



**INCLUSIVE
EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION**

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Case Study Visit Report:

Liinalampi Day-Care Centre, Jyväskylä, Finland, 18–20 April 2016

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Full version
ECE:	Early childhood education
ECTS:	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EU:	European Union
IECE:	Inclusive Early Childhood Education
IEP:	Individual Education Plan
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAG:	Project Advisory Group
SEN:	Special educational needs



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PREAMBLE: THE IECE PROJECT

This report on the case study visit to Jyväskylä City and the Liinalampi Day-Care Centre, Finland, is part of the Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) project, conducted by the Agency from 2015 to 2017. The project includes a total of eight such visits in different European countries.

The project's overall goal is to identify, analyse and subsequently promote the main characteristics of quality inclusive ECE for all children from three years old to the start of primary education.

Thus the project focuses on the structures and processes that can ensure a systemic approach to providing high-quality inclusive ECE that effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the children from the school group's local community.

The project started off with a focus on the five thematic areas for improving ECE that were raised by EU and OECD working groups for this field (EU, 2014; OECD, 2014):

- Access to quality ECE for all children. From the perspective of the project, this principle refers to facilitating access for all children in the community, with particular concern for the most vulnerable, such as children with disabilities and SEN, immigrants and newcomers, and other at-risk children and families.
- Workforce quality. This principle calls for the employment of appropriately trained staff with access to continuous training and adequate working conditions, appropriate leadership, support staff inside and outside the school, and adequate resources and positive parent, interdisciplinary and interagency collaboration.
- Quality curriculum/content. This principle underlines the need for a holistic and flexible curriculum and pedagogy that promote child wellbeing and learning in all aspects of development – cognitive, social, language, emotional and physical – and enable children to be meaningfully and actively engaged in a safe but open and stimulating environment.
- Evaluation and monitoring. This not only refers to how children's development and learning is monitored, but also to the ECE provision's level of effectiveness to meet established quality standards that ensure a quality learning environment for all children.
- Governance and funding. This principle considers how public funding and leadership models are used accountably to ensure that a quality ECE service is



available to all children and is managed with a constant focus on enabling each child's holistic growth and learning.

Project activity and project outputs will include:

- A literature and policy review providing the conceptual framework for the project and including a review of international and European research literature and policy papers on ECE.
- Country reports providing information on policy and practice in inclusive ECE for all children at national level.
- European practitioners' perceptions of and practices for inclusive ECE: a qualitative analysis of descriptions of 31 examples of inclusive ECE provisions.
- Detailed reports of the eight selected case study sites, including analysis of the key project themes investigated.
- Recommendations designed to meet policy-makers' needs: the project synthesis report will draw on evidence from all project activities; the key issues/factors facilitating quality inclusion in ECE will be analysed and translated into recommendations.
- A self-assessment/self-reflection tool for the ECE setting.



1. INTRODUCTION: SELECTED CASE STUDY VISIT 2 OF THE IECE PROJECT

This report provides information about the case study visit that the Agency team conducted in Finland in April 2016.

Jyväskylä City and the Liinalampi Day-Care Centre were selected, along with seven other sites, from examples of inclusive practice in ECE submitted by national experts and Agency Representative Board members. The eight selected examples were willing to be visited and studied by a project team in order to understand the quality features of inclusive ECE provision.

In order to support the countries in identifying examples of inclusive practice in ECE, the Agency team, in collaboration with the PAG members, established criteria that the example provisions were expected to meet. These criteria, which were also used to select the eight examples, were:

- Relevance of the site
- Clarity of the information provided
- Evidence of the following:
 - respect for diversity;
 - promotion of participation and engagement;
 - holistic curriculum;
 - skilled workforce;
 - collaboration and partnership;
 - smooth transitions;
 - quality assurance;
 - self-evaluation to inform improvement.

The selected examples also needed to reflect diverse geographical locations across Europe.

A team of Agency staff, PAG members and country experts visited Jyväskylä City and the Liinalampi Day-Care Centre from 18 to 20 April 2016. The visit provided opportunities to hear first-hand about developments in the city and the day-care centre's ECE provisions, to observe classes and to interview different stakeholder groups: principal, teachers, support teachers, parents and children. Interviews were conducted according to a schedule to provide consistency across the eight project case study visits. In addition, relevant documents on national and regional policy and practice were collected prior to and during the visit. All visiting project participants provided first impressions at a forum on the last day of the visit and



then submitted written feedback about the inclusive features of the ECE provision at the Liinalampi Day-Care Centre. All these sources of evidence have been used to draft this report.

