

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

---

## Curriculum for Comprehensive School-Aged Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Finland

Kärnä, Eija

Springer  
2019-10

---

Kärnä , E & Pesonen , H 2019 , Curriculum for Comprehensive School-Aged Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Finland . in X Hu & E Kärnä (eds) , Educating Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in China and Finland . New Frontiers of Educational Research , Springer , Singapore , pp. 153-170 . [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8203-1\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8203-1_10)

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/319725>

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8203-1\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8203-1_10)

---

acceptedVersion

---

*Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.*

*This is an electronic reprint of the original article.*

*This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.*

*Please cite the original version.*

## Chapter 5

### Curriculum for Comprehensive School-aged Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Eija Kärnä

University of Eastern Finland, Philosophical Faculty  
eija.karna@uef.fi, +358 505662404

Pesonen, Henri

University of Helsinki, Faculty of Educational Sciences  
henri.pesonen@helsinki.fi , +358 50 311 1944

#### Abstract

This chapter introduces the key elements of the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014) and describes how the education of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is individualized in accordance with the national curriculum. The Finnish National Core Curriculum regulates the education of all children in basic education in Finland. The curriculum has been renewed several times, and the latest renewed curriculum has been implemented since August 2016. Children with ASD often need individualization and support for learning. Education for children with ASD can be individualized in one or more subjects or a child can study according to a completely individualized syllabus. The individualization can also be done by delaying or lengthening the basic education of children with ASD. The three-tiered support model, which is being introduced in a detailed way, includes procedures for organizing individualized services for children with ASD. The individualized curriculum for a child with ASD is illustrated with two case stories at the end of the chapter.

#### National core curriculum as the basis for the provision of education for children with ASD

The Finnish National Core Curriculum (2014b) regulates the education of all children in basic education. Thus, it is also the basis for the organization of education for children with ASD even though the individual needs of the children are taken into account in the implementation of the curricula. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the key elements of the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education and to describe how the education of children with special needs, such as children with ASD, is individualized in accordance with the National Core Curriculum.

The goal of Finnish basic education is to support children's overall growth towards humanity and ethically responsible membership in society. It is also to provide the skills and knowledge that the children will need in life. The National Core Curriculum contains regulations issued by the Finnish National Board of Education and is used as a basis for the local curricula. The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education consists of guidelines for the provision of education as well as the objectives and main contents of instruction, such as the core contents of different subjects. The curriculum also includes guidelines for the

development of school culture and the implementation of instruction and guidance, support for learning, core issues related to student welfare, as well as an assessment of learning. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014b.)

The purpose of the National Core Curriculum is twofold. First, it supports and steers the provision and implementation of education. The support does not include detailed instruction to local education providers. Rather, the curriculum consists of broad goals that can be implemented locally by utilizing the needs and strengths of service providers. Second, the national curriculum provides common ground for the local curricula on municipality and school levels and, consequently, promotes equality and equity in education within the whole country. The overall goal is that the quality of education is equally excellent regardless of the location and size of the school where the education is provided.

The National Core Curriculum is also the basis for organizing education for children who need support, such as children with ASD. If a child is in need of special support due to illness or disability his/her education can be individualized. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014b). In such a case, the national core curriculum will form the basis of the organization of the education, but the instruction will be individualized in one or more subjects according to the needs of the child. If a child is severely disabled and instruction cannot be based on subjects, the child's education can be organized according to functional domains. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014b.)

### **The curriculum reform in 2014**

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education has been renewed several times. The latest curriculum was renewed in 2014 and has been implemented since August 2016. In autumn 2016, children in grades 1-6 started to work according the new curriculum, and in 2019, it will be implemented in grades 6-9. Over the years, the renewing processes have changed the responsibilities of state and local authorities. Actually, each renewal has increased municipal autonomy, in particular, and has strengthened the role of schools and teachers as practical and responsible implementers of the curriculum.

The latest curriculum reform contains many significant changes in comparison to the previous reforms. The reform had two major aims. First, the reform was implemented in order to ensure that Finnish children obtain the knowledge and skills that are necessary for a successful life in the future. In addition, the pedagogical guidelines were modernized to help teachers develop teaching methods that increase the children's interest and motivation in learning. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016; Finnish National Board of Education, 2014b.)

