership usually last 18 months.

According to the OECD (2020), the key challenge for head teachers is to achieve a balance of instructional and administrative capacity building. The OECD (2020) also notes that 'formal professional development for educators is not always perceived to be effective or relevant' (p. 14). It observes that about three quarters of head teachers participate in school administration training prior to appointment, but this training conflicts with their work schedules. The administrative role is increased due to school autonomy, decentralised governance and small municipal structures (OECD, 2020), and this perhaps restricts the head teachers' role as teacher educators. As Lavonen et al. (2023) note, a great challenge, recognised in the TALIS reports, is the head teachers' low commitment to leadership-type activities, such as the support to teachers' professional learning.

The study on the work of heads of Early Education Centres, conducted by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (2023), suggests that not all heads receive adequate support (from supervisors and colleagues) to be able to perform both their pedagogical role and their management role. In addition, many of the heads felt that they were responsible 'for too many areas, or an excessively large area' (p. 3). The report concludes that:

> … pedagogical and structural reforms of the steering system cannot be implemented in the daily life of early childhood education and care, as not all heads have time for pedagogical leadership, long-term development of early childhood education and care, or supporting personnel competence (p. 3).

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In relation to inclusive leadership, Laakso and colleagues investigated how the head teachers perceive inclusion in basic education. The researchers found that school leaders generally have a positive attitude about inclusion, but they conceptualise inclusion in varying ways. As noted before, they consider their job as mainly being about management, passing the leadership on implementing inclusion from municipalities to individual schools and teachers (Laakso and colleagues, 2022 in Honkasilta, Pihlaja, and Pesonen, 2024).

Capacity building for inclusive education

Capacity building for inclusive education requires the development of inclusive competences which will guide the CPD opportunities offered, and the concepts, tools and methods they employ. In 2024, the state-funded CPD (in Finnish) focused on the following themes:

- subject and field-specific competences;

- language awareness;

- assessment competence;

- digital competence;

- sustainability competence;

- continuous learning;

- developing inclusive operational culture;

- collective operational culture and leadership skills.

The budget for this state-funded CPD in 2023 (in Finnish) was EUR 15.4 million (Eurydice, 2024, Section 9.3).

The position of 'tutor-teachers' was introduced less than a decade ago with the aim to provide guidance and support on the implementation of the curriculum, design multidisciplinary learning modules, incorporate digital pedagogy, and contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning (NCEE, 2024).

A tutor-teacher is a teacher who has fewer lesson hours but has the responsibility to support other teachers in their own classrooms to use digital tools in education. Between 2018 and 2020, altogether 2,500 tutor-teacher positions were established with state funding. Tutor-teachers were trained to support teachers to use digital tools, organise inclusive education and support the learning of transversal competences of learners in their own classroom. The Finnish National Agency for Education has been responsible for the development of tutor-teachers' competencies and co-ordinating the network of tutor-teachers. However, since 2022 this responsibility has fallen to municipalities and it remains unclear whether they will continue this support model (Lavonen et al., 2023).

Capacity building is achieved through supporting measures that target teachers. According to Eurydice (2023), teachers who face problems in relation to teaching may be supported

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by the head teacher or the special education teacher, but it is noted that if a learner requires long-term individualised support, then it is necessary to apply for it. Special needs assistants for individual learners and learning assistants who circulate in the classrooms support teachers and learners. It is also noted that teachers who face personal problems at work may receive occupational health care services (during working hours and without a cost) (Eurydice, 2023).

According to the European Commission (2023), Finland funded the reskilling of teachers to address the shortage of special education teachers in the Kainuu and Upper Savonia areas, and for teaching in Swedish.

A recent survey on 'Differentiation and flexible teaching arrangements as part of support in learning and school attendance in primary and lower secondary education' (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2024a) is linked to inclusive education and may inform future decisions on capacity building. The survey included 86 education providers, and the school sample was 200 Finnish-language and 20 Swedish-language schools. The respondents were 55 heads of education, 178 principals, 831 teaching assistants and 2,636 class, subject or special needs teachers from grades 1, 3, 6, 7, 8 and 9. The survey findings suggest that general teachers face difficulties to differentiate their teaching, especially for learners who receive specialist support. In particular:

> … approximately half of teachers, principals and heads of education did not consider differentiation and flexible teaching arrangements to be adequate support measures for helping all pupils achieve the objectives described in the national core curriculum equally (p. 15).

In addition, about 80% of the respondents believed that the number of special classes and small groups is not adequate to accommodate the learners who need individualised support.

Based on these findings, the report suggested that competence development should be promoted through teacher professional development:

- teachers need practical training on how to support learners with different learning profiles and on how to plan differentiation, and this could be achieved by using the tutor activities or mentoring;

- teacher professional development should provide more opportunities to practice co-teaching and multiprofessional working;

- student teachers should receive adequate supervised teaching practice in different types of schools;

- teacher assistants should complete teaching assistant qualifications and should be given opportunities to constantly develop their competences (see Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2024a, p. 18).

Another relevant study of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (2024b, pp. 9–10) can inform future capacity-building decisions related to ECEC and VET. The study suggests that educated and qualified staff are needed for ECEC, and thus:

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> … the ability of ECEC to attract and retain employees must be ensured through pay, initial education, and in-service training as well as systematic and long-term development.

It is also noted that:

> … VET providers, universities of applied sciences and universities should together continue to clarify the competence profiles of qualifications and degrees and the development of the content of education in the ECEC sector (p. 10).

Monitoring and quality assurance

CPD is included in the national teacher data collection. The most recent data collection was carried out in spring 2019 and its results reported in spring 2020 (Eurydice, 2023, Section 9.3). Relevant data from OECD (based on TALIS 2018) is the following:

- 35% of teachers are aged 50 and above;

- 97% of teachers believe that teachers and learners have good relationships;

- 17% of teachers work in schools where at least 10% of the learners have a migrant background;

- 58% of teachers believe that their profession is valued by society;

- 14% of teachers experience stress in their work;

- 9% of teachers participate in collaborative professional learning at least once a month;

- 40% of teachers report that they never received feedback in their schools (OECD average 10%). It is noted that feedback in Finland relies on observing teaching, and internal (school-class) and external results of learners (OECD, 2018).

Data suggests that one fifth of teachers do not have access to CPD every year, and this figure varies between municipalities (European Commission, 2023). In addition, 'less than 15% of teachers have a personal development and training plan made and approved for them by their employer' (OAJ, 2022 in European Commission, 2023, p. 7). According to TALIS, 'teachers do not feel sufficiently prepared in ICT or to teach in multicultural and multilingual settings' (OECD, 2019a in European Commission, 2023, p. 7).

CPD in Finland is based on supply and demand, but it is noted that 'the number of applications for continuing education programmes focusing on the priorities of education policy is considerably higher than the capacity for funding such programmes' (Eurydice, 2023, Section 9.3).

Monitoring of the implementation of the Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022), which covers both ITE and CPD is conducted by HEIs and education providers. It is also noted that the Teacher Education

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Forum and external evaluators, such as the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) and researchers will also contribute to monitoring the Programme.

In Finland, education providers are responsible for evaluating the CPD that they provide (Eurydice, 2023, Section 10.2). In addition, FINEEC supports schools in their self-evaluation either by offering teacher professional development opportunities or tools for quality assurance (Eurydice, 2023, Section 11.1). HEIs have autonomy to organise and evaluate CPD opportunities (Eurydice, 2023, Section 9.6).

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2.3 Summary of strengths and challenges of TPL in Finland

The aim of the previous discussion was to provide evidence of the quality of the TPL framework within the Finnish system, especially in relation to inclusive education.

This section presents the strengths and challenges associated with TPL in Finland, as these have emerged from the document analysis. It provides insights into the policies and practices that contribute to its success and the areas that require further attention.

Strengths

- The Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026 outlines **a clear TPL policy vision**, developed collaboratively. It emphasises, among others, university collaboration, research-based competence development for teachers, co-operative learning through networks, and skilful management.

- The **government funds** the **implementation of the TPL policy vision**. The University of Helsinki, which co-ordinates the Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026, plans to develop a quality assurance system for the programme – a potential strength if realised.

- The **Teacher Education Forum promotes collaboration** between the Ministry of Education and Culture and other TPL providers, such as universities, teacher unions, the Finnish National Agency for Education, etc. The Forum has contributed to the development and the implementation of the Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026.

- **Collaboration between universities and teacher training schools** creates a good pedagogical context for student teachers' school placement and gives them the opportunity to interact with qualified mentors.

- **Teacher education institutions have autonomy over the content of their programmes**, yet they share concerns for the pedagogical dimension (theory, development of skills), and school placement opportunities for their student teachers.

- ITE offers a broad and diverse curriculum, covering **pedagogical theory, subject-specific content and practical teaching skills**. Teacher candidates also gain hands-on experience in classrooms. Finland places great **emphasis on research-based ITE** integrating theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Teachers are trained to conduct research and apply evidence-based practices, which is key to their professional development.

- The ITE system fosters **teacher autonomy and management skills** by equipping educators to make informed decisions about teaching and learning, both inside and outside the classroom.

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- Some of the TPL priorities focus on **digitalisation and its pedagogical application**. Providing co-ordinated TPL activities with a focus on inclusion may strengthen teachers' readiness for inclusive education.

- **CPD is mandatory for some days annually** for teachers and is provided by various entities, including universities, local authorities and specialised centres, like Valteri.

- Teachers in Finland have **access to a wide variety of CPD opportunities** that are usually free or highly subsidised by the Finnish government. Local municipalities, school districts and universities often offer training, and there are different opportunities for teachers to attend conferences or workshops, sometimes as part of their professional duties.

