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A report –
well
cooked by
the whole
group

Students with Special Needs: The Finnish Way of Action



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Group	236
Title	Students with Special Needs: The Finnish Way of Action
Theme	Transition from basic education to vocational education and training, including partnerships and professional co-operation
City, Country	Oulu, Finland
Type of visit	VET
Group reporter	Allan R Cowieson





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1: Three important insights gained from the study visit:

People use the same words but the meaning can often be quite diverse. For example, the term "inclusion" can be differently interpreted in different education systems. For some participants, inclusion was very much about children being in a mainstream setting, while for others, it means people wherever they are, feeling successful and happy. So not only must children and young people with special educational needs feel this sense of success and happiness, but those around them must also experience this same feeling. We also agreed that this must mean that those who are included feel that their contribution is valuable and valued.

It is always important to consider the historical development of educational systems and the professional and political forces that have shaped practice and perception.

Sometimes systems need to be theoretically de-constructed before authentic and lasting transformation can be achieved.

LUOVI, the host organisation developed within a national organisation that has in the past sought to address the needs of people with pulmonary disease/difficulties. It is a private organisation that is now government funded. LUOVI has seen changes in its client group due to shifts in social priorities and perceptions. The international and national move towards social and educational inclusion meant that LUOVI's client group now tend to have more severe special educational needs.

LUOVI provides centres for young people with a range of special educational needs at 27 sites across Finland. In addition to direct delivery of education and training for its client group, the centres provide research, consultation and training for other educational organisations, including state mainstream schools.

LUOVI demonstrates partnerships at a number of levels: private/public funding and service agreements; partnership working between LUOVI centres and local state schools; partnership working in multi-agency teams both within and across LUOVI centres. Clients and



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their families are seen as active participants in joint working arrangements.

As group members shared their presentations, it quickly became clear that similar challenges were felt by almost all of the countries represented. It was interesting to explore those historical factors that had brought different systems to their present form. For example, one participant explained how their current educational estate includes many specialist schools providing education for clearly diagnosed types of special educational needs: mental disability, sensory disability etc. These centres were perceived to be very effective in meeting specific needs - and this perception made it difficult for others to consider why it might be necessary to change practice or to reconstruct provision.

Provision of high-quality, meaningful vocational training was directly affected by social and professional attitudes and understandings; political priorities; national and local difficulties created by economical recession and a shrinking job-market. This was confirmed by each of the group participants.

Some of the most significant pressures on education systems lie outwith the sphere of education: unemployment, social fragmentation, poverty, immigration, etc. Education is often seen as the only way to address social problems. Some responses (for example, Germany and Finland) were evaluated by the extent to which young people progressed to productive roles within the national work-force. It was interesting to see the ways in which such transition was supported.

One example from Germany proved that separate, specialist provision could provide better outcomes for young people moving to adult working environments than more traditional, academic state schools.



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Every system has its challenges. There is no ideal, no single solution to the complex problems of social inclusion and social cohesion. Solutions can be very varied. On the one hand, separate, specialist services relating to diagnostic approaches - and on the other hand, the removal of all categories and labels and the assessment of needs within open-ended systems.

Every system presented showed evidence of careful analysis and responsible planning of local and national responses. The actual structures varied considerably, depending on unique national, regional and local factors. There was a considerable range of inclusive and exclusionary practices in operation across the different nations represented by the group - although everyone talked about moves towards inclusive education.

Where school education becomes overly driven by outside demands - for example, in Scotland, the requirements for university entrance, and in Germany, the pragmatic needs of employers - can create narrow and limited responses to educational needs. It is important to have a soundly-based philosophy to articulate the purposes and values of education. The teaching profession needs to be able to explain its own praxis. It is important to develop young people with good values and helpful attitudes (responsible citizens) - while making sure that trade and vocational skills develop that enable young people (including those with special needs) to find a productive and meaningful place within society.

Everyone was agreed that educational provision has to be flexible and open. It is important that individual learner needs can be identified and addressed, drawing on the best of both mainstream and special education. To improve the outcomes of special education, it is important to consider changes to the whole education system. There is clear evidence that conflicting values can undermine the effectiveness of educational systems.

2: Sharing good practice:

Title	The special school as a centre of service for regional community schools
Name of institution	Tervaväylä School
Contact person	Anne Martikainen (Principal)
Client group / needs addressed	Children of elementary school age who have diagnosed special educational needs
<p>Features of good practice:</p> <p>This is a separate special school that meets the needs of children and young people from across the whole of northern Finland. The school has developed as a recognised centre of excellence. Specialist staff provide an outreach training and consultancy/advisory service to support the development of special needs provision in non-specialist centres. School education, research and service combine to create a powerful climate within the special school and also well beyond its own client group. Publication of advisory and resource materials was also an important part of the school's mission.</p>	

Title	A second chance at education
Name of institution	Youth Workshops
Contact person	Anneli Koistinen and Sirpa Alapiessa
Client group / needs addressed	Disaffected young people who have dropped out of the compulsory school system - for whatever reasons.
<p>Features of good practice:</p> <p>A work-based learning centre was developed that became an attractive place for young people to attend. Young people learned and at the same time became productive. The group met a young man from Vietnam who was learning graphic design skills and was designing web-pages and advertising literature for the local council (municipality). He talked very warmly of the opportunity the workshop had offered him. He was improving his language skills in both Finnish and English, was learning new computer skills and communication skills.</p>	

Young people attend for around six months. The outcomes of the work of the centre showed that after one year around 55% were either in employment or in education.
Another feature of this provision was the work of personal counsellors

