LITERACY IN FINLAND
COUNTRY REPORT
SHORT VERSION

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1 Introduction

This report on the state of literacy in Finland is one of a series produced in 2015 and 2016 by ELINET, the European Literacy Policy Network. ELINET was founded in February 2014 and has 78 partner organisations in 28 European countries. ELINET aims to improve literacy policies in its member countries in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. One major tool to achieve this aim is to produce a set of reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive reports on the state of literacy in each country where ELINET has one or more partners, and to provide guidance towards improving literacy policies in those countries. The reports are based (wherever possible) on available, internationally comparable performance data, as well as reliable national data provided (and translated) by our partners.

ELINET continues the work of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (HLG) which was established by the European Commission in January 2011 and reported in September 2012. All country reports produced by ELINET use a common theoretical framework which is described here: “ELINET Country Reports – Frame of Reference”.

The Country Reports are organised around the three recommendations of the HLG’s literacy report:

- Creating a literate environment
- Improving the quality of teaching
- Increasing participation, inclusion (and equity).

Within its two-year funding period ELINET has completed Literacy Country Reports for all 30 ELINET member countries. In most cases we published separate Long Reports for specific age groups (Children / Adolescents and Adults), in some cases comprehensive reports covering all age groups. Additionally, for all 30 countries, we published Short Reports covering all age groups, containing the summary of performance data and policy messages of the Long Reports. These reports are accompanied by a collection of good practice examples which cover all age groups and policy areas as well. These examples refer to the European Framework of Good Practice in Raising Literacy Levels; both are to be found in the section “Good Practice”.

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1 For more information about the network and its activities see: www.eli-net.eu.
2 In the following, the final report of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy is referenced as “HLG report”.
3 This report can be downloaded under the following link: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf.
4 “Equity” was added by ELINET.
2 General Information about the Finnish Education System

In Finland, education is considered to be one of the fundamental rights of all citizens, and the aim of the Finnish education policy is to offer all citizens equal opportunities to receive education, regardless of age, domicile, financial situation or mother tongue. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015a.) The structure of the education system reflects this principle as it has no dead-ends. Students can always continue to an upper level of education, regardless of the choices they make in between. For instance, both general and vocational upper secondary certificates provide eligibility for higher education. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015b.)

The general objectives of basic education and the allocation of instructional time between different subjects are determined by the government. The National Board of Education, which is subordinate to the Ministry of Education and Culture, decides on the objectives and contents of instruction in different subjects, recording them in a national curriculum. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2015a.) Most education and training is publicly funded, and most primary and upper secondary level institutions are maintained by municipalities or federations of municipalities. Private schools receive the same level of public funding as the publicly-funded schools. There are no tuition fees at any level of education. In basic education also school materials, school meals and in some cases also transport are provided free of charge. In upper secondary education students pay for their books and transport. In addition, there is a well-developed system of study grants and loans. Financial aid can be awarded for full-time study in upper secondary education and in higher education. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2015a.)

Municipalities as education providers have a significant amount of freedom in organizing the schooling within the guidelines provided by the Ministry and the National Board (Finnish National Board of Education, 2015a). Governance is based on the principle of decentralisation since the early 1990s. Education providers are responsible for practical teaching arrangements as well as the effectiveness and quality of the education provided. Local authorities also determine how much autonomy is passed on to schools. For example budget management, acquisitions and recruitment are often the responsibility of the schools. Additionally, schools (and teachers) have autonomy regarding the pedagogical practices used. Teachers’ autonomy extends to assessment as well, comprising of both continuous (formative) assessment and the final assessment. Teachers are responsible for assessment in their respective subjects on the basis of the objectives included in the curriculum. The focus in education in Finland is on learning rather than testing, and there are no national high-stakes tests for pupils in basic education in Finland. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2015a.)

Before compulsory education begins, the child participates in one-year pre-primary education which since August 2015 is obligatory. Compulsory education usually starts in the year when a child turns seven. The scope of the basic education syllabus is nine years, and nearly all children complete this by attending the comprehensive school. The upper secondary level comprises general and vocational education. Both have a three-year syllabus. The general upper secondary school ends in the matriculation examination which provides eligibility for higher education studies in both polytechnics and universities. Also the vocational upper secondary qualification gives general eligibility for all higher
education. Commonly admission to higher education is based on the results in the matriculation examination and entrance tests. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2015a.)

Figure 1: Education system in Finland

![Education system in Finland](source)

Finland has built its educational system based on the principle of equity. By focusing on high-quality basic education for all, Finland has succeeded in fostering the individual potential of almost every child. There are hardly any private schools and no gifted programmes thus the general education can be said to offer equal opportunity to every child. Learning and education is compulsory, attending school is not. Parents have the right to teach their own children, in such cases evaluation is performed by professional teachers. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2015a.) This option is seldom exercised.