- Finnish **CPD programmes are research-driven**, grounded in the latest educational theories and evidence. Teachers are encouraged to apply academic research and innovation in their practice. The Finnish National Agency for Education supports CPD with updated evidence-based resources, ensuring alignment with emerging pedagogical trends and methods.

- Finland's CPD system supports **teachers' autonomy in professional learning**, allowing them to choose from diverse options, including formal courses, peer collaboration and networking. This flexibility encourages lifelong learning and helps teachers maintain a high level of motivation.

- Finnish **CPD programmes also emphasise collaboration**, encouraging peer learning, shared practices and joint pedagogical projects. This strengthens professional communities and creates opportunities for teachers to learn from each other. School-based professional development is common, with teachers regularly discussing strategies, solving problems and reflecting on their practice. This collaborative environment fosters innovation and supports teachers in overcoming classroom challenges.

- Finnish **CPD is strongly linked to real classroom practice**, encouraging teachers to reflect on their practice, experiment with new approaches and receive support from mentors or peers. This practical focus enhances the relevance and effectiveness of professional development.

- Finnish CPD programmes also place importance on **teachers' personal and professional well-being** and mental health, recognising that a teacher's personal growth is closely tied to their professional development.

- A significant percentage of **Finnish teachers are highly qualified**. Teachers are expected to have a bachelor's (180 ECTS) and a master's degree (120 ECTS), except for ECEC teachers who are only required to have a bachelor's degree.

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- The **extent to which the TPL policy vision addresses inclusive education is unclear**, and so is the extent to which it is implemented. Collecting and analysing data on the implementation of the Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026 could inform future policy decisions on TPL.

- Despite the range of opportunities for TPL, the evidence suggests that beginning and experienced class teachers and subject **teachers do not feel prepared to teach all learners**. Although this is a common finding in several countries, TPL opportunities could aim to maximise teachers' preparedness for inclusion by equipping them with the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills throughout their careers. This approach would contribute to the fulfilment of the Finnish system's aims for equity.

- Due to the **highly selective nature of the ITE system**, only a few teacher candidates are being admitted at universities each year. This creates teacher shortages in certain regions or subject areas.

- The extent to which **inclusive education is integrated into ITE content varies across universities leaving** considerable **room for strengthening its emphasis on inclusion**. While some programmes address inclusive education, others **focus primarily on special education**. Examining how these two areas of TPL intersect is part of developing capacity within the Finnish educational system.

- Coverage of key topics such as differentiated teaching, collaborative skills and co-teaching – essential for multiprofessional communication in inclusive settings – also differs, with some universities offering more in-depth training than others.

- In some cases, **general teachers and special teachers receive both ITE and CPD in different university departments**. Universities should consider how they might facilitate common understanding and teaching of inclusive education issues.

- The **differences in the ITE curriculum for general teachers (i.e. ECEC, primary, subject teachers) and special teachers reinforce the perception that not all teachers can educate all learners**, posing challenges for implementing inclusive education. Universities might consider increasing the common content across their ITE programmes, to ensure that inclusive education principles and practice are infused to all teachers. They might also consider approaching inclusive education as a human rights issue which is closely linked to key conventions, such as the UN CRPD and the UN CRC.

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- The **principles guiding school placements differ across ITE programmes**, with variations in duration, the ways student teachers are assessed, and the level of independent teaching required from them. Additionally, research indicates that some teacher training schools collaborating with universities may be selective, leading to student diversity that is not fully representative of schools in Finland.

- ECEC teachers can be employed with a bachelor's degree (180 ECTS), whereas all the other teachers are expected to hold both a bachelor's (180 ECTS) and a master's degree (120 ECTS). This difference in qualification requirements reflects a gap in the amount of support that is available for ECEC teachers to help them fulfil their roles effectively. This disparity deserves attention, as such an imbalance may also **reinforce the perception that ECEC is not as demanding** as the other levels of education, and teachers can respond to their roles with less educational support and training available.

- Although Finland offers widespread access to CPD opportunities, there can be **disparities between urban and rural areas**. Teachers in rural regions may have uneven access to CPD with fewer opportunities for in-person workshops, conferences and collaborative learning sessions due to logistical constraints or limited resources. While online professional development opportunities have helped bridge this gap, variations in digital literacy, access to technology and internet connectivity means that not all teachers benefit equally from these opportunities.

- Despite the strong emphasis on continuous learning, Finnish teachers often struggle to balance CPD activities with their workload. Many **teachers report struggling to find time** for professional development during the school year due to the demands of classroom responsibilities. While CPD is often integrated into regular working hours, the opportunity for teachers to fully engage with CPD may be limited.

- While there are various CPD programmes available, Finland **does not organise these within a standardised national framework for teacher professional development**. Consequently, teachers may find it challenging to identify which programmes will have the greatest impact on their practice, particularly given the wide range of options with varying levels of academic rigor. This challenge may be more pronounced in larger school systems, where CPD offerings tend to be more fragmented.

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- Finland, like many other countries, faces the challenge of ensuring that CPD programmes can quickly **respond to rapid changes in the education landscape**. For example, new curriculum reforms, technology advancements and pedagogical shifts (such as digital literacy or inclusive education) require continuous updates in teacher development programmes to remain relevant. The pace of change can be challenging. Finnish teachers have diverse professional backgrounds and varying levels of experience, leading to different professional development needs that CPD programmes may not always fully address. Newer teachers may benefit from more foundational support, while experienced educators may seek advanced or specialised training. While CPD opportunities are designed to be flexible, there remains a need for more tailored CPD programmes that **align with the different learning and training needs of teachers** at various stages in their careers.

- Another challenge in CPD is **ensuring that teachers effectively retain and apply the knowledge and skills** gained from professional development activities. Teachers may attend workshops or training sessions but translating new strategies into classroom practice can be difficult. Continuous reinforcement and peer support could help, but some teachers report a lack of structured follow-up or mentoring after CPD training, which may limit its long-term impact.

- Another challenge is that **CPD for inclusive education is often equated with CPD for special education**. For instance, the role of Valteri network in CPD for general teachers primarily focuses on enhancing support for learners with different types of impairment, while training teachers in inclusive education remains a secondary area. This focus aligns with Valteri's expertise in special education; however, preparing teachers for inclusive education requires a broader approach. It should also address the needs of other marginalised learner groups and consider the intersectional identities of learners who benefit from inclusive pedagogy.

- Although there is a strong emphasis on linking theory to practice, new teachers often report challenges in applying theoretical knowledge in real classrooms. Initiatives like the 'Osaava Verme' network aim to support beginning teachers, but more structured mentoring for teachers in the beginning of their career, especially in relation to learner assessment and differentiated instruction strategies, is needed.

- Finally, a key challenge related to CPD has to do with the **implementation of leadership practices**. In Finland, school leaders' extensive administrative duties limit their pedagogical and mentoring roles. Leadership training could benefit from a greater focus on the role of school leaders in supporting TPL, especially in relation to the implementation of inclusive education.

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3. TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FRAMEWORK IN IRELAND

3.1 Initial teacher education

Policy vision

The Irish Department of Education published an *Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Policy Statement* in March 2023. This aimed to explain the current policy and provision for initial teacher education (ITE) at both primary and post-primary levels. Ensuring that ITE programmes prepare student teachers to meet the evolving challenges of supporting all learners in the 21st century is one of its main goals.

Thereby, Goal 1 of the *Policy Statement* declares the desire that ITE appeals to high-quality candidates and is accessible to individuals from diverse backgrounds. The *Policy Statement* outlines actions to enhance the availability of baseline data and to commission longitudinal research. This research will explore the key personal, educational, professional and systemic factors that influence and shape teachers' early career experiences (Department of Education, 2023b, p. 46).

In October 2020, the Irish Teaching Council reviewed and updated its policy on standards for ITE programmes, publishing the revised standards in the so-called *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education*. *Céim* translates from the Irish language as 'A Step' and refers to the first step on the teacher education continuum. It is therefore equated with ITE. *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* encompasses seven Core Elements that underpin all aspects of ITE programmes, one of which is inclusive education. The other key elements are Global Citizenship Education, Professional Relationships and Working with Parents, Professional Identity and Agency, Creativity and Reflective Practice, Literacy and Numeracy, and Digital Skills (The Teaching Council, 2020).

The *Standards for Initial Teacher Education* have incorporated the findings from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) research published in 2019, making inclusive education a fundamental component of all programmes. The revised standards have

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further emphasised inclusive education, describing it as any aspect of teachers' learning that aims to:

- improve their capacity to address and respond to the diversity of learners' needs;

- enable their participation in learning;

- remove barriers to education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements;

- enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from their attendance at school (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 4).

The Department of Education's *ITE Policy Statement* (Department of Education, 2023b) includes several actions focused on inclusive education. One of these actions is to explore how the core element of inclusive education in the *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* (The Teaching Council, 2020) is intended to prepare student teachers to teach learners of all abilities and in all settings, including special education settings (Department of Education, 2023b). Student teachers 'will be prepared for entry to their professional role in the context of a collaborative, inclusive, dynamic teaching profession, helping them to engage with colleagues, co-professionals, pupils and parents and understand their respective roles' (Ibid., p. 10).

Direct providers

There are four state-funded providers of primary ITE:

- Dublin City University (DCU) Institute of Education

- Marino Institute of Education (MIE)

- Maynooth University (Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education)

- Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick.