In addition to the major aims, the reform has several practical goals for improving Finnish basic education. First, the new curriculum emphasizes children's participation in and responsibility for schoolwork. Thus, children are encouraged to set goals for themselves, solve problems rather than just learn by rote without any deeper understanding of the phenomena, and to assess their learning based on goals that they have set for themselves within the framework of the curricula. Teachers are also expected to take into account children's experiences and feelings when organizing teaching activities and to guide the children toward becoming lifelong learners by taking into account the children's individual learning

approaches, needs and strengths. Second, the reform aims to develop learning environments that are secure but inspiring. In addition, the learning environment includes not just the immediate school environment but also other environments, such as nature, public places, or virtual environments. Third, the new curriculum stresses transversal competences in the instruction of subjects. This means, in practice, that children should learn for example, learning-to-learn, interaction and expression skills, multi-literacy, daily-life skills, and ICT and working life competences. Finally, the new curriculum emphasizes information and communication technology skills, and children are expected to learn the fundamentals of programming, beginning in the lower grades of comprehensive school. Consequently, programming has been integrated into the curriculum as part of mathematics education. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016; Finnish National Board of Education, 2014b.)

The National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education was renewed at the same time as the Curriculum for Basic Education. These curricula have some differences. As the purpose of pre-primary education is to prepare children for comprehensive school, the core curriculum for pre-primary education emphasizes the child's individuality, active learning, and skills for acting as a group member. In addition, as children in pre-primary education are young, six years old, the curriculum focuses also on play, on the child's positive attitude towards life, and on the promotion of the child's own initiative as the foundation for all activities. The Basic Education Curriculum focuses more on issues related to the acquisition of skills and knowledge that children will need in the future (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014a; 2014b).

The local curricula define more specifically how the national curriculum is to be implemented on the local level. The local education authorities and schools prepare the local curricula. The content of the local curricula follows the main framework of the national curricula. However, the local curricula must include, for example, a description of the values and underlying principles that guide the schoolwork, the provision of language programs, and the lesson-hour distribution. In addition, the curricula must address the local organization of cooperation between home and school to support children with special education needs (Eurydice, 2015).

## **Syllabi**

The Basic Education Act regulates the subjects in the Basic Education Curriculum. In addition, time allocation, by defining the minimum number of lessons for core subjects during basic education, is also controlled by the government. Nevertheless, schools have the freedom to allocate time beyond the minimum number of lessons on subjects on which they focus in their local curricula. The education in grades 1-6 has less variation in different schools than in grades 7-9, where more elective subjects are included in the curriculum. The children's parents or other guardians decide in collaboration with the children which of the elective subjects on offer the child will take. (Basic Education Act; Distribution of lesson hours in basic education, 2012; Finnish National Board of Education, 2014b.)

The Core Curricula for Basic Education includes two general syllabi: The first one that is followed by most of the children with ASD is divided into subjects. This syllabus includes eighteen subjects common to all children. The subjects are: mother tongue and literature (Finnish or Swedish), the other national language (Swedish or Finnish), foreign languages, environmental studies, health education, religion or ethics, history, social studies, mathematics,

physics, chemistry, biology, geography, physical education, music, visual arts, crafts, and home economics. Children can also choose elective subjects that are usually included in the local curriculum (e.g. photography, and entrepreneurship studies). If a child is not able to study according to the subject-based curriculum, his/her education can be based on functional domains/areas. Usually, only the most severely disabled children study in accordance with the five functional areas. The functional areas include motor skills, language and communication, social skills, activities of daily living, and cognitive skills.

### **Curriculum individualization for children with autism spectrum disorders**

Children with ASD often need individualization and support for learning. In Finland, individualization is one means to take into account the child's need for support. Individualization can be implemented in different ways. First, the three-tiered support model includes procedures that are to be used to organize individualized services for children with ASD. The provision of three-tiered support means, in the first place, that the child will be able to study according to the general subject-based syllabus, but his/her studies will be facilitated by providing him/her general or intensified support (e.g. remedial education, part-time special education, or using alternative teaching methods). Second, it is also possible to consider whether the child's studies should be individualized in one or more subjects. This means that the content of one or more subjects will be individualized in accordance with the needs and strengths of the child, and the child will follow the guidelines of the general subject-based syllabus in all other subjects.

There is no recent information on the number of children with ASD whose curricula have been individualized in subjects. However, a recent statistic on the total number of children with individualized syllabus in Finnish comprehensive education describes the situation on a general level. According to the Education Statistic of Finland, almost half of the children (49,2%) who received special support in 2015 studied all subjects in accordance with the general subject-based syllabus. 13,5% of children who needed special support had one subject syllabus individualized, 13,6% had 2-3 subject syllabuses individualized, and 19,4% had four or more subject syllabuses individualized. Finally, 5,3% of children who received special support studied in accordance with functional areas (Vipunen - Education Statistics Finland, 2016).

