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Koulutuksen saavutettavuuden ja opiskelun aikaisen tuen arviointi
(Learners with immigrant backgrounds within the Finnish education system –
Evaluation on the access to education and the support during studies)

Editor

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Finnish legislation and school system guarantee equal opportunities for education to all Finnish residents. From the perspective of children and young people from immigrant backgrounds (in the evaluation referred to as ‘learners’), this requires accessibility and sufficiency of general support for accessibility of education, such as teaching in the language of instruction and taking into account individual needs of learners. The main questions of the evaluation are the accessibility of support and actualisation of this accessibility regarding the education range for learners with immigrant background, support at application and transitional phases, support for learning Finnish/Swedish and the learners’ native language as well as other studies during the studies.

The evaluation is based on self-evaluation of education providers of their capabilities of providing learners with immigrant backgrounds with equal opportunities to participate in common education. The evaluation focuses on teaching and education given at pre-primary education (approx. 340 education providers), basic education (approx. 350 education providers), general upper secondary education (approx. 300 education providers) and vocational upper secondary education and training (approx. 200 education providers) and which is based on the national core curriculum or vocational upper secondary qualification requirements set by the Finnish National Board of Education. In addition, the evaluation includes instruction preparing for basic education and preparatory education for vocational training as well as, with regard to free adult education (approx. 300 education providers), education based

on the national core curriculum. The principle of multi-party evaluation has been followed by directing the surveys also at teachers at these educational levels as well as upper secondary level students and by implementing evaluation visits around Finland.

Based on the evaluation results, all the education providers at all education levels evaluated are on the whole satisfied with the available education range, the smoothness of application and transitional phases as well as sufficiency and appropriateness of language studies and support for other learning for learners with immigrant backgrounds. The education providers estimated that they are quite well aware of the support needs of learners from immigrant background and felt that they have been able to meet these needs reasonably well. Consequently, it can be said that the availability of education for learners with immigrant background appeared in a reasonably positive light in the self-assessment by education providers. An exception in this evaluation focus group were education providers at all educational levels, who had 51–100 learners with immigrant background. These education providers found it considerably more difficult than others to meet the needs of the learners, which can be recognised based on both this evaluation and earlier studies.

Objectives related to learners with immigrant background or multiculturalism have been included in plans steering educational activities to varied degrees: Only little over half of education providers (56%) have included these objectives in teaching or educational strategies or equivalent plans. As strategic policies are missing, the needs of learners will be reacted to on a case-by-case basis, which is usually considered sufficient when there are at most a few dozen learners. Slightly less than a half (46%) of education providers had some practices related to learners with immigrant background (for example, teaching of Finnish/Swedish as a second language or teaching of learners' native language).

It was reported that transitional phase cooperation between pre-primary and basic education in particular works well, and well-functioning operating methods have been created for transfer of information during the transitional phase for learners with immigrant background. Learners are guided to instruction preparing for basic education usually on the basis of their language skills and this preparatory training meets the needs of learners with immigrant background well, even excellently according to education providers with more than 100 learners.

The transitional phase after basic education is challenging to young people with immigrant background, since some of them do not possess sufficient Finnish or Swedish language skills for further studies. Education range offered at this phase is considered insufficient especially in areas with many young people with immigrant background. However, both education providers and students felt that preparatory education for vocational training corresponds well with the needs of the young people. Information transfer practices between basic and upper secondary education are, however, often unestablished and vary by education provider. There is also uncertainty about

what information can be transferred and necessary information is not necessarily transferred to teachers teaching learners with immigrant background. There is a need for jointly agreed information transfer practices in vocational upper secondary education and training, in particular.

Education providers and teachers estimate that they succeeded well in taking into account the individual needs of learners in teaching of Finnish/Swedish as a second language. As a rule, teachers at all educational levels are satisfied with teaching arrangements and facilities, study materials and the ability to take into account also other goals than those related to language learning in teaching. This speaks of development in second language teaching at schools and educational institutions.

Teaching of learners' own native language is also appreciated, since it is widely arranged and a great need for it is recognised. Among other things, meeting the needs of the learners depends on the recruitment possibilities of teachers of the learner's native language, but, for example in vocational upper secondary education and training, the lack of separate funding prevents this teaching from being arranged. Furthermore, students are not always motivated to learn their own native language and do not consider the use of their native language in studies particularly important. In general, the significance of studying or support in your own language is not yet recognised at secondary level, even though practices enabling the use of one's own language are utilised in vocational upper secondary education and training, in particular.