3 Literacy Performance Data

Finland participated in IEA’s PIRLS (4th graders reading comprehension) only in 2011, in OECD’s PISA (15 year-olds’ reading literacy) since 2000, and in OECD’s PIAAC (adults’ reading literacy) in 2012. This means it is possible to describe the changes over time in average reading proficiency, according to different characteristics of the readers for 15 year-olds, and to compare relative reading levels of proficiencies for different age groups. Finland took part only in the last PIRLS cycle: no trends can be reported in that case.

In PISA 2012, Finland performed well above the EU average (524 vs 489 EU average). However, despite this relatively good performance, a small decline was observed between 2000 and the two last PISA cycles (-22 score points between 2000 and 2012), namely the equivalent of a half-year of schooling.

In PISA 2012, a limited proportion of pupils (11%) can be considered as low-performing readers. This is less than in EU countries on average (20%). These students can read simple texts, retrieve explicit information, or make straightforward inferences, but they are not able to deal with longer or more complex texts, and are unable to interpret beyond what is explicitly stated in the text. The proportion of low-performing readers increased between 2000 and 2012 (by 4%). This increase was observed mainly among boys (from 11% of low-performers in 2000 to 17.7% in 2012). Data point to 4.6% of low performers among girls in 2012; they were 3.2% in 2000, indicating a shorter increase. The proportion of top-performing readers was 13% in PISA, higher than the EU average (7%).

The gap according to the pupils’ socioeconomic background was lower than the EU average (61 vs 89 on average). In PIRLS, this gap is lower as well (54 vs 76 on EU average). However, the indices of socioeconomic background are not the same in PIRLS and PISA, so the comparison should be taken with caution. These data tend to indicate that the Finnish educational system is more equitable than most of the European countries.

In PISA 2009, the gap between native students and students with a migrant background was higher than in EU countries on average (70 vs 38 EU-average). The percentage of students with an immigrant background was very low (2.6% vs 8.3% in EU). The gap between students speaking the test language at home and those reporting another language was higher than the EU average (61 vs 54).

The gender gap (in favour of girls) was higher in Finland (55 vs 44 on average) than the corresponding EU average differences. The decrease in reading performance observed between 2000 and 2012 was stronger among boys (- 26 score points) than among girls (- 15 score points), resulting in an increase of the gender gap, with a peak at 62 points in 2012.

In conclusion for PISA, Finland is a highly performing education system: 15 year-olds performed much better than EU countries on average, leading the country among the top countries in the ranking. Despite a gradual decrease, it has remained well above the EU average over time. Its advantage still reaches 35 points, namely nearly one year of schooling. It was 55 points at the beginning of the study in 2000. The proportion of low-performing readers is lower and the proportion of top-performing readers is higher than the EU average. The decrease of the overall performance and the increase in the percentage of low performers were more significant among boys. However, it should not be a source of major concern as their performance is still well above the EU average.

The spread of achievement (gap between low and top performing readers) is lower than in the EU on average.
The gap according to migration or language spoken at home tends to be somewhat higher in Finland than in the EU on average. Nevertheless, it should be underlined that Finland has a percentage of students with an immigrant background, and a percentage of students speaking another language at home which is very low in comparison to EU countries on average. The gap according to socioeconomic status and migration background is much lower than in the EU on average in both studies. The Finnish educational system is then more effective, but also more equitable than in EU countries on average.

In PIRLS 2011, Finnish pupils performed well above the EU average (568 vs 535 EU-average), leading their country at the top of the ranking, with an advantage on the EU mean equivalent to one year of schooling. The proportion of low performing readers was well below the EU average (8% vs 20%). The proportion of good readers was much higher than in EU-countries (18% vs 9%).

The mean score difference between students who always spoke the language of the test at home and those who sometimes or never did so was slightly higher than the EU average (28 vs 26). The mean score difference according to the gender was in PIRLS 2011 equal to 21, somewhat higher than the EU-average (12), namely the equivalent of a half-year of schooling.

As far as adults are concerned, Finland performed above the EU average in PIAAC (288 vs 271). It should be remembered that only 17 EU countries took part in PIAAC in 2012, so the comparison with other age groups should be taken with caution. The spread of achievement – namely the gap between top and bottom performers – was somewhat wider in Finland than the EU-17-Average (123 vs 117 on average). The proportion of adults performing at or below level 1 in Finland was 11%, less than the EU-17 average (16.4%).

The performances of females and males were very close (289 vs 286); the gender gap was very slightly higher in Finland (3 score points) than in the EU on average (2 score points). The mean score difference was in favour of females which is coherent with what is observed in younger generations even if the difference with the EU average was higher among 4th grade and 15 year-old students. The gap according to parents’ level of education was exactly the same as in the EU countries on average (41), whereas in PIRLS and PISA, this gap was much lower than in the EU on average. The gap according to the language spoken at home was somewhat different: the gap between native and non-native speakers was larger than the EU-17-average (38 vs 28).
4 Key Literacy Policy Areas for Development (age-specific and across age-groups)

4.1 Creating a Literate Environment

The EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy stated the following in relation to creating a more literate environment:

“Creating a more literate environment will help stimulate a culture of reading, i.e. where reading for pleasure is seen as the norm for all children and adults. Such a culture will fuel reading motivation and reading achievement: people who like to read, read more. Because they read more, they read better, and because they read better they read more: a virtuous circle which benefits individuals, families and society as a whole.” (HLG report 2012, p. 41).