As can be seen from the statistics, the education of all children, including children with ASD, is organized as much as possible according to the general subject-based syllabus, and individual support is organized by using a variety of pedagogical means to meet children's individual educational needs. However, children who need more personalized education will also receive support by modifying their syllabi.

The individualization can also be done by delaying or lengthening the basic education of children with special needs. A delay in entering basic education means that a child starts basic education one year later than usual, at the age of eight, when it is considered to be beneficial for the child, e.g. in the event a child needs an additional preschool year to acquire skills needed in the first grade.

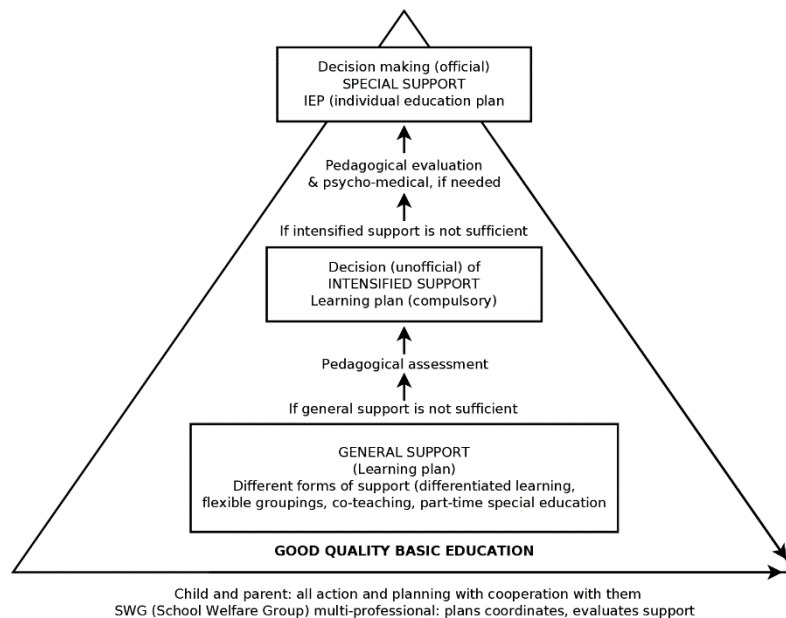
As the syllabus of basic education in Finland is nine years, lengthening means that a child would study two additional years, i.e. eleven years in basic education due to his/her disability or illness. This means, in practice, that compulsory education can begin one year earlier at the

age of six and continue one year later than usual, or that pre-primary education can take two years, and in such a case, the extended education can start at the age of five.

### Individualization and three-tiered support model

In Finland, children with ASD have the right to high-quality education as well as the opportunity to receive individualized guidance and support for learning and school attendance on all school days. The individualized support arrangements for children with ASD are based on the Finnish comprehensive school system’s three-tiered support model (Basic Education Act 642/2010, Basic Education Act 628/1998). Finland’s nine-year comprehensive school system follows the Basic Education Act of Finland (628/1998), and the Act endorses individualized support actions intended to support children with ASD. In January 2011, Finland implemented its latest educational legislation. The amendments to the Basic Education Act (642/2010) were designed much like the Response-to-Intervention model (Björn, Aro, Koponen, Fuchs, & Fuchs 2016; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Fuchs et al., 2003), and thus, three tiers of support based on children’s individual support needs were developed (see Figure 5.1). The three tiers of support are general support, intensified support, and special support.

The three-tiered support model was developed to guarantee fulfilling the children’s right to support. The support model was structured in a manner that the level of support could be easily changed if the needs of the child changed. Thus, the child’s pedagogical support could be increased or decreased depending on the nature and the extent of his/her support needs and strengths (Finnish Basic Education Act, 642/2010).



**Fig. 5.1** Three-tiered support model (Modified, original figure obtained from Thuneberg, Vainikainen, Ahtiainen, Lintuvuori, Salo & Hautamäki, 2013, 69)

It should also be noted that early recognition of needs and the provision of individualized support, as long as it is considered necessary, became the guiding principles of the Finnish

three-tiered support model. The aim of the changes in the legislation was to provide support for children struggling with ASD in classrooms with their peers and intensified support to reduce placements in full-time special educational settings (Kirjavainen, Jahnukainen & Pulkkinen, 2014). Furthermore, individualized support was planned to be educationally determined (Ahtiainen et al., 2012; Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2010), given that official medical diagnoses of ASD were not required for children to receive special support services (Thuneberg et al., 2013). Rather than being medically determined, the support was planned to be based on a child's educational strengths and needs. Teachers could establish which children were struggling and could seek support for them based on observations in the classroom (Thuneberg et al., 2013). For example, teachers may have different philosophies about responding to children with ASD, and municipalities in Finland may have various ways of organizing three-tiered support (Pesonen, 2016). Therefore, even though the legislation gives general guidelines for the implementation of three-tiered support, there can be a variety of educational arrangements for children with special education needs, such as ASD, in Finland.