These Colleges of Education offer primary ITE courses which are recognised by The Teaching Council. Additionally, Hibernia College, which is a non-state-funded, privately owned institution, provides ITE. It offers a part-time blended learning programme for a professional master's in education (PME), which takes place over two years and is recognised by The Teaching Council for the purposes of primary teaching.

To become a post-primary teacher, student teachers can complete an undergraduate ITE programme for four years or choose to do a postgraduate degree (Professional Master of Education – PME) which takes two years, similar to the one for primary teaching. Before entering the PME, student teachers must have satisfied The Teaching Council curricular registration requirements for at least one curricular subject. The Teaching Council provides details of the individual subject requirements (subject criteria) for all

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post-primary curricular subjects. The following institutions are post-primary level ITE providers:

- Atlantic Technological University (ATU) (includes the providers Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) and St Angela's College Sligo)
- DCU Institute of Education
- Hibernia College
- Maynooth University
- MIC (St Patrick's College, Thurles) [now Thurles Campus]
- National College of Art and Design (NCAD)
- St Angela's College, Sligo
- Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS)
- Trinity College Dublin (TCD)
- University College Cork (UCC) (which is linked with Munster Technological University)
- University College Dublin (UCD)
- University of Galway (UG)
- University of Limerick (UL) (Department of Education, 2023b, p. 25).

A number of universities and colleges provide courses to support access to ITE for people from groups which traditionally have been under-represented in teaching (Department of Education, 2020c). In recent years, it has become a priority for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to widen access to ITE programmes. To do so, participating HEIs have introduced various initiatives, including supplementary admission routes. The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) is a scheme for college and university admissions aimed at school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is an alternative admissions scheme for school leavers whose disabilities have adversely affected their post-primary education. Additionally, HEIs have developed pathways to encourage mature students to pursue higher education (Ibid., p. 28).

Structure of initial teacher education

ITE is the foundational stage of becoming a teacher. It is the first formal step in the 'continuum of teacher education'. This continuum includes both formal and informal educational and developmental activities that teachers engage in throughout their careers as lifelong learners. It encompasses ITE, induction (*Droichead*, translated from the Irish language as 'A Bridge' – which is equated with the induction phase), and teachers' professional learning (*Cosán*, translated from the Irish language as 'A Path' – associated with on-going professional learning) (Department of Education, 2023b).

Established in April 2004, the Teacher Education Section (TES) – now Teacher Professional Learning Section (TPLS) – incorporates the work of the former In-Career Development Unit (ICDU) and includes a remit for ITE, which was previously the responsibility of the

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Colleges' Section. TES was originally formed to reflect the Department's view of teacher education as a continuum from ITE to induction and continuous professional development (CPD). For more information, see *Special Education in an Independent Ireland 1922-2022: Insights from a Journey Through the Century* (Ring, 2024).

During ITE, student teachers engage in a recognised teacher education programme provided by a higher education institution (HEI). This involves completing an accredited programme in accordance with the relevant standards for ITE, currently these standards are defined in the already-mentioned *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* of The Teaching Council (Department of Education, 2023b; The Teaching Council, 2020).

ITE programmes in Ireland are structured in two ways:

- The **concurrent model** involves studying practical and pedagogical education alongside disciplinary studies for four years, leading to an undergraduate (Level 8) qualification.
- Alternatively, the **consecutive model** follows disciplinary studies with practical and pedagogical education for two years, resulting in a postgraduate (Level 9) qualification. Candidates following this route of study must have a degree in an appropriate curricular subject.

A few hybrid models, combining elements of both concurrent and consecutive approaches, have also been developed. According to the Teacher Supply Action Plan 2018, there is a strong policy preference for four-year concurrent programmes at the post-primary level, rather than longer hybrid programmes (Department of Education, 2023b, p. 26). The hybrid model means that 'the student completes a combined undergraduate and postgraduate part, typically taking five years in total' (Ibid., p. 29f).

For initial primary teacher education there are four state-funded providers who offer full-time courses leading to Bachelor of Education. When successfully completed, graduates can register with The Teaching Council. Furthermore, there is a two-year programme for primary teaching leading to a Professional Master's in Education (PME).

Post-Primary ITE combine disciplinary and pedagogical elements leading to a teacher education qualification.

> A suitable ITE qualification is defined as a qualification from a state-recognised university or similar third-level college, incorporating three specific elements (Foundation Studies, Professional Studies and School Placement) and which is directed towards the 12 to 18 age range (first year to sixth year) (DCEDIY, 2019).

The ITE programmes are subject to cyclical reviews and accreditation by The Teaching Council, ensuring that they meet the required standards and are aligned with national education policies (The Teaching Council, 2020).

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Regarding induction for early years educators[3] and school-age childcare practitioners, there are no standardised procedures of probation. However, under *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022–2028*, a standardised induction process will be gradually introduced for new entrants starting their first job in the profession. This process aims to help them adjust to their new professional role with the support of experienced colleagues. The development of this induction process will begin during the lifetime of *Nurturing Skills* and will involve research, consultation, piloting and review, along with actions to enhance service capacity and external supports for induction (DCEDIY, 2021; Eurydice, 2025, Section 9.2).

Content of ITE

The *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* state that there are three broader headings that sum up learning outcomes for graduate teachers: professional values, professional skills and practice, professional knowledge and understanding. These include demonstrated knowledge and understanding of the holistic development of learners, establishment of strategies to support suitable and effective learning for all, referring learners for specialised educational support as required, among others (The Teaching Council, 2020, pp. 20–25).

A study by the NCSE (2019) on ITE showed on the one hand that the programmes provided give student teachers a good foundation in the context of understanding attitudes, knowledge and skills for including all learners. However, students still stated that they are not convinced that ITE programmes prepare them well for specific skills in inclusive practice. It was found that the student teachers 'perceived a lack of preparedness in terms of practical skills' and that they needed 'greater alignment between programme and placement learning' (Department of Education, 2023b, p. 71). Arising from this, student teachers are now required to demonstrate an understanding of inclusive education and working with parents as part of school placement (Ibid.).

As mentioned above, The Teaching Council reviewed the *Céim: Standards for Inclusive Teacher Education* in 2020. Subsequently, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) stated that it was important to embed inclusive practice into all teaching and emphasised ITE programmes in this respect. It was suggested that inclusive practices can promote flexible approaches to teaching for meeting the diverse needs of all learners.

> By embedding inclusive practices, we can prepare future teachers to create inclusive learning environments in mainstream and special education settings. Inclusive education should not be seen as a specialised area but as a fundamental part of teaching (INTO, 2024, p. 5).

In the *Initial Teacher Education Policy Statement* from 2023, the Department of Education states that ITE will be underpinned by reflective practice, professional collaboration, research, creativity and well-being. It will take place at university-led centres of excellence

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[3] Although Early Learning and Care (ELC) in Ireland is neither part of the compulsory school education system nor included in teacher education, EASNIE considers it a crucial element of the continuum of TPL. Therefore, this report makes a few references to aspects of TPL for ELC settings in Ireland.

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to equip new teachers with competences and learning experiences that enable them to address ever-evolving challenges and to support all learners in the 21st century (Department of Education, 2023b). Inclusive Education is one of seven core elements which must underpin all programmes of ITE according to *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* (The Teaching Council, 2020).

Regarding progress in ITE, the Irish *Initial Teacher Education Policy Statement* defines six high-level goals for guiding progress until 2030:

1. Initial teacher education is attractive for high-quality candidates and attainable for those from a diversity of backgrounds.

2. Programmes will prepare student teachers to embrace the constantly evolving challenges of supporting all learners in the 21st century.

3. Initial teacher education is strongly connected with and relevant to the needs of the education system.

4. Structures are well placed to enable high-quality provision.

5. Systems and policies are in place to enable collaboration across the different sectors of education and to improve communication.

6. A strong research base is established to support programme and policy development and design into the future (Department of Education, 2023b, p. 9).

The government planned three phases for implementing this plan. Concrete actions for the first phase have been set out in the *Initial Teacher Education Policy Statement*. This will inform phases 2 and 3 (Ibid.).

School practice/placement

The *Initial Teacher Education Policy Statement* highlights the importance of school placements in teacher education, emphasising the need for student teachers to gain experience in various contexts, including special-education settings, DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools), and Irish-medium education (Department of Education, 2023b; 2020a). Some suggest mandatory placements in special education settings to better prepare student teachers. However, providers face challenges in securing diverse and extended placements, relying on relationships with schools and their goodwill. The Teaching Council's Guidelines on School Placement are welcomed, but there is a need for more consistency in placement quality and additional support for student teachers from diverse backgrounds (The Teaching Council, 2021b).

A national framework to support school-based teacher educators is suggested, along with addressing the costs of placements and some parents' reluctance to have student teachers in their child's class. The School Placement Working Group aims to address these issues.

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> School placement shall comprise a minimum of two placement settings incorporating a variety of teaching situations, class levels and school contexts, including Irish medium schools (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 18).

For more details, readers can also consult The Teaching Council's updated edition of the Report and Action Plan of the Working Group on School Placement, titled *Guidelines on School Placement* (2021b).

The *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* state that school placement shall provide opportunities for student teachers to:

- experience a high-support/high-challenge model of placement where their strengths are nurtured and fostered, while areas for further learning and development are identified in an overarching context of collaborative professionalism;

- engage in research on their own practice that demonstrates the connection between the sites of practice (HEI and school). The student teacher shall discuss their research plans with the Treoraí, as they have overall responsibility for the class (*Treoraí* translates from the Irish language as 'guide');

- plan for, and undertake, class teaching, learning and assessment using a wide range of strategies in a diversity of class settings and subject levels;

- establish classroom-management strategies that support suitable and effective learning for all learners and that promote and maintain positive behaviour;

- observe experienced teachers teaching;

- be involved in a wide range of school activities;

- reflect critically on their practice and programme of study and how both inform and shape each other;

- receive and respond to feedback on their practice;

- identify areas for further professional learning for Droichead (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 13).