Parents play a central role in children’s emergent literacy development. They are the first teachers, and shape children’s language and communication abilities and attitudes to reading by being good reading role models, providing reading materials, and reading to the child.

Schools play an important role in offering a literate environment for students. Schools may foster reading motivation and reading for pleasure in many ways. However, schools do not have sole responsibility. A broad range of actors may shape literacy motivation, from parents and peers to libraries. Particularly this is true in adolescence as it is a crucial phase in life where young people develop long-term identities and self-concepts related to reading and media use (Cf. ELINET Country Reports, Frame of Reference, pp. 29ff, 45f).

4.1.1 Pre-Primary Years

Creating a literate environment at home: The home learning environment, particularly in the first three years, is extremely important (Brooks et al. 2012). It determines the quantity and quality of interactions between the infant and the primary caregivers, who are the most powerful agents of language development, both receptive and expressive, in the context of everyday activities and experiences. During these years, experience-dependent creation of synapses is maximal. We know that the more words the children are exposed to, the more they can learn. Caregiver-child relations in their turn strongly influence the ability to learn, by influencing self-esteem, general knowledge and motivation.

Overall, the literate environment at home in Finland supports reading development as parents on average have a positive attitude towards reading, educational resources as well as the number of books at home are relatively high, and children are read relatively often before school-age (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Drucker, 2012). However, parents’ awareness of the role the home can have in reading development of the children should be addressed. Particularly, parents should be encouraged to continue to read to their children, also after school start, and they should be aware of the benefits of early literacy activities other than reading to children, such as verbal interaction and playing games with words and shapes.
4.1.2 Children and Adolescents

Creating a literate environment in school: According to PIRLS 2011 Encyclopaedia, there is major emphasis on reading for pleasure in the intended language/reading curriculum in Finland (Sulkunen, 2012). According to PIRLS 2011, children’s books are used as a supplement in teaching for a vast majority of students, as are reading series. Moreover, the proportion of students using computer software as a supplementary learning material is clearly above EU average. However, textbooks and workbooks dominate among resources Finnish teachers use for teaching reading (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Drucker, 2012, p. 236). Similar results about the dominating role of textbooks have also been reported for lower secondary schools (Luukka et al., 2008).

Based on data provided by their teachers, PIRLS 2011 shows that half the pupils in Finland were in classrooms which had class libraries – well below the corresponding EU-24 average (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Drucker, 2012, p. 240). Despite the active cooperation between public libraries and schools, classroom libraries should be invested in to guarantee every child an easy access to diverse reading materials.

Offering digital literacy learning opportunities in schools (and other public spaces, e.g. libraries): Finnish schools have above-average levels of ICT infrastructure. In primary grades, according to PIRLS 2011, Finnish students use computers for information search and writing stories more often than their peers in Europe. However, in lower secondary grades, the use of ICT is below-average. The percentage of students that claim to use ICT in class at least weekly is below the EU average at all levels (European Commission 2013). Thus, there is need to improve ICT use for pedagogical purposes. Therefore the Finnish Government has introduced digitalisation in education as one of its special investment areas (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015e). There is also a need to integrate ICT skills and digital literacy into teacher training for all teachers.

The role of public libraries: Public libraries are an important agent in reading promotion. Schools and libraries have a long tradition of collaboration in Finland. The Ministry of Education and Culture emphasises in its Library policy 2015 that library staff ought to have expertise and training to meet new challenges in our rapidly changing information society, and to be able to provide guidance on information searching and management to students. Library services should be of high quality and meet the needs of inhabitants in their area, in order to diminish a digital gap and marginalisation in terms of the information society (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2009). Libraries offer various materials, for they wish to serve everybody in their area. Books and printed materials will have a central position in library materials for a long time to come, but libraries are already seeking ways to provide more for children and youth, who are more accustomed to information technology and non-printed materials.

Literate environments for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples: The Finnish Reading Centre organises innovative and successful reading campaigns in Finland. Their basic activity is organising author visits for instance to schools amounting to over a 1000 events each year. The Finnish Reading Centre also has annual campaigns, the most visible of which is “Lukuviikko” (Reading Week). In the campaign schools, libraries and other organisations organise campaigns, events and other ways of promoting reading during one week each Spring. In April 2015, the Reading Centre initiated a programme called 100 authors, thousands of encounters to widen the scope of the author visits. In this programme authors have met their readers in several diverse settings: for example a

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children’s novelist has visited a kindergarten’s parents’ meeting, and a comic artist has presented his work to future graphic designers. The authors also visit prisons, hospitals and residents’ meetings.

