TEACHER EDUCATION FOR INCLUSION COUNTRY REPORT

FINLAND

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**Date: 16.4.2010**

2. Wider policy framework supporting teacher education for inclusion

In Finland the key words in the Basic Education Act (628/1998) are educational equality, individuality, lifelong learning and co-operation, which are also emphasised in the National Core Curriculum for basic education. At present there is an ongoing process of renewing both the Act and the Core Curriculum. The reform is based on the Special Education Strategy (2007). The Ministry of Education has prepared the changes in the legislation, and the Finnish National Board of Education is preparing the changes in the Core Curriculum for the pre-primary and basic education. The changes in the Basic Education Act are now in Parliament waiting for the Parliament to pass the law. The future change is being prepared with the help of a massive national development – the KELPO-project. Municipalities all over Finland have joined in with this work by developing new practices at schools and by in-service teacher training.

The strategy for the development of special needs and inclusive education emphasises the importance of the wide basic education network which supports the right of every child to attend the nearest mainstream school. The current practice will be changed to focus on earlier support and prevention. This intensified support will be adopted as the primary form of support before a decision of special education is made. The support will be divided to three parts; common support, intensified support and finally, special support. The common and intensified support will be used to bolster learning and growth and prevent the escalation of problems relating to learning. (Special Education Strategy 2007.)

More and more instruction and pedagogy is being structured so as to fit heterogeneous student groups. Finnish teachers know, for example, that no student can be excluded and sent to another school. In line with this principle the students’ own interests and choices are taken into account when planning the curriculum and selecting contents, textbooks, learning strategies, methods and assessment devices. All this calls for a flexible, school-based, teacher and student planned curriculum, along with student-centred instruction, counselling and remedial teaching (Välijärvi et al. 2002, 40).

To develop inclusive education requires a heavy investment in teacher education. In Finland, teachers have been trusted to do their best as true education professionals. Finnish teachers have been entrusted with considerable pedagogical independence in the classroom.

The interpretation of the strategy has an impact on teacher education. The strategy has been formulated in the framework of inclusive education but it still consists of the elements of special education. Well prepared, the reform can broaden the professional role of teachers in the process of defining and providing the support for diverse learners. In order to enhance teachers’ competencies in renewing education, the Ministry of Education has set up the OSAAVA -programme (2010–2016). The programme is to ensure that Finnish teaching personnel and teacher educators receive regular further education and in-service training to improve their professional competences.

The following aspects are relevant in the Finnish understanding of ‘inclusion’:

* The concepts of ‘inclusion’ and ‘diversity’ are reviewed in the teaching and education practices with the activities and arrangements that promote inclusion as the centre.
* To engage in long-term discussions on the problems related to the established tradition of recognising and naming differences as well as to the continuous process of defining and naming new differences, all of which underlie the pedagogical practices that are followed.
* To be fully aware of the fact that teachers share responsibility for the definitions which are adhered to, and for maintaining these definitions.
* To understand at least some of the social preconditions and consequences that diversity has.
* To broaden the conception of teacher’s profession: a teacher does not only enhance pupils’ cognitive skills but also social skills. A school is a social community where children act and develop their social identity.
* To co-operate and support parents’ in the upbringing of their children.
* To have the competences in multi-agency work with other experts who support child’s development.
* To be aware of the role that teachers have in the educational responsibilities related to enhancing equality in our society.
* To build up the teachers’ conception of themselves as experts on implementing the curriculum for diverse learners following principles of pedagogy of difference or universal design.
* To renew pedagogies enhancing inclusion, for example co-teaching and differentiating.

