



FOSTERING INCLUSIVE QUALITY EDUCATION IN FINLAND AND IRELAND

TSI-2023-FIQUE-FIIE-IBA

Deliverable 3.1

**Findings report on teacher professional learning
in Finland and Ireland – Executive summary**

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

The project is funded by the European Union through the Technical Support Instrument and implemented by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, in co-operation with the European Commission



INTRODUCTION

This document is the Executive Summary of the Deliverable 3.1 ‘Teacher Professional Learning in Finland and Ireland: Findings Report’, which is part of the [TSI FIQUE-FIIE project](#) ‘Fostering Inclusive Quality Education in Finland and Ireland’.

This multi-country project is funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument ([TSI](#)) and is implemented with support from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education ([EASNIE](#)) in co-operation with the Reform and Investment Task Force ([SG REFORM](#)) of the European Commission.

The project aims to help the two participating countries, Finland and Ireland, identify key objectives and plan actions for promoting equitable learning opportunities, improving educational outcomes and increasing access to mainstream education for all learners. With a particular focus on promoting quality inclusive education, the project aims to increase the two countries’ capacity to design and implement inclusive provision in mainstream education settings.

The summary consists of five sections. It begins with an introduction on the aims and the methodology of the full report. It then presents the main [strengths and challenges of teacher professional learning in Finland](#) followed by those of [Ireland](#). Subsequently, it highlights the [key findings and policy options](#) for both countries. Finally, it ends with some [concluding comments](#) on the findings.

Aims and methodology

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).

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.

The methodology for the desk review followed a structured, top-down approach led by the EASNIE team, as preferred by the participating countries. This approach began with the development of a detailed questionnaire, derived from EASNIE’s [TPL policy self-review tool](#), which served as the analytical foundation. The questionnaire aimed to gather data on both initial teacher education and on-going professional development.

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.

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EASNIE also compiled an initial list of resources, including recent [Country System Mapping \(CSM\) reports](#) for Finland and Ireland, as well as Eurydice updates and national policy documents. Countries supplemented this list with additional academic and policy sources.

Once the EASNIE team pre-filled the questionnaire with available information, countries were invited to revise, update or expand the content, adding comments that informed the next step – drafting the report. The final draft synthesised key findings using the TPL policy review tool’s seven policy areas. It was reviewed by the project’s Extended Steering Committee (ESC) and discussed with targeted stakeholders of both countries through online focus groups. The final report was validated in a dedicated meeting with the project’s Steering Committee members and the project’s Research Advisor, Professor Lani Florian, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected the national contexts and collaborative input.

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.

Strengths and challenges of teacher professional learning in Finland

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](#), is one of the strengths of the Finnish TPL policy as it emphasises university collaboration, research-based competence development, co-operative learning and skilful management.

The Finnish **government finances the implementation of this policy vision**, while the University of Helsinki **aims to establish a quality assurance system for the programme**. The Teacher Education Forum facilitates co-operation between the Ministry of Education and Culture and other TPL providers.

Collaboration between universities and teacher training schools ensures an optimal pedagogical environment for student teachers. Moreover, **teacher education institutions maintain autonomy** over their curricula but collectively address concerns regarding pedagogical aspects and school placement opportunities.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) encompasses a comprehensive curriculum that includes pedagogical theory, subject-specific content and practical teaching skills. The ITE framework promotes **teacher autonomy and enhances management competencies**. Furthermore, certain **TPL priorities emphasise digitalisation and its pedagogical application**.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is mandatory for teachers and provided by various entities, often at no or low cost. Finnish CPD programmes are based on research and promote the use of academic findings and innovation. The **CPD system supports teachers' independence in their professional learning** and encourages lifelong learning. These programmes focus on collaboration, peer learning and shared practices. CPD is closely connected to classroom practice and aims to **enhance teachers' personal and professional well-being**. Finally, Finnish teachers usually hold bachelor's and master's degrees, making them **highly qualified**.

Challenges

However, the TPL system in Finland faces several challenges too. **The extent to which the TPL policy vision addresses inclusive education is unclear**. **Beginning and experienced teachers do not feel fully prepared** to teach all learners. The **highly selective nature of the ITE system** creates teacher shortages in certain regions or subject areas.