School placement is considered to be the 'fulcrum' of ITE in *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 7). According to the new standards, during each school placement module, and depending on the student teacher's development stage, the student teacher must use their Taisce (portfolio-based learning) to show they understand inclusive education in that context. This is a new requirement that was not in the previous guidelines. It includes the demonstration of an understanding of inclusive education as applicable to that context and an understanding of working with parents (The Teaching Council, 2020).

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Portfolio-based learning supports students to become more conscious of theories and assumptions that 'guide their practice and provides a basis for professional conversations about teaching' (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 6).

During the school placement experience, student teachers, in collaboration with their Higher Education Institution (HEI) identify areas for further learning in the Droichead induction phase. Portfolio-based learning will continue to be an important process to support newly qualified teachers to engage in the professional conversations that are central to the Droichead process (Ibid.).

The *Initial Teacher Education Policy Statement* published by the Department of Education also suggests that student teachers at both primary and post-primary levels should spend at least one placement in a special education setting. This suggestion has been further discussed with the institutions providing ITE, highlighting both the valuable experience in the system and the challenges of introducing a mandatory placement (Department of Education, 2023b). The Teaching Council furthermore advises in *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* that a minimum of two placement settings needs to be completed by student teachers. It is thereby important to choose a variety of teaching situations, class levels and school contexts for that purpose. It is also mentioned that 'multi-class and/or mixed ability teaching situation and team teaching/co-teaching situations should be encouraged' (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 18).

Recently, the Government of Ireland expressed its goal to make:

> … special education modules and placements in special schools or classes a universal part of initial teacher training, which will be subject to assessment (Government of Ireland, 2025, p. 70; INTO, 2025).

In this context, The Teaching Council also states that its perspective on a truly inclusive approach to professional practice acknowledges that teachers face a wide range of learners' needs during their teaching, regardless of the setting. This includes additional learning needs such as autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia, as well as needs associated with diverse linguistic, socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including those of the Traveller and Roma communities (The Teaching Council, 2020).

Oide is a support service for teachers and school leaders, funded by the Department of Education. The Droichead Induction Division of Oide facilitates the induction of primary and post-primary Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) into the teaching profession. As noted previously *Droichead* translates from the Irish language as 'Bridge' and is equated with the induction phase of the continuum of teacher education. The primary goal of the Droichead process is to support the professional learning of NQTs during their induction phase, thereby establishing a foundation for their future professional growth and development. Furthermore, the Induction Division provides a variety of induction workshops for NQTs, offering complementary special education needs support that addresses behaviour, inclusion and differentiated support for all learners.

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Capacity building for inclusive education

In the revised *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* published by The Teaching Council, inclusive education has been strengthened and has become a core element for ITE. It is described as any aspect of teachers' learning which aims to:

- improve their capacity to address and respond to the diversity of learners' needs;

- enable their participation in learning;

- remove barriers to education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements;

- enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from their attendance at school (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 4).

The *Initial Teacher Education Policy Statement* (Department of Education, 2023b) mentions several actions that have a focus on inclusive education. The fact that inclusive education has been reinforced in ITE supports student teachers in learning how to respond to the needs of all learners, including different abilities and settings.

Also, school placement can be seen as part of capacity building in ITE. During the school placement process, student teachers gain valuable experiences. The placement is designed to offer opportunities to engage in a high-support/high-challenge model, where their strengths are nurtured and developed, while areas for further learning and growth are identified within a collaborative professional environment (The Teaching Council, 2020, p. 13).

Monitoring and quality assurance of ITE programmes

The Minister for Education has statutory responsibility for setting national education policy, supported by officials of the Department of Education. The Teaching Council has significant statutory functions within this framework, including collaborating with HEIs in setting minimum entry requirements and overseeing the quality of ITE programmes.

A key document in monitoring and quality assurance in Irish teacher education is *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* published by The Teaching Council. It sets out the requirements which all programmes of qualification for teaching in Ireland must meet in order to gain accreditation from The Teaching Council. It is also a benchmark for anybody seeking to register as a teacher in Ireland (The Teaching Council, 2020).

The Teaching Council's Procedures for the Professional Accreditation of Programmes of Initial Teacher Education (2021a) state that the Council aims to engage with Higher Education Institutions (HEI) on a regular basis. This is intended to support the mapping of national policy priorities on programme delivery. Furthermore, regular data updates on national education policy and strategy should be enhanced through this process.

> The HEI may be expected to provide data on different areas, such as school placement requirements and entry levels into different courses. This will help with national policy development on teacher supply and other areas (The Teaching Council, 2021a, p. 7).

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Additionally, all HEIs offering ITE programmes in Ireland operate within a quality assurance framework overseen by Quality and Qualifications Ireland – QQI (2019), which also acts as an awarding body for certain ITE programmes (Department of Education, 2023b). QQI is responsible for monitoring and evaluating these programmes, collecting information on providers' programmes, services and the quality assurance systems supporting them (Eurydice, 2025, Section 11.3). Another key focus of QQI is external quality assurance, ensuring broader engagement with providers.

The Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) for Initial Professional Education degree programmes for ELC provide criteria and guidelines that are underpinned by a range of core principles (Department of Education, 2019a). There is another quality-assurance mechanism through periodic reviews conducted by the OECD, or the Ministerial Review Bodies on primary and post-primary teacher education (Eurydice, 2023, Section 9.1).

In Early Childhood Education, there are the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations from 2006 (Government of Ireland, 2006) which describe the standards of health, safety and welfare that need to be in place before any facility can start providing their services. In these regulations, different aspects are covered. These include child/adult ratios, premises and facilities for rest and play, etc. The responsibility for developing policy in this area lies in the hands of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, which is now the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). Furthermore, the previous Health Service Executive (HSE) – now the DCEDIY – is responsible for the general health, safety and welfare of children in pre-school services. HSE is also required to inspect and regulate pre-school childcare services.

The DCEDIY is also responsible for ensuring that qualification requirements for practitioners are met. It oversees the list of qualifications which are approved for regulatory purposes.

The Department of Education states in its *Initial Teacher Education Policy Statement* (2023b) that establishing structures for continuous improvement in ITE is challenging across all systems. It is crucial, therefore, to have an effective and fair method for collecting evidence on the impact of ITE programmes to enhance ITE systems.

The *Policy Statement* explains that the conditions under which increased accountability leads to improved quality and outcomes for ITE are complex. According to the OECD (2019), there are risks attached to ITE programmes using an accreditation process. They may lack incentives to improve beyond the minimum standards set. While the OECD strongly recommends a robust accreditation process for successful ITE, several countries also implement measures related to assessing outcomes in ITE programmes, which go beyond the requirements of the relevant ITE provider (Department of Education, 2023b, p. 79).

3.2 Continuous professional development

Policy vision

The overarching goal of Ireland's education policy is to support the creation of inclusive environments for all learners while enhancing teacher education and professional development. The *Statement of Strategy 2023–2025* reflects a vision that places children and young people at the centre of educational strategies, prioritising values of quality, inclusiveness and well-being (Department of Education, 2023a).

In pursuit of this vision, the Department of Education provides a range of resources for learners with special educational needs, such as additional teaching staff, special needs assistants (SNAs), assistive technology, and continuous professional development (CPD) programmes in special education (Ibid.).

A central component of the policy vision is the professional development of teachers. The Teacher Professional Learning Section views teacher education as a continuum that spans initial teacher education, induction and on-going professional learning experiences (Department of Education, 2022a). The professional learning framework for teachers is designed to address the diverse needs encountered in the classroom, including those related to varying cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds (The Teaching Council, 2020).

Ireland's National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 further emphasises the importance of Academic Professional Development (APD) to enhance the quality of the student learning experience. It mandates that all HEIs ensure their teaching staff are both qualified and competent in teaching and learning, while also supporting their continuous skill development (Department of Education, 2011b).

In the context of early childhood education, the *Nurturing Skills Workforce Plan (2022-2028)* outlines a national approach to CPD for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) educators. The Workforce Plan underscores the importance of inclusive practice, focusing on equality issues, cultural diversity, gender identity and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Educators are expected to possess the skills and knowledge necessary to support learners' holistic development and ensure that their voices are heard and respected (DCEDIY, 2021).

The Oide platform, funded by the Teacher Education Section, offers accessible, inclusive and innovative professional learning opportunities for teachers and school leaders. Its mission centres on promoting inclusion, diversity and well-being as integral components of all its activities.

The *Cosán* framework, published by The Teaching Council in 2016, is intended as a flexible guide for teachers' professional learning following their induction. As noted previously, '*Cosán*' translates from the Irish language as 'A Path' and is equated with the on-going professional learning dimension of the teacher education continuum. It acknowledges the

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unique circumstances and contexts within which teachers work and supports diverse approaches to their on-going learning and growth (The Teaching Council, 2016).

Finally, the DEIS initiative is a key strategy aimed at addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-primary through to secondary education. DEIS provides targeted supports, including CPD opportunities, to promote educational inclusion and ensure that these learners have equal opportunities to succeed (Department of Education, 2020a). '*DEIS*' also translates from the Irish language as 'opportunity'.