The Strategy for Special Needs Education and Inclusion (2007) sets goals for the development of inclusion in all schools providing basic education. The implementation period has already started, and the Ministry of Education and the Finnish National Board of Education have allocated financial resources for municipalities in order to encourage and support them in the development. Local authorities and schools are required to draw up a plan for arranging education for pupils in need of special support. This kind of plan funds the local authorities in providing the measures for enhancing inclusion, who in turn have to give an account of the use of this money. This is a new financing scheme of the Finnish Ministry of Education. A new Basic Education Act will enter into force in the autumn of 2011 in order to strengthen a pupil’s right to early and well-timed support which will be given as mentioned before in three stages: a general, an efficient and a special support. All these are meant to reduce the numbers of pupils ‘transferred’ into special needs education classes.

Municipalities are also supported through teachers’ in-service training programmes, action research and the extensive development work co-ordinated by the Finnish National Board of Education. After this implementation period the strategy will have effects on upper secondary education as well. A number of proposals on teacher education are laid out in the Special Needs Education Strategy (2007), too. The essential goal is to develop and strengthen ordinary basic education instead of the dual system of general and special education.

Recent reforms will impact on teacher education as follows:

* The degree of integration in the different teacher education units should be raised.
* Reforms in subject matter distribution and the educational structures have led to a need for a reform of educational contents (safety at school, the pupils’ mental health problems, maintenance of the teachers’ continued capability at work, mental protection at work, the teachers’ mental health issues, co-operative measures, solution-orientated approaches, groupings and subcultures).

3. Initial Teacher Education

1. Entry to teacher education

In Finland, teacher education provides the students with a higher education degree. Only 10 per cent of the applicants are admitted yearly. When starting their studies many new students may have experience as teachers or from classroom support practices, which is an additional merit, not a requirement.

Finnish universities are required to have an equity plan according to which students with special needs are guaranteed equal access. Ethnicity is not officially acknowledged. Students are generally supposed to have adequate Finnish or Swedish skills so as to pursue teacher studies.

In teacher education the medium of instruction is generally Finnish or Swedish, occasionally English. Sami students (Lappish ethnic minority) have a quota at the two northern universities. Swedish-spoken student teachers study at their separate University in Vaasa. Instruction in sign language is provided at one teacher education institution, the University of Jyväskylä.

1. Models of initial teacher education

In higher education the degrees consist of different courses. Various courses contain literature, lectures and practice. The courses can be passed only by taking all these sections. On the practice section the theoretical framework, given in a lecture, is introduced or implemented by different kinds of exercises. Both in lectures and on practice, different kinds of methods are used. The team-based teachership and the competence to encounter and teach diverse children are seen as important sectors of inclusive teacher education.

The following working methods are applied for the purpose: answering the exam questions as a group, doing exercises and essays in pairs, pupil observation together, teaching in pairs, group teaching for each discipline, interviewing a teacher, a pupil or a student who needs special support, interviewing a study supervisor or a headmaster and the drawing up of reports.

In the process of learning to encounter challenges in classroom work, prospective teachers can also benefit enormously from the following aspects: lectures given by visiting lecturers or experts, well-prepared pupil descriptions and personal narratives, writing an essay on a pupil of the student teacher’s own choice, and on the field of problems involved in this particular case, a co-operative literature club, lecture blogs and study diaries. Also case study analyses and after that, dramatising the meeting with parents can be implemented. When dramatising, the students act or participate as an audience, seeking solutions and making plans for the imagined pupil’s learning environment and rehabilitation.

During teaching practice the class teacher and the special education teacher can supervise the student teachers together. The student teachers get an example of co-operation between teachers and sometimes co-operative teaching also. An educational discussion, where a certain solution-orientated psychological point of view is taken, can also be introduced. The two teachers or a school welfare officer discuss together or with parents and the students who can participate in the meeting (with parents permission). These kinds of situations give the students instruments to encounter, refer and teach diverse children in an inclusive classroom.

Most Finnish school classes in general education have pupils with special needs – the classes are quite heterogeneous, consisting of pupils with diverse needs. Therefore, educators teaching different subjects are obliged to lecture and train the students about differentiation although the main responsibility for teaching inclusion and differentiation is still the responsibility of the special education lecturer.