An analysis of all the above data led to the identification of three main themes that enhance the inclusiveness of Jyväskylä City and the Liinalampi Day-Care Centre's ECE provision:

- 1 Use of a three-step support model
- 2 Focus on the human factor
- 3 Promote a teamwork approach among qualified staff.

These are described in detail in Sections 3 to 5 of this report. Section 2 gives an account of the background of inclusive provision within inclusive education in Jyväskylä City, Finland. Section 3 follows, describing the setting's main highlight.



2. THE CONTEXT

2.1 Inclusive education in Jyväskylä City, Finland

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

Children start primary school at the age of seven in Finland and all children under school age are entitled to ECE. ECE is regarded as a child's right, irrespective of their need for support, the family's socio-economic background or other family situation. ECE also includes pre-primary education for six-year olds, which can be implemented at either day-care centres or schools. Pre-primary education is provided for in the Basic Education Act. The principle of inclusion is emphasised in the documents governing early childhood special education (National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland 2003, <http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe201204193910>, and the Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education, in press).

These national regulations also guide the local activities within the inclusive education model of Jyväskylä. The City of Jyväskylä and its day-care centres have created their own detailed curricula based on the national documents. Based on these curricula, all children, with their diverse support needs, receive an IEP. The child's support measures are planned to suit the group's activities. This makes them easy to implement within the group and highlights participation and the child's social inclusion.

In compliance with the Act on Early Childhood Education, children are supported based on their individual needs. In Jyväskylä, a three-step support model is used. Officially, the model is applied in Finland's pre-primary and basic education, but in Jyväskylä it is also applied in ECE (for more information about this theme, please refer to Section 3).

The key idea of the inclusive education model in Jyväskylä is to engage all educators in implementing early childhood special education. They are assisted in this task by consultative early childhood special education teachers and by early childhood special education teachers working in mainstream day-care groups. In this way, special education expertise is not concentrated on specific, individual day-care groups.



In Jyväskylä, there are 33 early childhood special education teachers who work in day-care centres and six consultative early childhood special education teachers. In special cases, staff can request consultative help from the national specialist network at Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting.

The special education teachers have an important role. The consultative early childhood special education teacher is the expert responsible for allocation, co-ordination, planning, evaluation and training. The early childhood special education teacher is responsible for implementing high-quality practices. This special education teacher also works collaboratively to model behaviours and practices for ECE class teachers.

(More information about the Finnish inclusive education system is available in the country report, in the description of the example and in Finland's national overview: www.european-agency.org/national-policy-and-provision/Finland).



3. THE SETTING'S HIGHLIGHT (THEME 1): USE OF A THREE-STEP SUPPORT MODEL

As expected, the ECE provisions in Jyväskylä and the Liinalampi Day-Care Centre were using several structures and processes that enhanced their inclusiveness. However, the case study visitors were struck by a three-step support model that is used: general support, intensified support, special support. This model provides universal methods for all children and supports the increase in capability of inclusive educational systems.

The *general* support given to all children is based on observing the children and evaluating their learning environment and pedagogy. Observations made by parents and educators are discussed jointly. Agreements are then reached, for instance, on how to take the child's strengths into account. The agreed issues are recorded in the child's IEP. As an example, general support could refer to training a child's social, linguistic and motor skills in everyday situations through play and motion. The educators highlight sensitive interactions with children, who are assisted in recognising and naming their own emotions. One of the aims is also to pro-actively prevent bullying.

Intensified support is provided to children who need individual support in more than one developmental area. Intensified support is collaboratively and specifically designed for an individual child by parents, the ECE class teacher and the early childhood special education teacher. When children receive intensified support, their active participation in whole group and small group activities is still supported in various ways. The child's IEP is again the foundation for implementing inclusive education. The educators aim to design the physical and interactive environment to suit all children. For example, images or other alternative communication methods are used in addition to verbal communication. In supervised activity sessions, images are used to illustrate instructions. Individual communication portfolios to be used in all situations are also created for the children.

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

An early childhood special education teacher is available to the education team at every stage in which inclusive education is implemented. This starts with planning and ends with the educators' self-reflection on their educational activities.



4. THEME 2: FOCUS ON THE HUMAN FACTOR

The second striking inclusive feature in Jyväskylä and the Liinalampi Day-Care Centre was the focus on human factors and the child- and parent-centred approach. The main focus was on how to change the system to better respond to children's and families' needs.

4.1 Access for all and respect for diversity

In Jyväskylä, all children aged up to seven can attend their closest day-care centre, irrespective of their individual support needs. There are no separate groups for children who need support. In this model, the working methods of early childhood special education teachers have been designed in a way that particularly supports inclusion.