Direct providers

Continuous professional development (CPD) for primary and post-primary schools in Ireland is provided through various services and supports from a range of agencies and institutions (public and private). These include Oide, the NCSE and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). Additionally, courses are offered by the Oide, Education Support Centres and through guidance counselling services. Apart from Department-funded inclusion and special education courses for ITE, some HEIs offer privately funded postgraduate and master's level courses in these fields, with participants funding their own participation (Department of Education, 2024b).

The Teacher Professional Learning Section (TPLS) of the Department of Education has also established the Teacher Professional Networks (TPN) Scheme to support the work of Teachers' Groups and Associations (TGAs). This scheme offers professional learning activities and peer support for post-primary teachers, enhancing the collaborative exchange of knowledge and practice. Beyond the direct provision of TPL, funding plays a crucial role in sustaining and expanding these initiatives. The Department funds the Teacher Fee Refund Scheme, which helps offset the costs of course participation and examination fees for teachers completing professional learning courses, including those focused on inclusion (Department of Education, 2024c). Teachers may also apply to the NCSE for funding to attend approved professional development courses. These include a variety of options, such as courses focused on communication systems, Braille, sign language, whole-staff training and postgraduate courses in special educational needs. Other relevant courses, as recommended by school principals, may also be considered for funding, subject to approval and budget constraints (NCSE website).

Beginning teachers/induction

The Induction Division of Oide plays a key role in supporting the induction of primary and post-primary Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) into the teaching profession. This is primarily achieved through the Droichead process, an integrated professional induction framework. Droichead combines school-based induction with additional professional learning activities designed to meet the specific needs of teachers as they begin their careers. The process is applicable in primary and post-primary schools, as well as in centres for education where post-primary curricular subjects are taught, provided these institutions are registered by Oide as participants in the Droichead programme. Each

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school involved in the Droichead process is assigned a Droichead Induction Associate, who guides NQTs through their induction journey (The Teaching Council, 2020; The Teaching Council website).

For NQTs, the Induction Division of Oide offers a range of induction workshops. This ensures the provision of 'complementary special education needs support addressing behaviour, inclusion and differentiated support for all learners' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2024).

Experienced teachers

In Ireland, CPD is not mandatory for teachers, with the exception of CPD for NQTs under the Droichead process. Teachers are not required to accumulate a specific number of attendances. CPD is compulsory only under individual circumstances such as teachers taking on specific responsibilities (OECD, 2022). Compulsory professional development is usually required only once during a teacher's career, that is when they take on the responsibility for the induction of new teachers as teacher trainers. In this case, they are required to take 200 hours of professional development before they can take on their new task (Ibid.).

However, the Department of Education provides a variety of support structures across both primary and post-primary sectors to help teachers and school leaders meet the evolving needs of the education system. These supports range from short CPD inputs to more extensive postgraduate programmes of study. Under the Croke Park Agreement (2010–2014), teachers are provided an additional number of hours (36 for primary and 33 hours for post-primary per year), which could be used for nationally mandated in-service CPD (e.g. new programmes or syllabi), school-arranged CPD, and further education activities as shown in Circular 0025/2011 (ASTI, 2025).

Furthermore, Education Support Centres (ESCs), consisting of 21 full-time and 9 part-time centres, provide high-quality CPD and support services to teachers and the wider education community at local, regional and national levels. ESCs offer a range of training, development and CPD courses, but there is no centralised database consolidating all participation records. Additionally, under Rule 58 of the Rules for National Schools, teachers attending approved summer courses can apply for Extra Personal Vacation (EPV) days, with a maximum of five EPV days per year, provided the course exceeds three days as mandated in Circular 0035/2009 (Department of Education and Science, 2009).

One of the key frameworks guiding teachers' professional learning after their induction is Cosán, a national framework that supports teachers' on-going development. Cosán is intended to be flexible and seeks to recognise the diverse circumstances and contexts in which teachers work, acknowledging the many ways in which teachers engage in professional learning (The Teaching Council, 2016).

The Department of Education offers a postgraduate diploma programme in teacher professional learning aimed at teachers working with learners with special educational needs. In addition, the NCSE funds a postgraduate programme in autism for teachers working in this area. In total, 338 places are offered annually on these programmes. The

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programmes are designed to provide both theoretical and practical professional learning to help enhance teachers' skills in working with learners with special needs including autism, aiming to strengthen schools' overall capacity in this area. The programme is open to all serving teachers employed in positions funded by the Department of Education, including those providing Special Education Teaching in recognised primary schools, post-primary schools and other recognised educational settings. Teachers in special schools and special classes are also eligible to apply (Department of Education, 2024a).

Capacity building for inclusive education

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is responsible for providing TPL and support for teachers working in special education. The NCSE aims to enhance the quality of learning and teaching related to provision for learners with special educational needs and offers professional learning opportunities for school leaders and teachers. These initiatives are designed with the further aim to improve educational experiences and outcomes for all learners (NCSE website).

The NCSE also provides tailored in-school support, which can be directed at either whole-school staff, small groups or individual teachers. This support is customisable to address specific teacher professional learning needs, including topics such as Universal Design for Learning, Supporting the Provision, Allocation and Deployment of Special Education Resources, and Supporting access to the Curriculum. NCSE also provides supports to schools through the Autism & Behaviour for Learning and Wellbeing Team. The Visiting Teacher Service for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing & Blind/Visually Impaired supports teachers and school leaders through school support visits.

Therapy Teams of Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists also support teachers and schools through a structured regional targeted support service. While currently this type of Therapy support is only provided in certain regions, it is expected that this type of support from Therapy will expand to other regions in time.

NCSE aligns its TPL with The Teaching Council's national framework for TPL and collaborates with regional support services and other teacher support organisations – such as the OIDE and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) – to support teachers and school leaders to build capacity and enhance inclusive environments. This will improve learning outcomes and experiences for learners with the rollout of Junior and Senior Cycle Reform and Developments in Post-Primary Schools (NCSE website).

The Teacher Education Section-funded service Oide provides TPL through various delivery methods including in-school support, online platforms, blended learning and face-to-face training. Oide works with both teachers and school leaders to offer continuous support for the promotion of inclusive practices. All of Oide's activities are designed with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in mind, a framework that facilitates the inclusion of all learners by making the curriculum accessible and meaningful. Oide encourages teachers to review and modify their teaching and learning strategies to meet the diverse needs of all learners, thereby fostering inclusive education.

Oide's school-based support is intended to support teachers and school leaders to explore inclusive practices directly related to their own contexts, responding to the specific needs

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of their learners. Additionally, Oide aims to provide a variety of supplementary or elective TPL events outside of school hours, which teachers are encouraged to participate in. These events, along with those provided by other organisations such as Education Support Centres or Department-funded Teacher Professional Networks (TPNs), intend to enhance the on-going professional development of teachers.

One such initiative is a seminar on Fostering a Culture of Inclusion in Schools. This cross-sectoral seminar, aimed at both primary and post-primary educators, invites teachers to explore inclusive school cultures that value cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity and to rethink their teaching approaches to better meet the needs of all learners.

At the primary level, Oide's Inclusive Education team offers a Professional Learning Event (PLE) titled 'Fostering a Culture of Inclusion in Primary Schools', aimed at broadening participants' understanding of inclusion. This full-day event moves beyond a focus solely on Special Educational Needs (SEN) and considers all forms of diversity. The PLE is available to school leaders and one other participant from each primary school, including special schools. In addition, the Department of Education's teacher professional development services have developed a UDL webinar in recent years, which provides guidance on how digital technologies can support the principles of the UDL framework. This initiative is part of the Department's on-going efforts to support inclusive education at the primary level.

The Teacher Professional Networks Scheme also contributes to building capacity for inclusive education by improving the teaching, learning and classroom management skills of post-primary teachers. Events organised by Teachers' Groups and Associations (TGAs) are designed to support teachers in achieving these objectives and are aligned with the national priorities set by the Department of Education.

Teachers can access these supports by responding to invitations from service providers, identifying areas for support through their school principal, or using online/telephone support services where available.

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Further support for inclusive education is available through the Department of Education's guidelines and through the National Council for Special Education's support documents, such as:

- Guidelines for Primary Schools (Department of Education, 2024e)

- Indicators of Effective Practice for Primary Schools (Department of Education, 2024f)

- Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools (Department of Education, 2024g)

- Indicators of Effective Practice for Post-Primary Schools (Department of Education, 2024h)

- The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023 (Department of Education, 2019b)

- Supporting Behaviour Management in Schools for Students with Behavioural, Emotional and or Social Difficulties (BESD) (Department of Education, 2011a)

- The Inclusive Education Framework (National Council for Special Education, 2011)

- Classroom Sensory Screening Tool (National Council for Special Education, 2024b)

- The Physical Classroom Environment (National Council for Special Education, 2024c)

- Visual Supports within an Inclusive Learning Environment (National Council for Special Education, 2024d)

- NCSE Relate (National Council for Special Education, 2025).

Additionally, the Department's Inspectorate published a set of guidance documents under the Looking at Our School framework (referred to as Looking at Our School) for primary schools (and an equivalent for post-primary schools). This framework provides a unified set of standards for two key dimensions: teaching and learning, and leadership and management. It is designed to help teachers and school leaders identify and implement effective teaching, learning and assessment practices, while also improving leadership and supporting the School Self-Evaluation process. For more information refer to *Special Education in an Independent Ireland 1922-2022: Insights from a Journey Through the Century* (Ring, 2024).

The latest Inspectorate's report, *Special Education Provision* (2024), investigates the learning experiences and the quality of provision for children and young learners with special educational needs in both primary and post-primary levels (Department of Education, 2024i).

