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Evaluation of a peaceful and safe learning environment in basic and upper secondary education

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The Basic Education Act (628/1998) and the Act on General Upper Secondary Education (629/1998) were imposed on 21 August 1998. The Basic Education Act provides for basic education and compulsory schooling, pre-primary education, voluntary additional education, instruction preparing for basic education and before- and after-school activities. The Act on General Upper Secondary Education provides for general upper secondary education based on the syllabus of basic education provided to young people and adults. The Act on Amending the Basic Education Act (1267/2013) and the Act on Amending the Act on General Upper Secondary Education (1268/2013) were imposed on 30 December 2013. These amendments to the Basic Education Act and the Act on General Upper Secondary Education are based on achieving a more peaceful and safe learning environment in both basic education and upper secondary education. The objective of the Government proposal (HE 66/2013) was to improve peaceful environment at schools and educational institutions, comprising a number of factors, extensively by amending and developing various forms of activity.

The Ministry of Education and Culture provided the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre an evaluation of peaceful and safe learning environment in November 2015. This report is targeted at general education, basic education and upper secondary education, excluding pre-primary education. The evaluation of a peaceful and safe learning environment was launched in the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre in May 2016. The evaluation was targeted at all education providers, a sample of schools and upper secondary schools and their teachers, third and eighth-graders and the second-year students of upper secondary school. The evaluation was participated by 196 education providers, 506 school-specific pupil welfare groups from basic and upper secondary education, 2,688 basic and upper secondary education teachers, 5,242 third-graders from basic education, 8,121 eighth-graders from basic education and 5,287 second-year students from upper secondary school.

The primary task of the evaluation was to produce information on the state of a peaceful and safe learning environment at schools and upper secondary schools and the impact of the new law reforms to serve as background information for the survey required by Parliament and the development of the Basic Education Act and the Act on General Upper Secondary Education. The first key task was to investigate the state of a peaceful and safe learning environment in schools and upper secondary schools from the perspective of pupils, students, teachers, schools, upper secondary schools and education providers and the operating culture, teaching policies and attitudes that support, maintain and improve it. Another key task was to collect information on how the law reforms entered into force in 2014 had been implemented in schools and upper secondary schools and how they had affected the peaceful and safe learning environment at schools and upper secondary schools.

The evaluation also examined the types of disruptive and problematic situations occurring in schools and upper secondary schools and how they could be reduced and prevented, how the rules and plans related to disruptive and problematic situations function and are followed at schools and upper secondary schools and how the disciplinary methods and interventions used in disruptive and problematic situations function at schools and upper secondary schools.

Most of the pupils and teachers included in the evaluation felt comfortable at school and liked to go there. Nearly nine out of ten third-graders, six out of ten eighth-graders and two out of three upper secondary students felt at least fairly enjoyed their classes. Most pupils felt that the teachers were skilled at teaching and, on average, at keeping up a peaceful environment in class. Both the pupils and teachers felt safe at school. According to the experiences of rectors and pupil welfare group of schools and upper secondary schools, most schools and upper secondary schools have a peaceful environment. Most education providers as well as the rectors and pupil welfare group members who responded to the survey felt that there had been no change in the disruptive and problematic situations at schools over the past two years.

According to the evaluation results, most disruptive and problematic situations occurred in secondary and comprehensive schools rather than in primary and upper secondary schools. On average, various severely disruptive and problematic situations occurred much more among eighth-graders than among third-graders and upper secondary school students. About one or two pupils out of one hundred were bullied at school every day. Boys were bullied more than girls, and there was more bullying among Finnish-speaking pupils than among Swedish-speaking pupils. Most pupils responded that violence at school occurs less than a couple of times a year.

According to the evaluation results from pupil and teacher surveys, the disruptive and problematic situations at schools were reduced and prevented by improving the comfort of pupils and teachers, peaceful environment and safety at school, developing the teaching policies and attitudes of teachers, increasing the support of other teachers and assistants, making guardians more involved in the schooling of the pupils and increasing the diversity of teaching and the involvement of pupils in school operations.

Quick intervention in disruptive and problematic situation proved to very clearly reduce and prevent disruptive and problematic situations in classrooms. According to the evaluation results, it was observed that as disruptive and problematic situations increased in the classroom, fewer teachers intervened immediately. According to the responses to the school-specific survey, disruptive behaviour was impacted the most by the teaching methods used by the teacher and the timing of the teaching. A small number of students in a class or a group, the opportunity to work in small groups or divide the class and the opportunity to have support from special needs assistants during class also appeared to improve the peaceful atmosphere.

Slightly less than nine out of ten pupils reported of being aware that there are rules and regulations at school. About one in four eighth-graders and upper secondary school students knew that the school has a plan for protecting pupils against violence, bullying and harassment, and only about one in three eighth-graders knew that the school has a plan for using disciplinary educational discussions and disciplinary methods. The involvement of pupils in drawing up rules, regulations and other plans was low. Nevertheless, the pupils found the rules and regulations functional and fair. The teachers, schools and education providers also found the rules, regulations and plans important and functional.

According to the responses, the pupils were not sufficiently aware of the means of intervention, reprimand, safety and punishment used at school and how often they are used. Slightly more than one third of the pupils felt that they had been sufficiently informed by teachers or the rector about the disciplinary and intervention methods the school may use, if necessary, to solve various disruptive or problematic situations. The use of disciplinary and intervention methods was more common in secondary and comprehensive schools. According to the evaluation results obtained from pupil and teacher surveys and the school-specific survey, disciplinary and intervention methods were distinctly more used in classes or groups of eighth-graders than those of third-graders and upper secondary school students. Disciplinary and intervention methods were used the least in upper secondary schools.

After the law reforms of 2014, more authority was granted to schools and teachers for the use of new disciplinary and intervention methods. According to the evaluation results obtained from pupil and teacher surveys and the surveys of schools and education providers, new disciplinary and intervention methods were used very seldom at schools but they were found functional and efficient in preventing disruptive and problematic situations. All the respondent groups felt that a disciplinary educational discussion was a functional intervention method. Confiscating a disruptive object from a pupil was also considered an effective intervention method. Checking the pupil's possessions and clothing was considered more efficient among teachers than among education providers and schools. According to schools and teachers, the use of disciplinary and intervention methods has not increased over the past two years: most schools reported that the use had remained unchanged, and about one third of primary and secondary school teachers and four out of ten upper secondary school teachers felt that the use of disciplinary and intervention methods had remained unchanged.