Language awareness – supporting linguistic diversity, recognising languages of various areas of knowledge and operations of all teachers as language teachers of their own subject matter – are most closely linked with the duty of teachers of native language and Finnish/Swedish as a second language to promote the language awareness of teachers of other subjects, cooperation between language teachers and other teachers as well as utilising learning contents of other subjects in language teaching. Promotion of language awareness is well-known and natural in pre-primary education, but the establishment of work methods supporting language awareness among class and subject teachers through workshops is needed. However, teachers at all educational levels see their opportunities to participate in continuing education clearly weaker than the education providers. This kind of training is sought out primarily by individuals who are interested in the subject matter. The need for continuing education in language awareness and multiculturalism seems to be strongly tied to the number of learners with immigrant background.

In the recognition of learning difficulties, the language and cultural background of the learner with immigrant background is first taken into account followed by the stage of integration. According to the estimate of education providers and teachers, the studies of learners with immigrant background are somewhat hindered by adaptation problems related to the teaching and study culture. Reasons behind learning difficulties are thought to arise from the life situation or post-traumatic problems of the learners. The need for special needs teacher services is seen as considerably

different in the case of learners with immigrant background than among learners belonging to the native population. At upper secondary level, the need for guidance counselling is emphasised. Regardless of the challenges, these needs of individual support for learners have been met well.

It is felt at all educational levels that dissemination of information to learners with immigrant background and their families succeeds the best, when the delivery of information is ensured personally. Interpreters and communications materials translated to various languages are also frequently used in pre-primary and basic education. At the upper secondary level, there is communications cooperation with organisations and associations. The use of internet-based cooperation channels between the school and the home (for example, Wilma software) is limited by some guardians' weak skills in using electronic systems. Respondents were happy with interpreting services at all educational levels, but the services were not as well-known at upper secondary level as they are in pre-primary and basic education. All in all, the needs of learners have been successfully taken into account, but the need for interpreting services is emphasised in pre-primary and basic education due to closer cooperation between the school and the home. Parent-teacher meeting events dedicated entirely to guardians with immigrant background are not organised at any level, which is also the wish of the guardians with immigrant background. Approximately half of the respondents at pre-primary or basic education give information related to the learner in their own native language. This possibility is considerably more rare at upper secondary level. Regardless of this, both education providers the individual needs of families with immigrant background can be taken well into account in cooperation between the home and the school/educational institution.

According to education providers, cultural diversity is supported with various principles and practices starting from the school and educational institution atmosphere, taking learners into account as individuals and respecting others to personnel training, various projects, cooperation with various bodies as well as resources and strategic policies. Teachers' views on cultural diversity emphasise the atmosphere of the learning environment and the significance of various resources and support measures. Views referring to assimilation of the type "when in Rome ..." in the answer, give pause for thought about the need for education related to cultural diversity.

Development of the study environment and the attitudes of the personnel to one treasuring cultural diversity is largely a question of pedagogical and ethical leadership. Education providers, and even more so teachers, see the role of the rector as important in promotion of diversity. In addition to leadership, the development of the competence and attitudes of the personnel of schools and educational institutions play a key role in the promotion of cultural diversity. Moreover, development of pedagogical competence is also needed: specialisation and differentiation to language-aware teaching. All this requires both financial and temporal resources as well as well-functioning cooperation with guardians and other bodies.

According to students participating in the evaluation, educational institutions have an approving atmosphere, which is evident to them as good everyday practices as well as the positive and open attitude towards them exhibited by the teachers and school-mates. It is felt that the teachers have a genuine will to help and they are considered understanding and nice. It is also reasonably easy for students to get new friends both from the native population and other students with immigrant background. Based on the answers, both teachers and students belonging to the native population possess attitudinal capabilities to function in a multicultural environment.

The evaluation has led to the following development recommendations:

1. The vision and strategy of the education providers must reflect the perspectives of multiculturalism and multilingualism.
2. Cooperation between various parties and new models should be developed for the transitional phase between basic and upper secondary education.
3. Learners with immigrant background must be provided with Finnish/Swedish instruction that is aware of language in various disciplines and support in their own language in basic and upper secondary education.
4. Appreciation of cultural diversity and multilingualism as well as development of language awareness must be established as part of the operating culture of schools and educational institutions.
5. Development of competence related to linguistic and cultural diversity must be included in the basic and continuing education of all teachers.
6. The availability and accessibility of various form of educational support for learners with immigrant background must be ensured also in the future.

Keywords: learner with immigrant background, education system, access, accessibility