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While various service providers offer different forms of support, the NCSE emphasises the need to align professional learning with each school's identified needs. It also highlights the need for specialist modules to be effectively integrated with targeted supports, ensuring that teachers receive the necessary pedagogical training to support inclusive education in mainstream schools (NCSE, 2024a).

Monitoring and quality assurance

Monitoring and quality assurance play a crucial role in ensuring that the provision of TPL and educational services meets high standards and effectively supports teachers, school leaders and learners. The Design and Quality Assurance Protocols document, which applies to materials created after November 2021, supports the wide range of Professional Learning Experiences (PLEs) provided to school leaders and teachers (answer to parliamentary question on the Oireachtas website). This document outlines the design and quality assurance process for PLEs offered by Oide, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders. The protocols are intended to promote rigor and reflection when developing and reviewing design materials, activities and resources for PLE. They aim to be used as a reference for design teams and stakeholders to meet the needs of school leaders and teachers working with all students (Eurydice, 2023, Section 9.2).

The Teacher Professional Learning Section (TPLS) of the Department of Education is responsible for overseeing policy formulation, co-ordination, management, quality and financial control in providing on-going support for teachers and school leaders throughout their careers. This process is managed through steering committees and policy support, as well as collaboration with The Teaching Council, the Inspectorate, and other departments on a range of educational issues (Teacher Professional Networks website).

Oide support service aims to ensure quality assurance within schools by providing high-quality professional development and support to enhance teaching and learning in schools. The Teaching Council also contributes to monitoring and quality assurance by investigating complaints against registered teachers and holding inquiries when necessary.

The Teaching Council's Code of Professional Conduct outlines the standards of professional knowledge, skills, competence and conduct expected of registered teachers. It emphasises that teachers are personally responsible for maintaining and enhancing the quality of their professional practice by keeping their professional knowledge and understanding up to date, reflecting on and critically evaluating their practice in relation to their professional knowledge base, and engaging in opportunities for continuous professional development throughout their careers. Additionally, the Department of Education is conducting a review of guidance provision in third-level education under the Programme Recognition Framework, aiming to ensure the supply of well-qualified guidance counsellors in schools (Department of Education, 2016).

The Inspectorate within the Department of Education is responsible for evaluating early learning and care (ELC) settings, primary schools, special schools, post-primary schools and centres for education. The Inspectorate conducts inspections, evaluates national educational standards and offers advice on educational issues. Their functions include

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providing assurance of quality, promoting best practices and supporting school improvement by advising teachers, principals and boards of management. Reports on inspection findings are published for transparency, and the Inspectorate advises policy-makers in the Department of Education (Department of Education, 2024d).

A comprehensive evaluation of professional learning activities is essential to ensure that these provisions meet the needs of teachers, schools, learners and the Department efficiently and effectively. In May 2023, the Educational Research Centre published a framework for evaluating Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) activities, particularly those related to learner well-being. This framework assists all stakeholders to reflect on TPL and make informed decisions about future learning initiatives. The evaluation framework considers the impact of TPL across several levels: participant reactions, learning outcomes, organisational support and change, the use of new knowledge, and learners' learning outcomes (Gilleece, Surdey and Rawdon, 2023).

The Department of Education is also responsible for maintaining and sharing data on special education provision across Ireland (CSM Ireland).

3.3. Strengths and challenges of TPL in Ireland

The strengths and challenges of TPL in Ireland, highlighted in this section, have been identified as key issues through the document analysis. In areas where the analysis aligns with challenges highlighted by the NCSE, their suggested strategies for addressing these issues have been incorporated. This approach reflects the belief that the convergence of findings reinforces the validity of the analysis and underscores the significance of these shared concerns.

- A clear strength in the Irish initial teacher education (ITE) system is the *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* (The Teaching Council, 2020). Inclusive education is defined as one of these standards. The Teaching Council has incorporated findings from the NCSE research published in 2019, making inclusive education a fundamental component of all programmes.

- The Department of Education, through its actions outlined in the *Initial Teacher Education Policy Statement* (2023b), is committed **to identifying processes that demonstrate how inclusive education prepares student teachers** in ITE to teach all learners in various settings.

- Expanding access to and hence **widening participation** in ITE for traditionally under-represented groups is seen as a positive step forward.

- Another strength of the Irish ITE system is the recent development in the **placement processes**. Students must demonstrate their understanding of inclusive education as it applies to their specific context. Additionally, school placement shall comprise a minimum of two placement settings, incorporating a variety of teaching situations, class levels and school contexts, including Irish-medium schools. However, it is not mandatory, only suggested, that one of these placements should be in a special education setting.

- There is an emphasis on embedding **inclusive practices** into ITE. A study by the NCSE (2019) revealed that student teachers felt their ITE was insufficient for effectively supporting them to include all learners. Consequently, efforts were made to enhance inclusive teaching in ITE and incorporate it into the school placement process.

- A strong element of Ireland's teacher education continuum is its **clear vision of career-long professional learning opportunities**, addressing inclusive education principles, roles and pedagogical responsibilities. Among others, Oide's offerings and the NCSE's tailored support reflect this vision.

- The **mandatory induction** by Oide through the Droichead process. Engaging teachers in induction and support programmes reinforces a culture of Teacher Professional Learning.

- **Beginning and experienced teachers are offered targeted professional learning** through postgraduate diplomas and specialised courses (e.g. Supporting autistic learners). These initiatives align with **standards requiring appropriate education for teachers at different career stages**.

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- **Policies prioritise specialist teacher education**, as evidenced for example by NCSE's role in supporting teachers' professional learning to enable them to support learners with special educational needs and cultivate inclusive culture, practices and pedagogy.

- **Leadership competencies for inclusive education** are addressed through seminars and specific professional learning events by services such as OIDE, NCSE and other TPL services.

- **Collaboration between stakeholders** (e.g. NCSE, Oide, HEIs and The Teaching Council) on the co-ordination, management, quality and financial control with the further aim of providing on-going support for teachers and school leaders throughout their careers demonstrates Ireland's commitment to **aligning local and national goals**.

- In terms of capacity building, **schools are largely supported** (e.g. the tailored in-school support provided by NCSE, the Oide school-based support, the Department of Education guidelines offering support for inclusive education).

- Another important aspect is that documents such as the Inclusive Education Framework and Looking at Our School (2022b) provide **clear guidance on inclusive education practices**, **collaboration and evaluation**.

- Evaluation frameworks, such as the framework developed by the Educational Research Centre, **provide tools for assessing the impact of professional learning** on teachers' practices and learners' outcomes, and mechanisms for publishing inspection reports and aligning professional learning with national policies enhance **transparency and accountability**.

- **Participation in professional development is not compulsory** for teachers in Ireland. While CPD opportunities are widely available, the absence of a unified tracking system presents a challenge in monitoring the actual engagement and participation of teachers in CPD.

- While competence areas for inclusive education are clearly stated, there is scope for further detail on whether and how they are **systematically developed** and **assessed across all teacher roles** and **career stages**.

- There is also space for improving **mechanisms for flexible resourcing** to foster **school-level professional learning opportunities tailored to specific inclusive education needs**. Providing funding in a co-ordinated manner to organisations and services to provide targeted TPL supports can improve flexible resourcing of professional learning for leaders and teachers in inclusion, according to the needs that the school identifies.

- Evidence of a fully integrated **continuum of diverse opportunities** (pre-service to in-service) across all education levels is limited. To respond to this need, the NCSE (2024a) recommended the development of a strategic planning group that will collaborate closely with all relevant organisations to provide a cohesive programme that enhances teacher knowledge, skills and competencies in inclusive education.

- **A legislative and policy framework** to provide for formal mechanisms **that promote dialogue among ministries, management bodies and teacher educators** (across various levels of stakeholders) to agree on inclusive education goals has yet to be established. Such a framework might facilitate and strengthen initiatives that focus on creating leadership teams in schools or higher education institutions (HEIs) dedicated to inclusion, including **strategic leadership teams** to drive school-wide strategies, support staff development and multiprofessional collaboration, and ensure that inclusive policies are effectively implemented and sustained over time.

- There is limited evidence of systematic strategies for providing professional learning programmes for teacher educators in **higher education institutions (HEIs) to align with inclusive education principles**. Consideration might be given to how TPL might benefit from policies that provide explicit incentives for teachers and institutions to prioritise professional learning for inclusion.

- There is a need to ensure that training aligns with specific school contexts. In-school support can also be strengthened by specialist teachers acting as resources to facilitate inclusion in mainstream classes (NCSE, 2024a).

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- It remains **unclear how national and local-level data is used** to inform improvements in professional learning for inclusion and ensure alignment with policy goals. Consultation with stakeholders and with existing support services and providers could be useful in developing structures that align both with the needs and with the overall vision to realise an inclusive education system.

4. KEY FINDINGS AND WAYS FORWARD

4.1 Comparative analysis

This chapter examines TPL for inclusion in **Finland and Ireland**, focusing on the **seven key policy areas of the desk review's analytical framework**:

1. *Policy vision* – the extent to which national policies articulate a commitment to inclusive education within TPL.

2. *Main principles* – how key inclusive principles are embedded in the training of student teachers, beginning teachers and experienced educators.

3. *Goals* – the specific objectives of TPL policies in equipping teachers with inclusive pedagogies, skills and competences.

4. *Continuum of support* – the availability of professional learning opportunities tailored to teachers at different career stages.

5. *Capacity building* – strategies, guidelines and incentives that strengthen teachers' ability to implement inclusive practices.

6. *Funding* – the extent to which TPL initiatives are financially supported and cost-effective.

