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Special Education, Needs, and Disabilities in Primary Education (Finland)

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Research on special education, needs, and disabilities

Education in the area of basic education is intended for those who need special support, who are unable to study the subjects individually and will benefit more from teaching that focuses on promoting the student's independence. Peltomäki's (2018) study revealed that, due to a lack of clarity and to ambiguity, achieving the objectives of [disabled children](#) was difficult. In addition, evaluations lacked measurable concepts. Children with disabilities do not form a cohesive group because each child has individual needs, opportunities, and aspirations ([Vehkakoski 2006](#)).

According to Paju and colleagues (2016), teachers' qualification areas are the most important predictors of their ability to meet the needs of pupils who need special support. Pedagogical and practical knowledge and general skills of how to teach special educational needs (SEN) pupils focus on special teachers. These findings show that there is a need for further training, including in-service training, and enhanced cooperation between special and general education in order to share knowledge about the practical teaching of special education pupils ([Paju et al. 2016](#)).

Programs and policies

Inclusive education is an official educational policy in Finland whereby students with special educational needs are placed in regular schools. The model of the New Special Education Strategy was launched by the Finnish Ministry of Education in 2007. Municipalities have come up with their own strategies for providing inclusive early childhood special education based on the new model. The strategy introduced a [three-tiered student support model](#) (general, intensified, special support), which included a new phase—intensified support—between general and (officially decided) special support ([Ministry of Education 2007](#); [Thuneberg et al. 2011](#)). This model is based on response to intervention thinking (RTI; see [Salvia and Ysseldyke 2007](#)). The RTI model aims to maximize the use of school resources while also maximizing student success. In general, support is provided to all primary school pupils and is of a preventive nature. If this level of support is insufficient, then a pupil can be provided with additional support that is more concentrated, with regular monitoring of the effects of teaching on the pupil's skills. If the intensified support at this stage does not help, the teaching becomes more individual and still more concentrated. A third stage is special support and is based on pedagogical evaluation, psychological and/or medical evaluations and their results, together with discussions with all stakeholders and parents. In special support situations, the pupil is also entitled to an individualized learning plan (IEP) (see [Suhonen and Nislin 2012](#)).

Categorizing pupil needs into general, intensified, and special support at schools plays a socially important role in determining the limits of normality and abnormality (see [Honkasilta 2016](#); [Kivirauma 2015](#)). The strategy leaves the municipalities and educational institutions with considerable leeway in deciding the grouping and placement of pupils. It is also remarkable that, although a large number of pupils with special educational needs are currently studying in mainstream groups, it is still obvious that some disability groups, such as people with developmental and sensory disabilities, study in their own age groups in special schools or classes ([Jahnukainen et al. 2015](#); [Mietola 2014](#)).

Regulations

According to the Basic Teaching Act 2010, the assistance needed by a student consists of general, intensified, or special support. The pupil's educational support should form a systematic and methodical whole.

Resources

In primary and preprimary school, teachers are using intervention programs that usually concentrate on language and social-emotional skills. The Step by Step program offers a series of practical lessons and support materials designed to be implemented in the classroom ([Askeleittain 2005](#); [Neace and Munoz 2012](#)). These lessons are based on a carefully chosen developmental perspective of middle childhood and adolescence to fit the characteristics and needs of each age group or grade, from the age of six through to seventeen. A teacher can instruct children in empathy skills, self-control, and problem-solving skills, as well as emotional regulation.

KILI, a language and exercise program, is a group rehabilitation method created by Isokoski and colleagues ([2002](#)). The KILI program includes language, motor, and interaction exercises as well as a clear structure, which the method as a whole follows. The group rehabilitation program aims to rehabilitate the child as comprehensively as possible.

KUTTU is picture-supported play. KUTTU has been developed to support the development of children's language in such areas as communication, interaction, and play skills. The method is suitable for interactive play for all kinds of children. Images in the supported play are used as toys as well as communication tools. The aim is to familiarize children with the most natural image communication in a familiar environment ([Kähkönen, Lindholm, and Tahvanainen 2006](#)).

Interaction Playgroup is for children aged four to five years. The aim of the playgroup is to support a child's self-esteem and to encourage children to play. A peaceful moment is created between the child and the adult in which the child is given care, the presence of an adult, the experience of success, and a safe, structured experience.

EKAPELI is a children's learning game based on computer and mobile devices. In the game, children learn the first steps in literacy. In the first stage, the child learns the correspondence between letters and sounds. The next phase is to sound out the syllables and entire word structures. In this way, the child gradually learns to form letters first, then short words, followed by longer words. In addition, the game recognizes the child's level and knows how to help those with disabilities.

The standardized assessment tools have been tested in uniform conditions nationally on a large sample of pupils. The primary school test "ALLU" ([Lindeman 1998](#)) is a commonly used test in pupils' mother tongue. The test can be used to identify a student's reading capacities, technical literacy, and reading comprehension. It can monitor the development of literacy on an annual level and identify children in need of additional support. ARMI 1 ([Lerkanen, Poikkeus, and Ketonen 2006](#)) is a literacy assessment tool for the first grade and ARMI 2 is intended for the second grade. FINRA ([1997](#)), which tests reading and writing, was compiled from a variety of tasks to evaluate these skills.

The most commonly used test for mathematics is the Early Numeracy Test ([Luit et al. 2006](#)). The Mavalka-test ([Lampinen, Ikäheimo, and Dräger 2007](#)) is an individual task-mapping tool, which is used to identify a child's mathematics capability. These tests are also available on the Internet (see [LukiMat n.d.](#)).

Funding

Funding for special education changed in Finland at the beginning of the year 2010. The new State Aid Act removed individual and increased state aid from special category transfers. It means that the primary objectives of the governmental grants are supporting developmental, experimental, and start-up projects that produce distributed models, methods, and practices and aim for permanent operational or structural changes and improvements, including special education programs and interventions ([Vainikainen et al. 2018](#)).

Teachers and teaching

Teacher experience shows that internal emotional disturbances remain unnoticed or are noticed far less often than external emotional and behavioral disorders. Teachers carry the burden of worry of whether they will be able to provide support at the right time and in the right way for children who have psychiatric symptoms. According to teachers, it is also difficult to have sufficient time to help students in large groups ([Ojala 2017](#)). Nor do the teachers believe that they are expert enough to deal with these cases. They feel that their pupils' disabilities have a negative impact on their ability to cope with the workload. According to teachers, all of the factors mentioned above affect their ability to cope with their workloads ([Ojala 2017](#)). There is a need for teachers to receive further training, to reduce their workload, and to increase pedagogical peer support. The Finnish National Board of Education and Ministry of Education and Culture mainly finance the teachers' supplementary education, which are free for the teachers. In some inclusive classrooms, some class teachers co-teach with special teachers.

School personnel

When there are pupils with profound or special educational needs, a school assistant may be assigned to the classroom. School assistants have their own competence-based qualifications based on further vocational qualifications in learning support (the Finnish National Board of Education). On the other hand, not all municipalities require qualifications ([Eskelinen and Lundbom 2016](#)).

Each school's healthcare group is responsible for the structure, development, implementation, and evaluation of student care. The principal heads the group. The group works in collaboration with others, including a school nurse, a psychologist, a school social worker, a special teacher, and other staff members as necessary. The school nurse is responsible for recognizing the need for early support and provides the necessary support and guidance for care and research. Nurses are required to have a four-year degree from a polytechnic institution. Staff members in psychological and curatorial services support student learning and well-being, and are required to have a master's degree ([Finnish National Board of Education n.d.-b](#)).

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