### **The assessment process of three-tiered support model**

Three-tiered support consists of general, intensified, and special support. The support can be increased or decreased depending on the needs and conditions of the child. In addition, the evaluation of the needs of the child is conducted on a regular basis, at least once a year but always when there is a need to revise the plan to support the child.

#### ***General Support***

The first tier of support is called general support, which is provided in the regular classroom with peers with and without support needs. General support can contain differentiation, flexible groupings, co-teaching, and part-time special education, for instance. Classroom or subject teachers usually provide general support. However, if needed, a special education teacher, who provides part-time special education, can provide assistance to and work in collaboration with the other teachers. All comprehensive schools in Finland have a special education teacher who provides part-time special education. It is also important to mention that part-time special education is meant to support all children, not just those diagnosed for special education needs. Thus, in Finland general support includes special education services that facilitate the inclusion of children with various needs in mainstream classrooms.

If general support is not adequate, a class or a subject teacher conducts a pedagogical assessment. If during the assessments, it is considered that the child needs more support he/she is moved to tier two. Below is an example of a form for the assessment of pedagogical needs. The teacher completes the following pedagogical assessment form (see Figure 5.2). The information concerning all the following pedagogical forms that are presented in this chapter have been modified from the online database forms with the permission of Visma InCommunity Oy (see <https://help.starsoft.fi/?q=fi/node/8951>). These forms are commonly used in Finland. Usually, forms in an online system are utilized, and no paper forms are used. However, the completed form is printed out, signed, and stored in a locked cabinet in the principal's room at the school.

<b>BASIC INFORMATION</b>
Group supervisor:
Child: Academic year:
Class:
Date of birth:
Guardians:
<b>PREPARATION OF A PEDAGOGICAL ASSESSMENT</b>
Date of preparation:
Level of support:
Publication date for guardians:
Teachers responsible for preparation:
Other responsible persons:
Participated in the preparation of the document:
Cooperation with the student and his/her guardians:
<b>LEARNING AND SCHOOLING</b>
General situation of learning and schooling:
Special needs and readiness for learning:
Individual strengths:
Work skills:
Social skills:
Subjects:
<b>SUPPORT PROVIDED TO CHILD</b>
Support measures provided as from: (date)
Support measures proved:
Evaluation concerning the impact of the provided support:
<b>PROCESS IN STUDENT WELFARE GROUPS</b>
Decision of student welfare group,
Student welfare group, comments:
<b>GUARDIANS HEARING</b>
Guardians comments:
<b>PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTS USED DURING PREPARATION</b>
Date of other documents:
other documents:
other documents, more information:

**Fig. 5.2** Pedagogical assessment form

Basic information is collected in the first section of the pedagogical assessment form (see above). For example, information about the child with ASD, teacher, other persons responsible (e.g., special education teacher), who participated in the process (e.g., child, parents, principal,



etc.). The purpose of this section is to name and to ensure that all parties necessary to the process are involved and aware of the assessment.

In the learning and schooling section of the form, information about a child’s overall situation at school is described. In addition, the support needs, strengths, and skills of the child are listed. Furthermore, each individualized (adapted subject on the form above) subject and the skills and targets of those are noted on the pedagogical assessment form. Often the description of a child’s skills and support needs are described in a detailed way to guarantee that the picture of the child portrayed in the form is descriptive and versatile enough to plan support activities.

The child’s support measures are documented and followed up in the third part of the documentation. For example, if the plan states that once a week a child with ASD should receive social skills practice, the person (e.g., special education teacher) who is practicing social skills with the child has to document this support arrangement. The individual goals and supports must be documented and the support provided. This action aims to target support in a manner that aims to reduce transfers to special support. This is called intensified support. The following is a description of the consequences and what might occur if intensified support does not meet all the support needs of a child.