At many universities it is possible and common for student teachers to take their teaching practice in small groups with special needs children. They are groups located in mainstream schools.

At the Teacher Demonstration Schools of the Universities, some special education teachers supervise the student teachers together with the class teacher. In this way the student teachers will get an example of collaboration between teachers and a wider point of view towards teaching heterogeneous classes.

For example, at the University of Tampere the special needs education lecturer and a subject lecturer implement courses together. Also the teacher responsible for supervising teaching practice at the Teacher Demonstration School of the university and the special needs education lecturer at the university work in close collaboration, and sometimes even change their roles for the purpose of increasing their expertise.

1. The initial teacher education curriculum

The basic structure of the teacher education curriculum is nationally quite uniform although there are some differences between the universities based on profiling (in minor subjects or profiling areas.) For example at the University of Lapland inclusive education is one of the profiling areas.

Based on the above national guidelines, the teacher education curriculum is planned by a curriculum team consisting of the professor of teacher education and representatives of different subjects, i.e. lecturers in subject didactics as well as student representatives. The Faculty of Education is the board where the curriculum is approved. Teacher educators are responsible for planning and implementing the curriculum so that students can achieve the stated learning outcomes.

All universities offer single courses of 1–5 ECTS on inclusive and multicultural education. All students in the Department of Teacher Education must include in their studies ‘general pedagogy’, which familiarises them with the ideology, theory and practices of inclusion, for instance the following aspects: ‘inclusive diversity in education’, ‘education related to multiculturalism’, ‘global education’ and ‘special needs education’.

The foundations (basic studies) of special needs education are compulsory in all teacher education. There are differences in study content between the universities. For example, at the University of Tampere a study block is included called ‘Welfare in a learning environment’ with the following themes:

* A group as a resource;
* Youngsters’ mental health at school;
* Good management and supervision skills required of a teacher;
* Collaborative methods;
* Development of learning environments.

At the University of Jyväskylä inclusive education and multicultural education are integrated across all study content.

Separate universities may include the aspects of collaborative practice in general pedagogy courses or inclusive education courses. Usually they are not independent modules. Special needs education is offered to all students as an optional study area. This creates a fruitful platform for inter-learning and collaboration of students from different disciplines, not only from different fields of education. Particularly interesting broader perspectives have been explored in groups where students from the Faculty of Arts and Design, Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of Education have been working on same issues. For example, the course called ‘*Do talk about what bothers you’* provides opportunities for dealing with a variety of collegial, multi-professional and multidisciplinary forms of collaboration.

The theory is examined and different working forms are put into practice. For instance, the course called ‘Issues of special needs education’ provides practical opportunities for drawing up what is called an ‘Individual Plan of Education’ developing the competence of a teacher as a member of a multi-agency team which also includes a social worker, a doctor, a psychologist, a representative from the police authorities and an immigration co-ordinator.

Moreover, teacher students gain valuable experiences by familiarising themselves with the practical forms of support realised in different schools, for instance in relation to the theme ‘How to deal with problematic (challenging) behaviour’, with reports being examined and discussed in groups.

Minor studies in special education or multicultural education are very popular among class teacher students. Many Finnish student teachers are aware of the importance of having a range of skills for addressing pupils with diverse needs and backgrounds. The emphasis in these studies is on inclusion at every university giving teacher education.

For example at the University of Tampere during the six-year inclusion project, the lecturers invited groups of 3 or 4 teachers to conduct a discussion on what inclusion is about. This was followed by convening a number of experienced teachers (e.g. in multicultural education), and, after that, researchers of various academic disciplines as well as students for similar discussions.

A new course called ‘*Diversity in education’* was compiled for the students on the basis of these discussions and relevant literature. All participants were allowed to say what they thought was important in teacher education. All this information has been passed on to those responsible for the teacher education provided in our Department.