Title	HeadStart diagnostic and therapeutic movement programme
Name of institution	North Ayrshire Council Educational Services
Contact person	Allan Cowieson
Client group / needs addressed	Primary-age children (5 - 12 year old) who have or appear to have Developmental Coordination Disorders - such as Dyspraxia)
<p>Features of good practice:</p> <p>Official diagnosis of Dyspraxia in Scotland is controlled by Health Service Occupational Therapists. The waiting time for diagnosis in 2004-2005 was two years. At the same time, 80% of the referrals from primary schools were negative - that is, the children were found not to have Dyspraxia.</p> <p>The Education Department seconded a senior Occupational Therapist and a Physical Education teacher to develop a dual-purpose movement programme. For children with mild to moderate difficulties, the programme would meet their needs by providing useful therapeutic input. An assessment checklist (completed by the observing class teacher) would allow diagnostic information to be provided to the Occupational Therapy department.</p> <p>Within two years, a number of positive outcomes were measured.</p> <p>Referrals dropped by more than 50%. Referrals received were 85% positive. Waiting times fell to less than six months.</p> <p>Now, all primary schools within North Ayrshire have staff trained to implement the programme and to complete the diagnostic checklist.</p> <p>For children with mild to moderate problems, attention in class lessons improved, their confidence increased and they became better co-ordinated to join in other physical activities, thereby increasing positive social interaction.</p>	



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Title	Multi-professional support services
Name of institution	Educational Psychology Advisory Support Service
Contact person	Montserrat Caselles Grau
Client group / needs addressed	Primary and secondary schools
<p>Features of good practice: A needs-driven, proactive and responsive service which provides assessment and support for children with special educational needs, so that schools can meet their needs more effectively. The service focuses on children with special educational needs but also helps schools build capacity to manage diversity in general by operating across services. This service operates across Catalonia. The team comprises eleven professionals: eight psychologists, two social workers and a physiotherapist and an administration officer.</p>	

3: Policy development and co-operation:

3.1 common approaches, if any, that are met in all or some countries (both host and participants') regarding the theme of the visit:

Provision of alternative and flexible ways to progress through educational systems.

Multi-agency and multi-professional partnership working.

Within provision for special educational needs, there was a place for diagnostic assessment. However, the role of and the importance given to such assessment varied across the systems within the member states represented.



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The development of VET relies for its effectiveness on sound links between all stages and routes through an educational system.

All of the systems within which participants worked stressed the role of personal learning planning (Individualised Educational Planning [IEP]).

3.2 common challenges that are faced by all or some countries (both host and participants') in their effort to implement policies related to the theme of the visit:

Providing intensive, appropriate and relevant support for individual children and young people while at the same time creating the environment in which inclusive and cohesive community and social structures can thrive.

The apparent exponential rise in the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder and social, emotional (mental health) and behavioural problems.

The links beyond school systems to the labour market need to be very well-established - with available support for young people at points of transition. All participants expressed difficulties with this, particularly in the current economic climate.

Although each service is affected by limited resources, this causes professionals to be innovative, flexible and creative in the way they work together to find practical solutions.

Educational systems must be supported by national and international, political policies and decisions that take into account the real social and economical needs of client groups and that respond to these accordingly. Individual, national systems must somehow connect within a broader European system.



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Teachers were seen to have a much broader role in these new, flexible systems: managing change, changing methodologies, supporting individuals, linking with other professionals and undertaking new duties. Teachers need to be well supported as they work through the uncertainties of a rapidly changing social, cultural (inter-cultural) and professional environment.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) could be improved in all our countries. ITE needs to ensure that new teachers have a sound understanding of effective strategies and positive attitudes towards meeting the diverse needs of all children. In many countries, the education of mainstream teachers and those who have been trained for special education are separate streams.

3.3 effective and innovative solutions you have identified that the countries (both host and participants') apply to meet the challenges you mentioned in question 3.2:

In Finland, universities are about to become independent institutions and each will have to become more responsive to professional markets.

Provision of sheltered or supported living and work opportunities after formal / compulsory education has ended for a young person with special needs.

Approaches that are needs rather than category driven. Assessment is context sensitive - not only focused on within-child conditions or factors.

The flexible use of professional specialisms to build capacity to deal with student diversity within educational systems (for example educational psychologists have abandoned 'classic' ways of working - assessment - and have developed capacity-building - solution oriented practices to encourage teachers and other professionals to explore areas of difficulty and to identify a range of possible responses): so, for example, a teacher is encouraged to define the pedagogic problems within their own classroom and to construct



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possible solutions that they feel empowered to implement.

Building the capacity of schools and colleges to provide solutions to a range of special educational needs. The HeadStart programme was one example of such capacity-building (see example of good practice.)

3.4 policies and practices that can be further explored and possibly transferred to other countries:

The design, development and provision of sustainable protected work opportunities during a period of extreme economic uncertainty.

Supporting system transformation by building the capacity and readiness for change. Formal and informal group discussions explored top-down, legislated models of promoting change against bottom-up, personal and professional transformation. It was agreed that perhaps one of the most important training and process-management issues was the provision of skills to support the management of complex changes within organisations.

The whole concept of inclusion bears ongoing debate and investigation.

4. Creating networks of experts, building partnerships for future projects is another important objective of the study visit programme.

Members of the group (including hosts) have agreed to continue to share documentation around their educational systems as a means to support professional learning and development. A few group members are also arranging visits and possible joint working.