Inclusive education integration in ITE varies by university, affecting topics like differentiated teaching and co-teaching. **General and special teachers train in separate departments**, leading to differing views on inclusive education. This split fosters the belief that not all teachers can teach all learners. **Variations exist in school placement principles, learner diversity in training schools and qualification requirements for ECEC teachers** versus other educators.



There are notable **disparities in access to CPD opportunities between urban and rural areas**. Teachers often face **challenges in balancing CPD activities with their existing workload**. The **absence of a standardised national framework for CPD** is evident, leading to inconsistencies.

Additionally, CPD programmes may not fully address the diverse professional development needs of teachers. Retaining and effectively applying knowledge gained from CPD activities can be difficult. It is common for **CPD aimed at inclusive education to be equated with CPD for special education**. New teachers frequently report difficulties in translating theoretical knowledge into practice within real classroom settings. Furthermore, **school leaders' extensive administrative duties restrict their ability to fulfil pedagogical and mentoring roles**.

Strengths and challenges of teacher professional learning in Ireland

This section presents the strengths and challenges of TPL for inclusive education in Ireland that have been identified as key issues through the document analysis.

Strengths

The Irish initial teacher education (ITE) system has several strengths, including the [Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education](#), which defines inclusive education as a fundamental component of all programmes.

The Department of Education is committed to **identifying processes that demonstrate how inclusive education prepares student teachers in ITE** to teach all learners in various settings through its actions outlined in the [Initial Teacher Education Policy Statement](#). Furthermore, **expanding access to ITE for traditionally under-represented groups** is seen as a positive step forward.

The recent development in the **placement processes requires students to demonstrate their understanding of inclusive education** as it applies to their specific context. There is an **emphasis on embedding inclusive practices into ITE**, and efforts have been made to enhance inclusive teaching in ITE and **incorporate it into the school placement process**. Ireland's teacher education continuum has a **clear vision of career-long professional learning opportunities, addressing inclusive education principles**, roles and pedagogical responsibilities.

[Oide](#), a support service for teachers and school leaders, provides **mandatory induction** through the [Droichead](#) process, which reinforces a culture of Teacher Professional Learning. Thereby, beginning and experienced teachers are offered targeted professional learning through postgraduate diplomas and specialised courses. **Policies prioritise specialist teacher education, and leadership competencies for inclusive education are addressed through seminars** and specific professional learning events.

Collaboration between stakeholders on the co-ordination, management, quality and financial control demonstrates Ireland's commitment to aligning local and national goals. Schools are largely supported through tailored in-school support, and documents such as the **Inclusive Education Framework provide clear guidance on inclusive education practices, collaboration and evaluation**. Finally, evaluation frameworks provide tools for assessing the impact of professional learning on teachers' practices and learners' outcomes.

Challenges

The analysis also pointed towards some challenges in the Irish system. One of these was that **participation in professional development is not compulsory** for teachers in Ireland, and 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 space for further detail on whether and how they are systematically developed and assessed across all teacher roles and career stages.



Furthermore, it was found that there is **space for improving mechanisms for flexible resourcing** to foster school-level professional learning opportunities tailored to specific inclusive education needs. Additionally, **evidence of a fully integrated continuum of diverse opportunities across all education levels is limited**. A legislative and policy framework to provide for formal mechanisms that promote dialogue among ministries, local authorities and teacher educators has yet to be established.

Another finding showed that there is **limited evidence of systematic strategies for providing professional learning programmes for teacher educators in higher education institutions to align with inclusive education principles**. Furthermore, there is a need to ensure that training aligns with specific school contexts, and in-school support can be strengthened by specialist teachers acting as resources to facilitate inclusion in mainstream classes.

It remains **unclear how national and local-level data is utilised to inform improvements in professional learning for inclusion** and ensure alignment with policy goals.

Consultation with stakeholders and existing support services and providers could be useful in developing structures that align both with the needs and with the overall vision for a realisation of an inclusive education system.



Key findings and policy options

The teacher professional learning report concluded with four key findings that highlight systemic issues across important TPL policy areas and need further consideration. The four key findings cover the areas of policy vision and principles, goals and continuum of support, capacity building and funding, and monitoring and evaluation.

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **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.
4. **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.



Table 1. 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.



Policy area	Policy options for Finland	Policy options for Ireland
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 special needs assistants (SNAs) in mainstream schools.
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.



Policy area	Policy options for Finland	Policy options for Ireland
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.
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. • 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.

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.



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.