In the national Lukuinto-programme (Joy of reading), schools and libraries have worked together to start and consolidate their cooperation. The participants have gathered and improved concrete ideas to take away to their own libraries and schools. For sharing good practices, Lukuinto-programme has organised training events together with Regional State Administrative Agencies. Local and national media have followed Lukuinto events around Finland and the reading status of Finnish children and young people is seen as an important topic in the media. The President of the Republic Sauli Niinistö is the patron of the Lukuinto theme year in 2015. Additionally, Lukuinto ambassadors, authors Siri Kolu and Aleksi Delikouras, as well as librarian Agneta Möller-Salmela visit schools and libraries during the Lukuinto theme year - also virtually. Ideas tested and produced for cooperation between schools and libraries as well as for use at home can be found on the Lukuinto website.

4.1.3 Adults

Fostering literacy provision for adults: The basic right to education in Finland is entrenched in the Constitution. Public authorities must secure equal opportunities for every resident in Finland to access education after compulsory schooling and to develop themselves, irrespective of their financial standing. Legislation provides for compulsory schooling and the right to free pre-primary and basic education. In Finland, liberal adult education has the task of responding to changing educational needs and of strengthening social cohesion, active citizenship and the conditions for lifelong learning. This responsibility includes responding to the educational needs of immigrants, those who need educational rehabilitation, the unemployed and senior citizens.

Adult literacy provision in Finland is part of the basic education provision for adults and the integration education.

Adults can attend basic education in adult upper secondary schools, or in folk high schools. Adult upper secondary schools provide basic and general upper secondary education for adults, including the opportunity to improve existing grades. Individual upper secondary schools for adults may specialise in specific courses or in the instruction of specific adult target groups. Some upper secondary schools have groups or classes specifically for adults; in others adults study together with younger learners. Classes in these schools normally take place in the evenings, whereas those in folk high schools usually take place during the day, and include boarding options. In larger adult folk high schools, it is possible to follow lower year classes in English, mathematics and Finnish as a second language. There are about 40 adult upper secondary schools, and 30 folk high schools, offering basic education to adults. Some prisons also provide basic education.

Funding for basic education forms part of statutory government transfers to local authority basic services, which are managed by the Ministry of Finance. The education provider makes the decisions on the use of central Government transfers. This funding is not earmarked.
4.2 Improving the Quality of Teaching

The quality of teaching consists of several aspects:

- the quality of preschool
- coherent literacy curricula
- high-quality reading instruction,
- early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners
- highly qualified teachers (cf. Frame of Reference for ELINET Country Reports).

Particularly crucial is the quality of teaching and of teachers, as the McKinsey report *How the world best performing school systems come out on top* (McKinsey et al. 2007) states: “The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers”.

4.2.1 Pre-Primary Years

**The quality of preschool education:** In Finland, every child has a subjective right to early childhood education and care, regardless of the family’s situation. Additionally, high quality care has been provided with relatively small expenditure (Eurostat, 2014), and pre-school teachers in Finland must have, at a minimum, a 3-year university degree. Compared to other European countries this is a high level of qualification. However, the government has recently (in October 2015) suggested a new law in which the subjective right to early childhood education and care is limited to 20 hours per week. Children whose parents are working, whose family circumstances, or whose development require it, would still be entitled to full-day care. Additionally, the government suggests that the ratio of children to teachers is changed from 7 to 8 children per one adult in the groups consisting of children aged 3 or older (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015c). If realised, these changes in legislation will likely affect the groups most in need of special support.

**Preschool language and literacy curriculum:** In Finland, fostering the development of emergent literacy skills is an important function of pre-school institutions, providing a basis for formal literacy instruction in primary school. It is emphasised that children are motivated to participate in emergent literacy activities implemented in meaningful and communicative contexts in order to understand the functions of spoken and written language (Finnish National Board of Education, 2010a, p. 10-11). The national curriculum instructs that children in pre-primary education should be frequently involved in reading and writing activities. They should be aware that print carries the message and be able to grasp written language in accordance with his or her own abilities. They should have been provided with different types of printed materials and have the opportunities to read alone and together with other children or adults (Eurydice, 2011, p. 55-56; Finnish National Board of Education, 2010a, p. 10). The aim is that the classroom environment provides children with rich linguistic stimuli and enables the implementation of activities which support children’s linguistic development. Furthermore, children’s literacy skills are improved by a learning environment which enhances their exposure to diverse texts.

4.2.2 Children and Adolescents

**Literacy Curricula and Reading instruction in schools:** Finnish national curricula for different school and grade levels emphasise literacy in an age-appropriate way. Reading engagement, that is reading for pleasure, and the wide concept of texts is emphasised throughout educational levels. At pre-school level the emphasis is on emergent literacy and play-like activities. In primary school the curriculum focuses on teaching reading using phonics but also reading comprehension strategies are introduced.
already in grades 1 to 2. In lower secondary grades, students are expected to develop further their reading strategies, engage in increasingly diverse literacy activities, and adopt critical literacy, also evaluate texts in information search contexts (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). In upper secondary level, literacy has a particularly strong focus on academic track but also in vocational curriculum literacy integrated to the field of study has a role.

