**Special educational courses for visually impaired students coming from the mainstreamed schools; Service Models of the School for the**

**Visually Impaired in Jyväskylä**

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About the School System for Children with Visual Impairment in Finland

In Finland the primary choice for each child with any impairment is a local school. According to the law the municipality has to provide basic education for all individuals, including the necessary supportive and rehabilitation services. If these arrangements prove insufficient, a child has the opportunity to attend a special class or school in his own or some other municipality. The final decision regarding school placement lies with parents. A child with visual impairment can start pre-school at the age of five but latest at six. Comprehensive school system starts for everyone at the age of seven. If a child with special needs cannot be educated within the regular nine-year education, it may last for ten to eleven years.

In municipalities there are no special classes or schools for children with visual impairments. As our country have two official languages, we have two state-subsidized special schools for children with visual impairments: The Jyväskylä School for Finnish -speaking majority and the Helsinki School for Swedish -speaking minority. These schools offer a special school placement with board and lodging for the children with visual impairment from all over Finland. Nowadays most pupils in these special schools have multiple impairments. Today there are approximately 45 pupils at Jyväskylä School and 10 pupils at Helsinki school. Because of the widespread inclusion the role of these state-subsidized special schools has also changed a lot. So Ministry of Education has authorized these schools to act mainly as a National Pedagogical Resource Centres for inclusion. Nowadays the important role of these schools is to work with children with visual impairments studying in local schools all over Finland.

The National Pedagogical Resource Centre for Inclusion at Jyväskylä School

The National Pedagogical Resource Centre for Inclusion at Jyväskylä School serves approximately 700 pupils with visual impairments studying all over Finland. There are four main support services for the children in inclusion: counselling visits to local schools, pedagogical training courses for teachers and class-assistants, supplementary learning material production and Special Educational Needs -courses for children.

Counselling visits to local schools are one way to support inclusion. Each child in inclusion who has been reported to our unit for Support Services is appointed an itinerant teacher. These special teachers in visual impairment offer individual consultation by visiting schools, providing teachers and class-assistants information concerning pedagogical methods, giving expert advice in drawing up Individual Education Plans etc. Itinerant teachers also meet parents for discussion and help to organize supportive networks of experts on a local level. The local school authorities are responsible for the costs of a school visit.

The pedagogical training courses for teachers and class-assistants are intended for staffs working among children with visual impairment at local schools. There are separate courses for pre-school, grades 1 to 2, grades 3 to 6 and grades 7 to 9. The aims of these short courses are to pass on information on visual impairment and its impact on learning, and to offer concrete tools for teaching and assisting in everyday work. It is important to train teachers and assistants for overcoming the special needs caused by the visual impairment. The local school authorities are responsible for the costs of a teacher and an assistant attending the course. The coming trend is to organize these studies partly via courses in Internet.

Supplementary learning materials for local schools are produced in our learning material unit. Pedagogical guides, tactile materials like embossed pictures and materials for students with low vision are sold to schools all over Finland. It is also possible to order materials on specific individual demands. The National Library for the Blind produces the Braille- and talking books used at schools.

Special Educational Needs -courses are intended for pupils with visual impairment in local schools all over Finland. The next chapters will provide more information about this way to support inclusion.

Special Educational Needs -courses for children with visual impairment

**Principles for courses**

The National Pedagogical Resource Centre for inclusion in Jyväskylä invites children from inclusive settings to attend Special Educational Needs -courses. These courses are intended for blind and low vision pupils from preschool to ninth grade from all over Finland. One of the main aims for a course is to offer support in study techniques and using aids. A course usually lasts for one school week, but sometimes there are individual needs for longer or shorter placements. The course cost includes transportation, board and lodging, education, rehabilitation, materials, leisure time activities, preliminary questionnaire and multidisciplinary report. Local school authorities are responsible for half of the costs and the state pays the other half.

**How to apply for a course**

Every spring each itinerant teacher is asked to report the level and the urgency of pupil’s needs for a course. As the needs are gathered from all over Finland, the members of multidisciplinary group at the National Pedagogical Resource Centre for inclusion in Jyväskylä go through all the papers to find those children who have the greatest need for a course on the following academic year. The final information of acceptance to a course is sent during summer both child’s home and school. Attending a course is voluntary and up to the child and the parents. Last years we have been able to offer placement almost for each applicant. During the academic year 2005 – 06 we had approximately 240 children with visual impairment at our courses.

**The aims for Special Education Needs -courses**

Aims for the courses vary according to child’s impairment, age, grade, individual needs etc. Some of the aims deal more with school subjects some with rehabilitation. Essentially is also to have an opportunity to meet peers and to build up for long lasting contacts, which is considered very important also by pupils.