All children are welcome at the Liinalampi Day-Care Centre at any time. There are many facilities. As such, families can choose the best timetable for them, so children can attend the centre in the morning, afternoon, evening or even at night. It is a place of wellbeing, as everything is organised for children to feel at home.

Some actions are undertaken specifically for children with special needs to feel welcome. For example, before a child with special needs start attending the day-care centre, a special education teacher from the centre visits their home. This is a way of welcoming them and informing them about what is going to happen so that they do not worry. Children also visit the day-care centre with their families to familiarise themselves with the centre before they start. This makes the transition from home to the day-care centre easier.

4.2 Child engagement

The staff ensure children's engagement in learning and social activities. All children participate in group activities, answering questions or solving challenges proposed by the teacher. For example, in the classroom visit, the children were talking to teachers in groups about who was present, their daily activities and routines and the weather. Children could choose their next activity and were organised into different groups depending on their interests.

Children have the opportunity to choose the activities they want to do. This is an opportunity to develop problem-solving competences, interests and independence. The teachers consider children's interests, giving them the opportunity to choose, but also supervising and guiding activities in accordance with children's needs.



4.3 Inclusive environment

Participants observed that play is one of the most important activities for learning in the school. The day-care centre slogan 'learning by playing' is appreciated and respected by all staff and parents. Outdoor play is very much promoted, and children spend quite a lot of time playing outside no matter what the weather.

All children are engaged in play activities, regardless of their personal needs. All children are invited and supported to participate in group discussions and to share their ideas when discussing a topic.

Participants observed a lot of respect in interactions between children and adults. The speaking turn is always respected and the tone in which they speak is pleasant and respectful. Rules posted in each classroom seem to work well, as the children's behaviour is very good.

Interaction between adults is very respectful, too. This is important in inclusive settings. All ideas and opinions are important and all the people in the class are engaged with the activities and what is going on.

4.4 Child-friendly physical environment

The day-care centre is designed to be a welcoming space. Classes have different spaces that make it easy to develop different activities. Children are able to move from one place to another very easily. There are specific spaces for:

- play;
- speaking, instructions, explanations, singing and drama;
- rest and sleep;
- writing, cutting, pasting, etc.

The toilets are very clean and adapted to the children's size. There are different spaces for putting their belongings (clothes, shoes, gloves, etc.), and there is a place for drying clothes after playing outdoors.

All classes use pictures to support language and writing. There is a timetable with pictures for the daily routine. It is shared with families when they start at the day-care centre so they know the kind of activities that the children do. The timetable is also shared with the children.

4.5 Child-centred learning environment

During the visit and discussions, participants realised that all professionals involved share a vision of inclusion in favour of the children. All day-care centre staff are involved in the teaching of children with a flexible curriculum. They all have very



clear goals which they work towards. Teachers, staff and families design the IEP for each child together. The content of the plan is quite general. Participants consider this a good starting point and a good way to get to know the child and the family. It also clarifies responsibilities and other relevant issues, such as shared goals.

Participants also observed that all children were motivated to participate. All were asked and all participated in the activities. Interaction was mostly between adults and children.

4.6 Parental involvement

Parents have opportunities to be listened to at different times in the year. The centre organises general meetings with parents, in order to talk about the school and the children. It also organises events for parents related to festivities. Staff also talk to parents on a daily basis and when necessary.

The parents also have an important role in preparing and implementing the 'Early Learning Plan'. Both teachers and parents participate in developing the plan. This includes identifying children's interests and needs and defining the priorities for 'pedagogical principles', 'support measures' and 'assessment'.

One mother pointed out that: 'Teachers and parents respect each other, have a close relationship and communicate well'.



5. THEME 3: PROMOTE A TEAMWORK APPROACH AMONG QUALIFIED STAFF

The visit and the discussions with different stakeholders confirmed the emphasis on recruiting highly qualified staff and promoting a teamwork approach. This approach is based on mutual trust and collaborative teaching. There is a strong belief in equality between day-care centre staff, clearly expressed by the principle 'We are all equal'.

5.1 Staff preparation and continuing training activities

The ECE teachers have completed a bachelor's degree, and other ECE staff also have adequate training. In addition to the bachelor's degree, early childhood special education teachers have completed a minimum of 60 ECTS credits in special education. The key idea of the inclusive education model in Jyväskylä is to engage all educators in implementing early childhood special education. They are assisted in this task by consultative early childhood special education teachers and by early childhood special education teachers who work in mainstream day-care groups. This means that special education expertise is not concentrated purely on specific, individual day-care groups.