1. Attitudes and values in initial teacher education

All Finnish universities have an equity plan and the universities have to follow up on its implementation. There is an effort to apply Universal Design in the environment and the curricula at the universities.

There is an evolving understanding of the need to develop more responsive university pedagogy. Nowadays more and more research is made in that area.

Finnish teacher education is made up of theory and practice which alternates during the education. After certain theoretical studies, students go on teaching practice (5–6 weeks) a year. The lecturers of the teacher demonstration school or field teachers and the university lecturers supervise them together. During or after every teaching practice there is usually a pedagogical or didactic seminar at the university, where:

The students regularly reflect the experiences which they have had in their teaching practice and on their visits to different schools. The small groups allow free expression of feelings and thoughts related to what has been experienced, also by writing, and a variety of forms of art education are used (e.g. drawing, singing and acting).

Reflection is seen as an important section of occupational development. The students build up their own operating theory throughout the education piece by piece. They will have to deal with their biographic school memories and learning experiments, compare them to what they have studied and learned and to become aware of their own educational philosophy.

1. Teaching practice

All basic education student teachers have their teaching practice (class teachers have four, one every year) in government teacher demonstration schools. Usually one of the practice periods is carried out in ordinary municipality schools, so called field schools.

Before each teaching practice certain studies have to be taken. After that one can put them into practice at school. Every teaching practice also has a seminar linked to practice so that student teachers’ experiences can be reflected upon or analysed thoroughly.

There are lecturers who are supervisors at the teacher demonstration schools. Also the senior lecturers (different didactics) from the university come to the school to observe and supervise the student teachers once or twice during the practices. Usually the first practice concentrates on pupil observation, analysing cases and interviewing teachers and also teaching a little. At the University of Lapland, the senior lecturer of pedagogy is responsible for this practice. The senior lecturers at the university also help the students to make rough plans for the second practice (didactic practice). The third is at a field school and the last is based on the idea of taking care of a class all day, keeping in touch with parents and so on – the full responsibility of a teacher’s work. The lecturers supervise all of the time and the senior lecturers supervise one or twice.

All Finnish schools have heterogeneous classes which have diverse pupils. Almost every class has at least one pupil with special needs, usually more.

4. Competences, assessment and accreditation

In Finland there are official qualifications for teachers which have been determined by legislation. All new basic education teachers must have a master’s degree. However, teacher competences are not defined.

For the teacher students, these study blocks:

* make them examine their own world of values, and promote their;
* ability to meet diversity with open and understanding hearts and minds;
* increase their positive expectations of the future;
* reform their attitudes in an ideal way;
* promote their professional growth and personal identity;
* increase the strengths in their personality in every possible way;
* enable them to update their knowledge and continue the process of lifelong learning.

As a whole, teacher education is based on the principle of a teacher as a researcher. Teachers are trained to reflect and analyse their work all the time and adjust their teaching as a continuous process. At the same time teachers are trained to think scientifically. Teacher research is quite common in Finland.

The general assessment rules and regulations are applied to all studies.

An applicant seeking admission into the Department of Teacher Education, benefits materially from having worked as a classroom support practitioner but, under the current regulations, this does not benefit them in the entrance examination although this would serve all parties concerned.

The following posts could also benefit applicants: a helper to disabled or elderly persons, a helper at an immigrant reception centre or a day care centre, or in youth work.

5. Teacher educators

Some teacher educators have expertise in all of the following areas:

* SEN and disability;
* Challenging behaviour;
* Diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious groups;
* More able learners;
* Other minority groups/learners vulnerable to underachievement (e.g. gay, lesbian, transgender learners, children in care).

However, this is usually limited to certain educators. The challenge is to provide the skills and knowledge to subject lecturers as well.

For example at the University of Lapland, where an orientation to inclusion exists in class teacher education, a new post of senior lecturer of pedagogy has been constituted. She has a qualification both on general education and special education and is also responsible for the pedagogic and didactic seminars of teaching practices. The aim is to narrow the gap between general and special education and to combine them into a solid basic education.