Strength of the Finnish school is that it has succeeded in providing students with a relatively good level of competence, on average. However, there is some evidence, e.g. from PIRLS 2011, that the implemented curriculum does not meet the requirements of the intended one, particularly when it comes to reading strategies which have a strong position in the intended curriculum but are taught less frequently than in the EU on average (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Drucker, 2012). This is something the teacher educators should pay attention to. Additionally, instruction has not succeeded in engaging and motivating students in learning to the same extent. Indeed, one of the challenges of the Finnish school is to respond to the low motivation for school work and low level of engagement of students. As a response to the declining trend in learning outcomes and relatively poor motivational results, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture launched the national development programme Basic education of the future – Let’s turn the trend! The overall aim of the project was to provide analysis and recommendations for updating the Finnish basic education for the 21st century. One of the central themes of the project was motivation and teaching (Ministry of Education and Culture 2015d).

**Digital literacy as part of the curriculum for primary and secondary schools:** ICT competence is explicitly mentioned in the new Finnish national curriculum as a cross-curricular topic to be integrated into all school-subjects. Additionally, the cross-curricular competence of multiliteracy has a strong element of digital literacy as it introduces a wide concept of texts and literacy by emphasising multiple forms of cultural communication and using literacy in its many forms in multiple situations and contexts (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). Digital literacy has a strong position also in media literacy which has a long tradition in the national curriculum. The Good Media Literacy Plan is intended to promote media literacy from 2013 to 2016. Finland is one of the few countries that have a governmental media education authority, the MEKU (Department for Media Education and Audiovisual Media) within the Ministry of Education and Culture (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2004). Additionally, Finnish schools feature extremely high levels of infrastructure provision compared to other EU countries. The majority of students enjoy excellent technological equipment and internet connectivity. However, the number of teachers who apply ICT in at least 25% of lessons is below EU average at grade 8 and slightly above at grade 11 general and vocational. The percentage of students that claim to use ICT (that is school computer, own laptop, own mobile phone) in class at least weekly is below the EU average at all levels (European Commission 2013).

**Early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners:** Identifying special educational needs is mainly based on early identification in Finland. This is a duty of school and teachers, who are required to also work together with parents (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 62–63). There are several standardised tests available for reading assessment in early school years, but some for young people as well. Their use is not obligatory but depends on the decisions made at school. In Finnish primary schools, diagnostic testing of reading is practised somewhat regularly (see Sulkunen, 2012).

PIRLS offers some data concerning issues of remedial instruction in primary schools. Finnish teachers estimated that 12.3% of students in fourth grade in Finland are in need of remedial reading instruction while a somewhat smaller proportion of students receives it. In Finland, 7.9% of students in fourth
grade performed at or below the PIRLS low benchmark on overall reading. Hence, the percentage of students in Finland receiving remedial reading instruction is slightly greater than the percentage performing poorly on PIRLS.

In Finland, students have a legal right to adequate support for learning. Support is divided into general, intensified and special extents. General support refers to every pupil’s right to receive good quality education that takes their abilities and needs into account. Remedial teaching, with individualised learning tasks and use of time as well as guidance and counselling, is a part of this (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). Intensified support is for students who need continuous support in their instruction. Support measures are tailored specifically for the student with the aims of systematically facilitating the student’s learning and preventing problems from accumulating (Finnish National Board of Education, 2010b). According to teacher responses in PIRLS 2011, 99.4% of students in Finland are in classes where there is always or sometimes access to specialised professionals to work with students who have reading difficulties, compared with an EU-24 average of 66.7%.

Overall, most Finnish students in the need of support receive it, particularly at primary grades. However, as according to the PISA results the proportion of struggling readers has increased steadily and currently, for instance, nearly every fifth boy is placed on low levels of literacy at the age of 15, it is evident that these students’ individual needs have not been successfully met. There are several possible explanations starting from lower resources for support in lower secondary stage to traditional pedagogical solutions that do not engage students in reading and learning. Also the specialised support may place too much emphasis on basic reading and cognitive skills, leaving aspects related to motivation and self-concept to the side. In all, there seems to be rather a strong view among Finnish researchers that pedagogical culture in the Finnish school should be developed into a more engaging direction (see e.g. Ouakrim-Soivio, Rinkinen & Karjalainen, 2015).

**The quality of pre-service and in-service teacher training:** In Finland, teachers are highly educated. The decree stipulates that all teachers shall have a Master’s degree (Government Decree on University Degrees, 2004). According to PIRLS 2011, 82% of fourth grade students have teachers who completed a Postgraduate University Degree. Teachers have good knowledge of the most recent research about learning and pedagogy. They also have competencies to develop their teaching using methods and approaches of scientific inquiry. However, according to TALIS 2013, only 8 percent of the teachers in lower secondary level do research (Taajamo, Puhakka & Välijärvi, 2014).