7. *Monitoring* – mechanisms for tracking teacher engagement, professional growth and the effectiveness of TPL initiatives (see Methodology section).

Through a **comparative analysis** of these policy areas, this section identifies **strengths, gaps and common issues** in both countries' approaches to TPL for inclusion. Based on these insights, **targeted policy actions** are proposed to enhance policy frameworks, ensuring that all teachers receive adequate preparation and on-going support to create truly inclusive learning environments.

Table 1 provides a comparative analysis of Finland and Ireland's approaches to TPL for inclusion across the seven critical policy areas:

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Table 1. Comparative table of Finland and Ireland's TPL approaches

Policy area	Finland	Ireland	Common issues
1. Policy vision *The underpinning policy vision to guide TPL for inclusion is that all teachers should have the attitudes and skills to meet the needs of all learners.*	The **Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026** provides a policy vision that emphasises collaboration, research-based competence development and teacher learning through co-operation and networks. However, the extent to which it fully addresses **inclusive education** is unclear.	The *ITE Policy Statement* (Department of Education, 2023b) supports inclusive education by ensuring student teachers are prepared for diverse learning environments. The *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* **(The Teaching Council, 2020)** explicitly include **inclusive education** as a standard. However, there is a lack of a legislative and policy framework to provide for formal mechanisms that promote dialogue among ministries and teacher educators to agree on inclusive education goals.	• Lack of a **consistent national vision** for inclusive education within a TPL continuum. • Policies emphasise teacher **collaboration and autonomy**, but **do not always explicitly address inclusion** in TPL strategies.

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Policy area	Finland	Ireland	Common issues
2. Main principles *The main principles underpinning policy for TPL for inclusion are that all teachers (student teachers, beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators) receive appropriate education to understand and implement inclusive education.*	Finnish policy highlights the importance of **collaboration between universities, research-based teacher learning and continuous professional development (CPD)**. However, there is **variation** in how inclusive education is embedded across education institutions. TPL is not seen as a continuum, with the induction phase being an important gap. While CPD opportunities are widely available, teachers' participation varies, depending on the region and funding. Some CPD initiatives focus on special education rather than broader inclusive education, including most of the CPD opportunities offered by Valteri.	Ireland has clear standards for inclusive education in ITE and CPD, with a strong focus on collaboration between organisations like NCSE, Oide, and HEIs to support inclusive education. Professional learning is seen as a continuum, encompassing ITE, induction (Droichead), and on-going professional learning (Cosán). While CPD opportunities are widely available, the lack of a unified tracking system makes it challenging to monitor teachers' engagement in CPD.	• **Variation** in how inclusion is embedded across different teacher education institutions. • TPL often focuses on **special education** rather than broader inclusive practices, limiting support for general teachers.

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Policy area	Finland	Ireland	Common issues
3. Goals *Policy must state the goals of TPL for inclusion to ensure it covers a range of issues (such as competence development, pedagogies for inclusion, dialogue about inclusion, etc.) that contribute to understanding and implementing inclusive education.*	The goals of TPL are stated in the **Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026** and cover ITE and CPD, but TPL for inclusive education is not clearly outlined. The **Teacher Education Forum** plays a role in defining and supporting TPL goals, including digitalisation, teacher collaboration and professional autonomy. However, **inclusive education goals** are not always consistently addressed across education institutions and other organisations and networks that offer CPD activities.	Goals for inclusive education are explicitly set in policy. Mandatory induction (Droichead) supports new teachers, embedding inclusive teaching principles. CPD offers targeted postgraduate diplomas (e.g. supporting autistic learners), and NCSE plays a key role in enhancing teachers' inclusive practices. However, the lack of compulsory CPD could affect goal implementation.	• Lack of a **coherent and long-term strategy** to embed inclusive education in TPL policies. • CPD programmes often lack **clear learning outcomes** related to inclusive education.

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Policy area	Finland	Ireland	Common issues
4. Continuum of support *Policy must ensure that professional learning opportunities cover a continuum of support for all teachers working at different levels of education and with different roles in schools/higher education institutions.*	Finland offers a **broad range of CPD opportunities**, but disparities exist between urban and rural areas. CPD is mandatory for some days annually, but teachers struggle to balance CPD with workload. There is **no national induction programme**, which affects novice teachers' ability to integrate theory into practice. Teachers feel unprepared for inclusive education, and fewer peer support and mentoring opportunities at schools limit their ability to gain the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills.	Ireland has **a structured induction programme (Droichead) for beginning teachers**, along with CPD options through Oide and NCSE but there is a lack of a fully integrated continuum of professional learning across all education levels and career stages.	• Teachers feel unprepared to implement inclusive approaches to address the diverse needs of learners. • CPD **accessibility issues**, particularly in rural areas, limit participation. • Weaknesses in the national induction programmes: Finland lacks a national induction programme, leaving early-career teachers without structured support, and links between all TPL opportunities throughout teachers' career paths. Ireland has structured induction (Droichead) but lacks a fully integrated continuum of TPL.

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Policy area	Finland	Ireland	Common issues
5. Capacity building *Policy must ensure that professional learning opportunities contribute to capacity building through strategies, guidelines, competences and incentives for all teachers.*	Finland promotes **teacher autonomy** and **research-based training in both ITE and CPD.** **ITE varies across education institutions,** both in the way inclusive education is infused in specific modules or across modules, and in the quality of school placement. CPD **varies in quality and access** depending on location and institution. School leaders could benefit from targeted CPD on inclusive education. Currently, they seem to have more administrative duties and less pedagogical role.	Ireland has **clear leadership development initiatives as well as the aim for distributed leadership,** and policies prioritising specialist teacher education. There is still a need for a **co-ordinated whole-school CPD programme** and **more leadership training for inclusive schools**. There are limited opportunities for **whole-school CPD for all teachers and SNAs in inclusion**.	• Limited opportunities **for whole-school CPD** for inclusive education. • Lack of mandatory CPD on inclusion. • Lack of **leadership training** focused on developing, leading and managing inclusive schools, particularly for school principals.
6. Funding *Policy must ensure that TPL opportunities are adequately funded and cost-effective.*	The government funds CPD opportunities, and many are **free or subsidised**. However, **rural areas face access issues**, and funding does not always ensure equal quality across CPD programmes. Recently, there have been cuts in funding for CPD activities.	Funding supports NCSE training, teacher fee refund schemes, and postgraduate courses in special education. However, funding allocation remains fragmented, lacking a co-ordinated national approach. Financial or professional incentives for inclusion-focused CPD are limited.	• Funding for TPL is **not always effectively distributed**, leading to disparities in CPD quality and access. • In Ireland, funding is often allocated to CPD providers rather than **directly supporting schools' specific needs**. • Rural and small schools in both countries face **greater barriers** to accessing TPL opportunities.

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Policy area	Finland	Ireland	Common issues
7. Monitoring *Policy must ensure that TPL opportunities are monitored through appropriate mechanisms. These mechanisms should consider data on teachers' engagement and improvement, regardless of the level of education they serve or the location of their workplace.*	Monitoring of CPD engagement and effectiveness **varies across providers**, and **data on how it impacts inclusive education implementation is lacking**. A **quality assurance system** is expected to be developed as part of the Teacher Education Development Programme 2022–2026. This could improve the monitoring of TPL activities for inclusive education.	The Inspectorate evaluates inclusive practices in schools, and evaluation frameworks for self-assessment exist. However, the way in which national and local-level data informs CPD policy improvements remains unclear.	• Limited **data collection** on teachers' engagement in inclusive CPD. • No **systematic national evaluation** of how CPD impacts inclusion in schools. • Finland is developing **quality assurance mechanisms**, but their impact on inclusion remains unclear.

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4.2 Key findings and policy options for Finland and Ireland

The analysis of the desk review revealed that inclusive education is an important aspect of teacher professional learning (TPL) in both Finland and Ireland. Nevertheless, despite the recognition of its importance, several systemic issues persist across key TPL policy areas that warrant further examination and action.

This section delves into the review's key findings and explores policy options aimed at addressing some of the issues identified with the goal of enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of TPL in both countries. According to the review's findings, the following **systemic issues** across the key TPL policy areas require attention:

- **Policy vision and principles**: While both countries emphasise teacher autonomy and professional collaboration, there is no explicit and unified national vision embedding inclusion across all TPL policies. Finland's approach leans on local decision-making, leading to inconsistencies in how inclusion is addressed, whereas Ireland's system allows voluntary CPD, limiting consistent engagement.

- **Goals and continuum of support**: Despite efforts to enhance CPD opportunities, gaps remain. Finland lacks a structured induction programme for beginning teachers. While Ireland has a structured system ('Droichead'), the lack of mandatory CPD can affect the implementation of set goals. Additionally, limited accessibility (especially in rural areas) prevents equitable participation in both countries.

- **Capacity building and funding**: In both systems, CPD is often fragmented, with insufficient leadership CPD on inclusion. Schools in rural areas or with limited resources struggle to access high-quality CPD opportunities, and Ireland's funding model often prioritises CPD providers rather than directly supporting schools' needs.

- **Monitoring and evaluation**: A major challenge is the lack of systematic national data collection on how CPD influences inclusive teaching. Finland is currently developing a quality assurance mechanism, but there is no clear impact assessment yet. Ireland faces similar gaps, with no national tracking system for CPD engagement related to inclusion.

Addressing these issues requires **a targeted approach**, one that builds on the identified strengths of both systems and further ensures cohesive policy alignment, equitable access to CPD, sustainable funding structures and robust evaluation mechanisms.