6. Quality assurance and follow up of new teachers

In Finland the universities are autonomous establishments providing this particular education. The Ministry of Education can issue recommendations but the only way it can guide teacher education is by finance allocation for different projects.

So far there are no measures to follow up new teachers on the effectiveness of their preparation for meeting the needs of all learners.

7. Representation from minority groups

In Finland there is no official statistics on ethnicity, only citizenship is registered; this does not provide information on ethnic or cultural background.

The Teacher Union newsletter carried out a survey on teachers’ attitudes towards gay/lesbian/transgender colleagues and students in 2010, but there is no easily accessible information about the numbers of teachers and their sexual orientation/identity. Some gay/lesbian/transgender teachers and students working in the field of education have created a discussion forum on the Internet.

In the Sami-region, as well as in other parts of Finland, there are Sami-originated teachers; there are only a few teachers of Roma-origin.

At the University of Lapland there is a multicultural group of immigrants who are qualified teachers in their own countries. They study to also become qualified teachers in Finland. They live in different parts of Finland and mainly they study by Internet, for example, the lectures are sent live to different units giving the students the opportunity to discuss with the lecturer.

At the University of Helsinki there is a teacher education programme for teachers who would like to work with immigrant children. There are many students who also come from different backgrounds.

8. Policy into practice examples

**Best practice example 1**

In-service education related to the inclusive school for teachers working in a town with a university.

There is an increase in interaction between the university and the in-service teachers and teacher students. Lifelong learning becomes a familiar concept, and, in teacher education, theory and practice are united in sharing experiences.

Setting/situation of the example:

The first phase of the education was conducted in the academic year 2009 through 2010, to be continued in the academic year 2010 through 2011.

Partners involved:

The city of Tampere and the University of Tampere

Description of activity/approach being taken:

Those who had voluntarily sought and gained admission into teacher education were allowed to choose either only the relevant studies or university degree studies with the literature requirements completed.

Competences that are being developed:

In-service teachers consider it necessary to prepare themselves for the new Act which implies progress towards the inclusive school.

Impact/benefits for student teachers/learners/others:

There is an increase in collaboration between prospective teachers and in-service teachers with decades of experience. Moreover, lifelong learning is increasingly seen as positive.

Identification of what can be learned from the study about teacher education for inclusion:

Making attitudes towards teamwork and diversity more positive, with increased mental resources as knowledge is increased.

Plans for further development/extension of this practice:

A regular and continuous in-service teacher education scheme is being planned with an application for project funding to the Ministry of Education in February 2010 for the purpose of establishing and widening these activities.

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**Best practice example 2.**

Setting/situation of the example:

At the Teacher Training School of the University of Lapland, two supervising teachers began to develop co-operative teaching in an inclusive classroom with teacher students.

Partners involved:

A special education teacher, a class teacher and eleven class student teachers

Description of activity/approach being taken:

A two year period of field work was conducted by co-operative action research. The special education teacher made a dissertation of the work as an action researcher.

Competences that are being developed:

The goal was to develop the kind of pedagogies that give the student teachers competencies to teach diverse children co-operatively in an inclusive class.

Impact/benefits for student teachers/learners/others:

To ensure class teacher students that there are many ways to encounter diverse children by class teacher’s own skills. Also to teach class teacher co-operative teaching and to teamwork.

Identification of what can be learned from the study about teacher education for inclusion:

In Finland, co-operative teaching is spreading as one way of implementing inclusive teaching, not only due to this research.

The dissertation has widely been used in pre-service and in-service teacher education as a source and an exam paper in Finland.

Plans for further development/extension of this practice:

At present, the practice is being implemented at one particular teacher demonstration school by three class teachers in co-operation with the special education teacher. It has also become a goal for teaching practices at the University of Lapland. For part of their lessons, student teachers will have to teach co-operatively.

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