Teachers are obliged to participate in an in-service training for one to five days a year according to the relevant statutes and collective agreements. According to PIRLS 2011, 68% of Finnish 4th-graders had teachers who spent no time in CPD related to reading two years prior to the study (EU-24 average 29%) (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Drucker, 2012, p. 196). Finnish teachers in general participate in CPD less frequently than on average and use relatively little time for the CPD. According to the TALIS 2013 study, 79 per cent of the Finnish lower secondary school teachers participated in CPD during the year prior to the study which was below the international average (88 %) (Taajamo, Puhakka & Välijärvi 2014, 33).

In recent years, teachers’ participation in in-service training has decreased, and there is clearly an urgent need for more systematic and frequent CPD. The Ministry of Education and Culture has started to emphasise teachers’ professional development by doubling the funding for this purpose and launching a new development program (Ministry of Education and Culture 2015e). The themes both initial teacher education programmes and the continuous professional development activities should
address include at least the following: Firstly, literacy expertise should become a clear standard for teacher education in all grades and subjects, since the new national curriculum for basic education explicitly introduces disciplinary literacy in the framework of multiliteracy as a cross-curricular competence which all subjects integrate with their content. Secondly, since class and subject teachers have a central role in providing general and intensified support for students that struggle, teacher education and professional development activities should be developed and offered accordingly. Thirdly, use of ICT for pedagogical purposes should be a priority in improving teachers’ competences since it is lagging behind despite the relatively high level of infrastructure in ICT.

**Improving the quality of literacy instruction: Programmes, initiatives and examples:** A strength of the Finnish school is that it has succeeded in providing students with a relatively good level of competence, at least on average. However, instruction has not succeeded in engaging and motivating students in learning to the same extent. As a response to the declining trend in learning outcomes and relatively poor motivational results, the Finnish Ministry of education and culture launched the national development program **Basic education of the future – Let’s turn the trend**! The overall aim of the project was to provide analysis and recommendations for updating the Finnish basic education to the 21st century. The report produced by 45 experts based on a research review included several proposals for developing basic education (Ministry of Education and Culture 2015d). The report underlines the need to develop a **new pedagogical culture** that would support both collaborative and individual learning. Instead of studying facts in discrete school subjects, learning should be a phenomenon-based activity across the curriculum in which students have an opportunity for “voice and choice”, participation and active role (e.g. Harinen et al., 2015, p. 75). The new curriculum for basic education takes the first steps in this direction, but to change the pedagogical culture of the schools requires time and support from e.g. teacher training and teachers’ professional development provisions.

Also, the **Lukuinto-programme** (Joy of Reading) targets the reading motivation and multiliteracy competence of children and young people aged 6–16 years. In the Lukuinto project, schools and libraries work together to develop novel models and improve existing practices that promote multiliteracy, new reading and writing skills, as well as reading enjoyment. The best practices are gathered into an online material and idea bank, which is directed at teachers, library experts, parents and other educators (Lukuinto, 2015).

In the **new national curriculum** for basic education, literacy has an even stronger role than before, since it has a separate chapter in the common part concerning all school subjects. The concept of multiliteracy is introduced as a cross-curricular competence aimed at all subjects throughout basic education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 21–22).

For supporting the pupils struggling with reading, **game-like approaches** have proven to be effective. Especially for struggling learners and children starting to learn to read a digital gaming environment GraphoGame provides extra training in early reading skills. The game can be downloaded free of charge and used both in schools and homes.

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4.2.3 Adults

Monitoring the quality of adult literacy providers: There is no national inspection service in Finland. Instead, responsibility for monitoring the quality of education, from early childhood to higher education, sits with the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). FINEEC comprises an Evaluation Council, a Higher Education Evaluation Committee and units for the evaluation of general education, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education.

Given the prevalence of local autonomy in education in Finland, there are also no national quality standards. Education providers are responsible for all practical teaching arrangements but also for monitoring the effectiveness and quality of the education provided. The current educational legislation is based on a principle of decentralisation where self-evaluation by providers and external evaluations by national expert bodies form the basis of quality assurance. The activities of education providers are guided by objectives laid down in legislation as well as the national core curricula. The system relies on the proficiency of teachers and other personnel. Education providers are thus afforded a great deal of freedom in matters of quality management, including the methods used and the frequency of the quality assurance measures.

At the end of the literacy training, adult migrants are assessed in relation to the objectives set for training as a whole, using the assessment checklist in the National Curriculum for Curriculum Training for Adult Migrants. Certificates are awarded on completion of the training.

Developing curricula for adult literacy: The National Core Curriculum for Adult Basic and Upper Secondary Education states that the basis for provision must be the understanding that adult learners build their learning upon previous life experiences and the skills and knowledge basis they have previously acquired (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014).

In Finland, the national core curriculum is a framework for making local curricula. It determines a common structure and basic guidelines that the local curriculum makers, school officials and teachers use in order to build a local, context-driven curriculum. This gives the core curriculum a dual role: on one hand it is an administrative steering document, on the other a tool for teachers to develop their own pedagogical praxis (Vitikka, Kroksfors, & Hurmerinta).

Training providers are responsible for taking each student’s different learning abilities and needs into account when creating teaching groups. In Finland textbooks and other learning materials are not authorised by the government. The schools and teachers themselves decide on the material and textbooks used.