The following table proposes some possible practical and **context-specific policy options** and strategies for Finland and Ireland, aiming to build on current policy, research and evidence from stakeholders, strengthen TPL policies and enhance teachers' capacity to meet the needs of all learners.

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Table 2. Policy options for Finland and Ireland

Policy area	Policy options for Finland	Policy options for Ireland
Policy vision	- Strengthen the Teacher Professional Development Programme 2022–2026 to ensure inclusion is a core priority. - Develop an action plan for the short-term and long-term implementation of the Teacher Professional Development Programme 2022–2026. - Encourage collaborative policy-making involving teachers, researchers and policy-makers to ensure the implementation of the TPL policy vision.	- Develop a cohesive programme that comprises a continuum of professional learning with inclusion as a core priority. - Develop strategic planning teams to facilitate dialogue among different stakeholders, support services, providers and families to co-develop IE plans and explicit IE goals.
Main principles	- Ensure all teacher educators embed inclusive principles into their TPL courses in higher education institutions and at school level. - Ensure CPD activities are in line with a clear TPL vision which considers inclusive education.	- Make CPD participation in IE mandatory or supported through a range of incentives, such as recognition of competencies, qualifications or career advancement opportunities. - Ensure a consistent approach of IE across all teacher training institutions.
Goals	- Develop clear learning outcomes for inclusion-focused TPL. - Establish a long-term TPL strategy emphasising inclusive pedagogies.	- Systematically assess competence areas for IE across all teacher roles and career stages. - Foster co-ordinated collaboration between NCSE and Oide to promote a unified approach to professional learning that embeds IE as a core competence for all teachers, not as a separate or specialist domain. - Establish a long-term strategy to strengthen the role of SNAs in mainstream schools.

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Policy area	Policy options for Finland	Policy options for Ireland
Continuum of support	• Introduce a structured induction programme for beginning teachers. • Develop strategies for TPL to adapt to local school needs. • Improve access to and provide funding for CPD across the country, especially in rural and under-served areas.	• Strengthen the continuum of TPL for all teachers and SNAs across all education levels and career stages. • Develop strategies for TPL to adapt to local school needs.
Capacity building	• Develop a national CPD framework ensuring whole-school approaches to inclusion. • Increase CPD opportunities for school leaders on inclusive education. • Provide opportunities for CPD that will increase collaboration between special teachers and mainstream teachers.	• Improve whole-school CPD opportunities to ensure consistent practice. • Provide specialised leadership training on inclusive education.
Funding	• Allocate funding directly to schools for CPD needs. • Ensure that funding is allocated for TPL activities promoting inclusive education. • Ensure that funding for CPD activities targets all professionals involved.	• Re-channel funding in a co-ordinated manner to institutions and services to offer targeted TPL supports. • Provide professional and financial incentives for teachers and institutions for TPL on IE.

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Policy area	Policy options for Finland	Policy options for Ireland
Monitoring	• Establish a national data collection system on TPL participation and impact. • Develop monitoring mechanisms in higher education institutions to ensure that the content of ITE modules reflects the principles of inclusive education. • Develop monitoring mechanisms in higher education institutions to ensure that the content of ITE modules reflects the principles of inclusive education. • Regularly review and refine quality assurance mechanisms concerning TPL for inclusive education.	• Implement national tracking of CPD engagement in inclusive education and impact assessments to evaluate CPD effectiveness. • Establish mechanisms that use national and local data to inform improvements in TPL and align with policy goals.

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The table of policy options directly addresses the common issues and challenges faced by the two countries, identified in the previous discussion:

- To **address gaps in policy vision and principles**, both countries need clear national frameworks that explicitly embed inclusion into TPL policies and ensure consistent implementation.

- To **improve CPD engagement and accessibility**, Finland should introduce structured induction, while Ireland should provide teachers with professional and financial incentives as well as establish a mandatory CPD framework.

- To **strengthen capacity building**, both countries should prioritise leadership training and whole-school approaches to professional learning.

- To **ensure equitable funding**, Finland could allocate CPD funding directly to schools, while Ireland could adjust its provider-driven model to better meet school needs.

- To **enhance monitoring**, both systems must implement national data collection mechanisms to track CPD engagement and measure its impact on inclusive teaching.

4.3 Concluding comments

Both Finland and Ireland have strong elements within their TPL frameworks, but face common challenges in:

- creating a national TPL framework to standardise quality;

- ensuring uniformity in ITE and school placements;

- providing equal access to CPD, especially in rural areas;

- improving induction and mentoring for beginning teachers;

- managing teacher workload to encourage CPD participation;

- enhancing leadership training to support teacher development.

Ensuring that TPL policies effectively support inclusive education requires stronger alignment, accessibility and accountability. By adopting the targeted policy actions that this report recommends, both countries can move towards:

- a more unified national vision for inclusive teacher education;

- improved professional learning structures that ensure teachers at all career stages have access to high-quality CPD;

- greater equity in funding and accessibility, especially for teachers in rural or under-resourced schools;

- robust monitoring systems that track teacher engagement in CPD and assess its impact on inclusive education.

By addressing these key issues, both Finland and Ireland can ensure all teachers are well-equipped to meet the needs of diverse learners, strengthening the overall effectiveness of inclusive education.

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ANNEX 2: TPL INFORMATION COLLECTION TEMPLATE

Section 1: Direct providers – Targets – Outcomes

This section asks you to provide key background information in relation to the direct providers of TPL in your country, their understanding of inclusive education, and the way they respond to teachers' professional learning needs.

3.1. **Who are the direct providers of teacher professional learning? (e.g. universities, pedagogical institutes, local authorities, NGOs, other organisations)**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.2. **How is it ensured that the providers of teacher professional learning have a clear understanding of inclusive education?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.3. **Are there any procedures safeguarding that the providers of teacher professional learning consider both the policy context and the particular needs of the teacher groups they educate?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.4. **How do the direct providers of teacher professional learning ensure that inclusive education principles and values are embedded in all internal procedures between the target audience and the final outcome?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers teach in inclusive ways in school placement and mentors support them to this end)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers and teacher educators have inclusive attitudes, they teach inclusively, and all other education stakeholders have subsequent training that enables them to collaborate with teachers)

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Section 2: Concepts, tools, methods

This section asks you to provide information on the concepts, tools and methods used in TPL for inclusion in your country.

Concepts

2.1. **Are there any mandatory courses/seminars/workshops on inclusive education in the different teacher career paths (i.e. student teachers, beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

Tools and methods

2.2. **To what extent are teachers educated on teaching and learning strategies and methods that contribute to inclusive teaching?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

2.3. **To what extent are teachers educated on collaborative ways of teaching (e.g. co-teaching between special and mainstream teachers, co-teaching between mainstream teachers) that can lead to inclusive teaching?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

2.4. **Are there any guidelines that describe the procedures that teachers can follow in order to include all children?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

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Section 3: Policy vision, goals, continuum of support, capacity building, funding and monitoring

This section asks you to provide information on the policy vision about TPL for inclusion in your country, and the related goals and principles. It also asks for information on the continuum of support, capacity building and monitoring for TPL for inclusion.

Policy vision

3.1. **Is policy guided by a vision that all teachers (i.e. student teachers, beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators) can access career-long professional learning opportunities regarding the principles of inclusive education, and their roles and responsibilities in inclusive education?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)
- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.2. **Is teacher professional learning defined in policy as a prerequisite for inclusive education?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)
- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

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3.3. **To what extent do the teaching qualifications reflect an inclusive education agenda?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.4. **Does policy state competence areas for inclusive education for all teachers working at different levels of education (e.g. professional development of all teachers to facilitate their involvement in co-teaching, planning together, developing differentiated materials collaboratively, etc.)?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.5. **Is there is a mechanism to ensure that all professional learning opportunities available to teachers are aligned with national and local-level policy goals for an understanding of inclusive education?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.6. **Is there a medium and long-term review strategy for teacher professional learning opportunities to ensure they meet system requirements for an inclusive education system?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.7. **Is there a strategy to ensure a continuum of diverse professional learning opportunities for inclusive education – for pre-service, beginning and experienced teachers, as well as teacher educators and support teachers – across all levels where teachers work?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)
- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.8. **Are there strategies for developing leadership competences (e.g. school leadership or learning support leadership roles) for inclusive education in all relevant professional learning opportunities?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)
- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

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3.9. **Are there strategies to increase the capacity of all schools/higher education institutions to support all teachers to engage in professional learning activities on inclusive education?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.10. **Is there guidance on how teachers working in mainstream school settings/higher education institutions can understand and enact inclusive education?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.11. **Are there guidelines that support all teachers to collaborate to support all learners?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.12. **Are there strategies stated in policy to develop the role of specialist teachers as a resource for mainstream schools?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.13. **Are there financial incentives to encourage all schools/higher education institutions to develop policy and action plans for teacher professional learning for inclusion?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.14. **Are there flexible resourcing mechanisms that foster teacher professional learning at school level?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)

- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

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3.15. **Is there a comprehensive accountability framework for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of teacher professional learning for inclusion activities?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)
- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.16. **Are there mechanisms to support schools/teacher education departments/higher education institutions to have ownership of review and improvement processes in relation to teacher professional learning?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)
- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.17. **Are there mechanisms to share and analyse data to inform improvement processes in relation to teacher professional learning at national and local level?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)
- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.18. **Is there data available on whether teachers are engaged in professional learning that is relevant to the level of education they teach?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)
- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)

3.19. **Are there mechanisms to ensure that teacher professional learning contributes to improving inclusive education practice at school level/the level of a teacher education department or higher education institution?**

- Initial teacher education (student teachers)
- Continuing professional development (beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators)