

# Implementation of the Special Education Strategy (2007) and the Basic Education Act (2011) in Finland, a follow-up study

Thuneberg, H., Hautamäki, J., Vainikainen, M., Ahtiainen, R., Hilasvuori, T., & Lintuvuori, M.

## Background

The new **Special Education Strategy** by the Ministry of Education (2007), the **Basic Education Act** and the **National Core Curriculum** (2010) led to an extensive reform in Finland, comparative in importance and extent to the foundation of Finnish Basic Education. The new legislation emphasizes **inclusion** and the “**neighborhood school principle**”. The 3-tiered student support model includes a new phase *intensified support*. Early intervention is stressed and pedagogical approach emphasized instead of the psycho-medical. All teachers are expected to be involved, to find effective ways to collaborate, use flexible student groupings and reconsider, how to differentiate teaching in innovative ways.

**I wave:**  
233 (of total 340) municipalities  
Board of Education: coordination  
2 Universities: Training and developmental evaluation  
Spring 2008

**Special Education Strategy**  
12/2007

**II wave:**  
243 municipalities  
5 devel.networks (Uni+munic.)  
Fall 2009

**III wave:**  
279 municipalities  
additional 2 dev. networks  
Fall 2010

**Basic Education Act & National Core Curriculum**  
1/2011

**IV wave:**  
Spring 2011

## Case Lapland

Lakkala, S. & Thuneberg, H.

[suvi.lakkala@ulapland.fi](mailto:suvi.lakkala@ulapland.fi) [helena.thuneberg@helsinki.fi](mailto:helena.thuneberg@helsinki.fi)

## Objectives

The aim was to explore implementation of the educational reform through experiences of teachers of in Northern Finland. The empirical study was conducted in 2010 by the University of Lapland. Research questions:

- Q #1:** How do the teachers experience the more heterogeneous classrooms they now have to deal with?
- Q #2:** How does the experience vary between different types of teacher occupations, genders, age-groups, teaching years and grade-levels?
- Q #3:** What was the hierarchy of the ten supportive means teachers need in the inclusive classrooms?

## Method

### INSTRUMENT:

Instrument: 1. Questionnaire consisting of 42 items, 1-5 Likert scale, 2. choice of 10 alternatives in order of importance, 3. 3 open-ended questions.

### DATA:

N=327, total sample of one rural municipality and two towns in Lapland. The participants: class-teachers (44%), special education teachers (16%), subject teachers (35%) and principals (5%). One third of them were male.

### PROCEDURES:

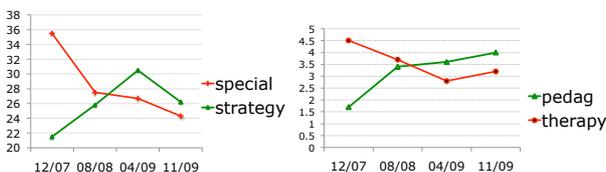
Explorative factor analysis: for forming the variables of sum (reliabilities above .70). GLM MANOVA: for analyzing effects of the background variables. Cross-tabulation and Chi sq tests: for identifying subgroups and nonlinear relationships.

## Results

- #1:** For positive attitudes towards inclusive arrangements, it was not significant, whether a teacher has had pupils with special needs. However, if a teacher had participated in the process of making Individual Learning Plans, it enhanced positive attitudes. In-service training had a beneficial effect.
- #2:** Principals and the special education teachers were most positive and the subject teachers most negative. Probably due to traditional subject teacher education, they were not familiar with flexible teaching arrangements. Changing the practices in the upper levels demands more planning of the whole system, which might relate to the more pessimistic attitudes, as well.
- #3:** The ten supportive factors for teaching quality were in the order of priority: 1- reducing of class-size, 2. support of special ed, 3. in-service training, 4. divided class in some lessons, 5. support of school assistant, 6. support of principal, 7. support of colleague, 8. co-teaching, 9. school welfare group, and 10. individual tutoring hour.

## Conceptual change

The **conceptual change at the national level** was analyzed based on municipality documents of four time-points. Main result: The amount of *special* and *therapy/medical* terms significantly decreased and *strategy* and *pedagogical* terms increased.



### Stage of implementation (Hall & Loucks, 1977)

After one and half years of the process, of the municipalities were at the 1<sup>st</sup> level: *non use, orientation, preparation*, 22%, at the 2<sup>nd</sup> level: *mechanical use, routine*, 60% at the 3<sup>rd</sup> level: *refinement, integration and renewal*, 18%.

*There is now a piece of new evidence that teachers from the extreme ends of Finland, south and north, have similar opinions about the flexible and differentiated teaching practices (see Ahtiainen & al. 2011).*