Improving the qualification and status of teachers of adult literacy: Adult educators may work as general education teachers, secondary or vocational education teachers, teachers in higher education institutions, teachers of short-term educational courses, teachers of immigrant groups in several institutions or as special needs, or reading and writing teachers among adults. There are also teachers working in non-formal education institutions, such as educational centres.

All teachers enjoy fairly high status/reputation in Finnish society. Adult educators draw a similar average salary to teachers working in compulsory education.

Adult educators must have a Master’s degree, with at least 60 credits in the subject they teach and 60 credits in general pedagogy studies. Institutions providing education may choose whether teachers there need some additional specialised qualifications. For vocational education, teachers need a higher education degree and at least three years of working experience. For the drive for literacy (voksne
Innvandrere Kreves) only general teacher education is required, i.e. postgraduate (MA). There is no separate formation for adult literacy teachers.

20 million Euros of the Ministry of Education and Culture’s expenditure in adult education goes to continuing education for teaching staff in order to develop their professional competences. Continuing education for teaching staff with an immigrant background is a priority: for this purpose the government allocates 1.5 million Euros annually. Every year universities and other providers organise shorter and longer courses for teachers in literacy education.

4.3 Increasing Participation, Inclusion and Equity

The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy drew attention to persistent gaps in literacy, namely the gender gap, the socio-economic gap, and the migrant gap (HLG Final report 2012, pp. 46–50). These gaps derive from the reading literacy studies that repeatedly show unequal distribution of results among groups of children and adolescents (PIRLS, PISA).

Performance gaps in Finland and on average across the EU-24 are shown in Figures 1 and 2. The figures show a below-average socio-economic gap and an above-average gender gap on both primary and post-primary level. The language gap is close to average at primary level but at post-secondary level, the gap between native students and migrants as well as second language learners is above the average.

Figure 2: Performance Gaps in Finland and on Average across the EU-24 - Primary Level

Education: University – Lower Secondary or lower; Language: Language of test spoken always – sometimes/never; Gender: Girls – Boys.
4.3.1 Pre-Primary Years

Encouraging preschool attendance, especially for disadvantaged children: The benefits of attending preschool institutions have been highlighted in many studies. The duration of attendance is associated with greater academic improvement (Mullis et al. 2012). However, Finland is the only country participating in PIRLS 2011 where there is no correlation between children’s reading performance in grade 4 and the length of preschool education attendance. This may be partly explained by the fact that many educated mothers use their right to stay home until the children turn 3. PIAAC data shows that adults staying home have very high literacy proficiency, as the proportion of high-performers in this group (36 %) is higher than in other groups, including those at full-time work or students (Malin, Sulkunen & Laine, 2013, p. 52). Good educational resources at home could thus partly explain the relatively good performance of the small number of children cared at home.

In Finland, every child has a subjective right to early childhood education and care, regardless of the family’s situation. However, the government has recently (in October 2015) suggested a new law in which the subjective right to early childhood education and care is limited to 20 hours per week. Children whose parents are working, whose family circumstances or whose development require would still be entitled to full-day care. Additionally, the government suggests that the ratio of children to teachers is changed from 7 to 8 children per one adult in the groups consisting of children aged 3 or older (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015c). If realised, these changes in legislation will likely affect the groups most in need of special support.

Identification of and support for preschool children with language difficulties: Children in Finland with an immigrant background may participate in pre-primary education that has been organised in conjunction with other pre-primary education, in the form of instruction preparing for basic education, or as a combination of these (Finnish National Board of Education, 2010a, p. 47). These children differ in terms of linguistic and cultural origin, the reason for immigration and the duration of residence.
According to the national curriculum for the pre-primary education, children’s backgrounds will be the starting point of instruction but in general, instruction will comply with the objectives of pre-primary education. In addition, there are specific objectives for immigrant education, for instance pre-primary education needs to support development of the Finnish/Swedish language, and that of the children’s own native language, and the opportunity to grow into two cultures. Supporting children’s own culture aims at children becoming aware of the cultural heritage of their own ethnic group and learning to appreciate it.

According to the national curriculum, instruction of Finnish/Swedish as a second language aims at children achieving functional skills in the Finnish/Swedish language during basic education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2010a, p. 48). Pre-primary is one of the first steps in this process. In pre-primary education, children have the opportunity to study Finnish/Swedish both under guidance and in natural communication situations with Finnish/Swedish-speaking adults and children. Additionally, pre-primary education aims at integrating children into Finnish culture. This instruction and the learning processes of children’s native language are to be interwoven with all areas of pre-primary education.

Compensating socio-economic and cultural background factors: Finland has a low child poverty rate and on average a relatively high educational level. So far, there has been a relatively small number of migrant families, but the number of these families will increase significantly. Responding to the educational needs of migrants of different ages will be a challenge in the near future.