We gathered the background information on each child beforehand. Parents and teachers are informed about the aims of the course in advance. They are and also asked to fill a questionnaire on the present situation of each child, e.g. about the use of low vision aids, strengths and weaknesses in schoolwork, mobility and daily living skills. Also papers from the latest visit to an ophthalmologist are needed. Before each course a multi-disciplinary meeting is held with the workers involved the child’s course. Although the aims for the course are set in advance, after getting the final descriptions the multi-disciplinary group re-evaluates them individually. Sometimes new aims on a more individual basis are needed.

**Groups on the Special Educational Needs -courses**

The main principles for building up groups for courses are vision, age, curriculum, other handicaps and specific individual needs. Separate courses are offered for both blind children and children with low vision from preschool to grade 9.

Blind pupils with none or minimal other impairments studying regular curriculum on local schools and are called to the groups according to their grade. Blind pre-schoolers attend always two-weeks “Assessing school abilities” –course with maximum four children at a time. If a child attends school the coming year, he will also have one-week course for Braille -techniques. During grades 1 to 6 blind children are called for a one-week course every school term, so twice a year. Pupils study in same course groups throughout the years, and so they get to know each other well. From grade 7 to 9 they attend a course once in an academic year. The size of groups during grades 1 to 9 is limited approximately to six children, in order to offer as much individual guidance as possible.

Pupils with low vision following regular curriculum are invited to courses during pre-school and grade 1 to 9 on individual basis. Children with serious vision problems are called for a course more often than the others with low vision. The needs for a course vary and so the pupils in groups might vary or stay the same throughout the years. The size of groups varies; during grade 1 to 6 there are approximately six children in a group, and grade 7 to 9 approximately 10 – 15 pupils.

Children with visual and other impairments are invited for a course according to their multiple individual needs. Groups for these children are small, 2 to 4 pupils in a time, in order to give more guidance for each child. Some children can also attend an individual course due to their very specific needs. Course program for these children concentrates mainly on assessment and guidance. Sometimes child’s assistant or teacher participate the course.

**Programs for children on the Special Educational Needs -courses**

During a course the basic program mainly includes the following themes: assessment of functional vision, use of low vision aids, basic study skills suitable for each grade in reading and writing, mathematics, listening skills/talking books, reading pictures and maps, information technology, techniques in arts and crafts, sports, orientation and mobility, daily living skills. Each child according to his impairment has his own timetable for one school week. Most of a day he studies in a group with individual aims guided by a special teacher and a classroom assistant. Some lessons are individual, such as assessment in functional vision and mobility. A lot of the material used during courses is given to the child to take with him back to his school; some of the materials may have been designed for him individually. After the school day a child goes to the dormitory where he can practice daily living skills and enjoy his leisure time and take part in a variety of activities.

**Parents attending a child’s’ course**

When a child comes for the first time to the National Pedagogical Resource Centre for Inclusion at Jyväskylä School parents are invited to accompany him free of charge (board, lodging and transportation). Most parents come, others don’t, and the decision is up to them.

There are also regular courses for parents organized jointly with the Finnish Federation for the Visually Impaired. These three-day-courses for parents are held at Jyväskylä during the same week as the child’s Special Educational Needs -course. National Insurance pays for the course costs for adults. Courses for parents are held in the most important stages of school education. Courses like “Getting prepared for preschool”, “Starting first grade”, “What should parents know about grade 3 to 6” / grades 7 to 9“, “What is to be expected after grade 9?” aim to share information about themes concerning school education. Parents also have an opportunity to observe their child in classroom work during the child’s course and to discuss the child’s situation with the workers. One very important aim is to meet other parents in the same situation and to establish networks.

**Multidisciplinary report**

The teacher who has been responsible for the course draws up a multi-disciplinary report on each child. This feedback contains a short description of every theme and evaluation made with a child. The feedback report shows child’s strengths in the specific subject, and the areas where more practice is still needed. We also write down detailed and concrete instructions for local schools how to approach these different subjects on the everyday schoolwork. In addition a recommendation for new required aids is drawn. If there is an obvious need for a new Special Educational Needs -course during next academic year, it will be mentioned in the report.

After the course this multi-disciplinary report is delivered at least to the child’s parents, schoolteacher and rehabilitation worker at the local hospital. The itinerant teacher also discusses the report with the child’s class teacher during the next possible visit, and the report acts as a guideline when preparing an Individual Education Plan for a child.

**Conclusions**

The main aim of Special Educational Needs -courses is to provide children with visual impairment in inclusion support for learning by specialists. Another aim –and equally important– is to offer children an opportunity to meet their peers and to study, albeit for one week at a time only, in a setting where methods are intended for pupils with visual impairment. By drawing up multidisciplinary reports we hope to share knowledge and to obtain a more profound understanding for a child's study skills and to provide teachers, class assistants and families with various ways of helping the child improve these skills.

In the future we hope that our National Pedagogical Resource Centre for inclusion at Jyväskylä School will be able to offer these Special Educational Needs - courses more often for all applicants, and also we hope to organize these courses close to child’s home at municipal level.