The staff and children in ECE and early childhood special education can receive support from a network of state schools focusing on special education (Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting, www.valteri.fi/EN/valteri.html). This support might include consultative expert help or continued training. In addition, state schools provide testing and rehabilitation services for children with severe disabilities.

Staff have regular opportunities for preparation and training on topics they consider necessary. For example, most of the staff learn how to use sign language, as they find it important for some of the children.

Universities and research institutions play an important role. They provide courses and research relevant ECE topics. There is a link between research and practice.

A highlight of the City of Jyväskylä's inclusive early childhood special education model is the way it uses the expertise of special education teachers. Every single educator works with children who need support, and receives support from early childhood special education teachers. The early childhood special education teachers either serve as consultative early childhood special education teachers within a larger area of the city, or work at one day-care centre. Here, the role focuses more on working with the day-care groups than consulting with educators. In both roles, through their special expertise, early childhood special education teachers bring a special education perspective to the observation and assessment of children and to planning and education.



The model also highlights flexibility. The need for resources is assessed based on the expertise of consultative early childhood special education teachers and the early childhood special education teachers who work in the day-care groups, rather than on the children's diagnoses. Consultation is also offered where it is most needed. The staff's job descriptions are modified dynamically when necessary. The varying situations of day-care centres are taken into account, and evaluations are performed, even weekly, to enable quick and flexible solutions.

5.2 Staff collaboration

The staff co-operate, learn together and listen to each other. There are weekly staff meetings where they plan and co-ordinate activities. The collaboration between different professionals was visible in the way they worked with all the children in the classroom. For example, during the classroom visit, the special education teacher was welcoming all children and the class teacher was helping her. Afterwards, children were divided into different groups and they both supervised the activities. They have complementary roles and co-operate accordingly, ensuring great staff collaboration. The staff also consider that they 'are all equal' and all work with each other.

There were specific elements of staff collaboration that we must highlight. The special education teacher plays an important role in daily activities with all children. During the classroom visit, the special education teacher was working with the whole class, while the class teacher was supporting her. Both teachers knew all the children and their daily routines, interests and needs, which meant that they could co-operate on a daily basis.

Participants had the opportunity to observe a teacher managing a child's behavioural 'problems'. She managed the situation fantastically, respecting the child and letting him express himself.



6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During the visit and relevant discussions, the participants observed and appreciated the inclusive education model of Jyväskylä City and the Liinalampi Day-Care Centre, presented in this report. The education approach is inclusive for all children in the day-care centre, irrespective of their support needs. Special attention is paid to caring for the individual needs of all children in the day-care centre.

There seems to be a clear focus on human factors and on a child- and parent-centred approach. An emphasis is placed on how to change the system to better respond to children's and families' needs.

Discussions with different stakeholders confirmed the focus on recruiting highly qualified staff and promoting a teamwork approach. This approach is based on mutual trust and collaborative teaching. There is a strong belief in equality between day-care centre staff, clearly expressed by the principle 'We are all equal'.

Participants in the visit have stated that the strengths of Liinalampi Day-Care Centre are:

- a clear inclusive policy;
- inclusive values and respect for diversity;
- highly qualified staff;
- flexible curriculum;
- assessment for learning;
- co-operation of professionals;
- flexible spaces in the day-care centre.

6.1 Areas for further discussion

As Jyväskylä City and the Liinalampi Day-Care Centre strive to continue to improve their services, the visit participants made some proposals for further reflection on key areas related to inclusion:

- Transition to primary education: There seem to be some problems with transition arrangements for children with SEN/disabilities to mainstream primary schools. In Jyväskylä, all children who receive ECE can go to their closest mainstream day-care centre, irrespective of their individual support needs. However, the transition to mainstream primary education is not so easy. As such, many children have to go to special schools. Extra work is needed to extend the inclusive model to primary education.

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- Intercultural education: Participants did not see many children from different countries attending the day-care centre. It is not clear how the centre deals with different cultures. For example, all posters and words in classrooms were in the same language and they would have expected to see some use of different languages. They saw many pictures and it seems that they are used to support children's understanding. They found this very interesting and helpful.
 - Peer interaction: Participants observed that all children are engaged in play activities, regardless of their age, characteristics or additional needs. However, there was the impression that interactions between children are not strongly promoted. They could see different types of activities inside the classroom, but they could not see children talking to each other in any of them. Most of the time, children were interacting with adults/teachers. There was a lot of respect in the interaction between children and adults. The speaking turn is always respected and the tone in which they speak is pleasant and respectful. Some extra effort may be needed to promote more peer interaction.