### 4.3.2 Children and Adolescents

**Support for migrant children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school:** According to the national curriculum, instruction of Finnish/Swedish as a second language aims at children achieving functional skills in the Finnish/Swedish language during basic education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2010a, p. 48). Additionally, immigrant children have a right to similar support in case of e.g. learning disabilities than other children. When the pupils are already integrated in the mainstream classes, they still have an opportunity to attend Finnish as a second language instruction in case the school provides such instruction. In bigger cities and in the areas with a larger immigration population (e.g. in Eastern Finland with a large Russian immigrant population) this is usually provided, but in small municipalities or schools where there are only few immigrant pupils, separate Finnish as a second language classes seldom exist. The same can be said about home language instruction, which is usually arranged only in big schools with a relatively big proportion of immigrant pupils having the same home language.

Support for both mother tongue and language of the school is one of the strengths in supporting students whose home language is not the language of the school in Finland. Among the challenges is the length of preparing education which does not always allow the proficiency in the second language (Finnish/Swedish) to become high enough for mainstream class education. Another challenge is that municipalities can themselves decide whether such education is provided for recently arrived immigrant children.

**Preventing early school leaving:** One important, but certainly not sufficient, precondition for raising performance levels in literacy for adolescents is literacy provision during secondary schooling, as functional literacy is mainly acquired in school-based learning. Thus, the provision of secondary
education for all adolescents, and the prevention of early school leaving may serve as indicators for the opportunities of adolescents to improve their literacy performance, especially basic functional literacy.

According to Eurostat (2015), the rate of early school leavers (ESL) in Finland was 9.3% in 2013 – slightly higher than during the preceding year. A target value has been set for 2020, when the rate of ESLs should be down to 8%. Approximately 70% of the students (69.8%) aged 15-24 years (ISCED 1–6) were in some form of education in 2011, which was above the EU-27 average (61.9%).

Increasing participation, inclusion and equity for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples: In Finland, equity in education is considered a priority. Hence, financial support is allocated to schools ‘that work in a challenging environment’ and who have lower academic performance. Schools in environments of high unemployment and low education rates, as well as schools where number of immigrants is high, have been supported in particular. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013a). Some cities also offer this kind of ‘positive discrimination’ grant for schools in challenging environments - Helsinki and Espoo to name a few (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013b).

One example of policy aiming at the prevention of segregation and advancing equity is the limitations regarding free choice of school. As a rule, education is provided in neighbourhood schools or other suitable places which makes school travel as short and safe as possible (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013a, 2013b).

The Let’s Read Together Network supports immigrant women in integrating into Finnish Society. A network of Finnish women volunteers offer tuition in literacy and the Finnish language to immigrant women in various locations all over Finland. The idea of the activity is to complement the education provided by the authorities. The number of immigrants is rapidly increasing, and some of the people coming from war zones have not had the opportunity to go to school in years. Many of the illiterate immigrants are women. Some of these women may have participated in language courses but still their skills are inadequate for training and work. The Let’s Read Together Network offers an informal context for language and literacy learning (Let’s Read Together, 2015).

Capable parent-project in the city of Vantaa focuses on immigrants who need special support. The project offers Finnish language and literacy instruction to parents who care for their children at home. Additionally, the project organizes joint activities to parents and children in order to support parenthood and adults’ integration into the Finnish society by providing them information about the Finnish society, developing everyday skills and encouraging them to use Finnish in everyday life. Group of 12 mothers and their children meet twice a week, and the first meeting is allocated to the formal language instruction with organized childcare. The second meeting is dedicated to mother-and-child-activities, such as field trips, singing and spending freetime together. The objective of the project is to advance participants’ basic vocabulary and functional communication and literacy skills. The participants speak 9 different languages as mother tongue, and the time they have been in Finland varies. (Intke-Hernandez, 2015.)

4.3.3 Adults

Increasing offers for second-language learners: The Act on the Promotion of Integration (the ‘Integration Act’) states that migrants past compulsory schooling age are to be provided with integration training including instruction in the Finnish or Swedish language and, where necessary, instruction in reading and writing literacy, as well as other types of instruction geared towards
promoting access to employment and further education and training as well as civic, cultural and life skills. Training for these migrants is offered as either labour market training or as self-motivated study. Adult immigrants with little or no formal education can access 1,120-1,400 hours of tuition in literacy and Finnish as a second language. Provision is offered free of charge. After completing the programme, students may move on to integration training, basic education for adults, employment, or activities provided by the employment and economic development administration, the local authorities or the third sector (Finnish National Board of Education, 2012).

The National Core Curriculum for Literacy Training for Adult Migrants states that the whole curriculum is based on ‘a socio-constructivist conception of learning’, that is, that learning is the result of a student’s active and goal-oriented action, where a new topic being learnt is linked to prior learning while studying is about doing things together. Literacy training offered as labour market training is provided in compliance with the National Core Curriculum for Literacy Training for Adult Migrants adopted by the Finnish National Board of Education. Where a migrant past compulsory schooling age is provided with some other type of education and/or training, such as basic education, the National Core Curriculum covering such education applies.

Teachers do not require any special qualification to teach immigrants – but in practice many teachers working with immigrants have received some education in the field of Finnish as a Second Language.

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5 References