***Intensified Support***

The second tier consists of targeted educational interventions and intensified support arrangements. The decision on intensified support does not require an official administrative decision; it is based on teachers’ pedagogical observations in the classroom. The second tier involves drawing up a learning plan, which is always compulsory (see Figure 5.3). The teacher makes the learning plan for the child with ASD based on the child’s individual support needs. In addition, the child’s strengths and personal learning characteristics are taken into account in the plan. The goal of the plan is to support the child so that he/she can attain the objectives put forth in the general syllabus.

<p><b>BASIC INFORMATION</b></p> <p>Teacher:</p> <p>Child:</p> <p>Academic year:</p> <p>Class:</p> <p>Date of birth:</p> <p>Guardians:</p>
<p><b>The intensified support processed in the student welfare group</b></p> <p>Date of preparation, comments:</p> <p>Starting date of the learning plan:</p> <p>Ending date of the learning plan:</p>
<p><b>Document type: Learning plan</b></p> <p>Date of preparation:</p> <p>Level of support: intensified support</p> <p>Publication date:</p>

Teachers responsible for preparation:
Other responsible persons:
Participants of the preparation of the document: (Names)
<b>PREPARATION OF A LEARNING PLAN</b>
Overall situation of learning and schooling:
Special needs and readiness for learning:
Aims of the child's learning and schooling:
Subjects:
Support planned for the child:
Form of support:
Other solutions:
Cooperation with the and guardians, support provided by the child's home:
Cooperation between vocational educators:
Evaluation and monitoring of progress:
<b>GUARDIAN'S AND CHILD'S HEARING</b>
Guardian's comments:
Self-assessment:
<b>PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTS USED DURING PREPARATION</b>
Other documents:
Date of other documents:
Other documents, more information:
<b>REVISION OF THE LEARNING PLAN</b>
Date of monitoring:
Evaluation of the implementation date:
Evaluation of the implementation:
Participants of the evaluation:
Evaluation of the process:

**Fig. 5.3** Learning plan form

The learning plan consists of contents similar to the pedagogical assessment. The plan includes basic information concerning the people involved in the process. In addition, to ensure that the decision on intensified support for a child is adequate, it must be handled in the student welfare group. Thus, even though a teacher plays a key role in noticing a child's need for intensified support, the multidisciplinary student welfare team helps to confirm the decision. The plan also includes detailed information on the preparation process, on the guardians' and the child's hearing, and on the documents used in the process. Finally, the plan also must include information on the revision of the plan. The plan needs to be revised at least once a year or whenever there is a need to make modifications due to changes in the child's needs or condition.

If intensified support is not enough to support the child's educational needs, a more extensive pedagogical statement regarding the child is to be completed (see Figure 5.4).

<b>BASIC INFORMATION</b>
Group supervisor:
Pupil:
Academic year:
Class:
Date of birth:
Guardians:
<b>DOCUMENT</b>
<b>Document type:</b>
<b>Pedagogical statement:</b>
Date of preparation:
Level of support:
Publication date for guardians:
Teachers responsible for preparation:
Other responsible persons:
Participated in the preparation of the document:
The statement about intensified support and pupil's overall situation in student welfare group's cooperation between vocational educators
Statement for pupil's and guardian's hearing and date
<b>LEARNING AND SCHOOLING</b>
Overall situation of learning and schooling:
Special needs and readiness for learning:
Assessment of the need for continued support and support arrangements:
Individual strengths:
Work skills:
Social skills:
Subjects:
<b>SUPPORT PROVIDED TO PUPIL</b>
Support measures provided as from: (date)
Support measures proved: e.g. Learning in a small group
Evaluation concerning the impact of the provided support: e.g. The support has had a great impact...
<b>ASSESSMENT CONCERNING THE PUPIL'S NEED FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION</b>
Student welfare group, handling: e.g. The pupil NEEDS SPECIAL SUPPORT
Student welfare group, comments: e.g. We will continue...

<b>THE FOLLOWING PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTS HAVE BEEN USED DURING PREPARATION</b>
--

Date of other documents:
Other documents:
Other documents, more information:

**Fig. 5.4** Pedagogical statement form

Teachers and the school’s welfare group have a meeting to discuss the child’s support needs. Concerns about the child are discussed. The plan consists of sections similar to a pedagogical assessment. The participating parties and issues related to a child’s schooling, such as his/her needs and strengths, are described in a detailed and concrete way. For example, a child has difficulties in mathematics, but he/she is good at foreign language. In addition, the support that is given to the child is to be explained. It is important that the various forms of supports are listed as they are also vital information when making an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that is part of special support arrangements. The pedagogical statement has to be completed before any special support decision can be made. Consequently, based on the documentation and information discussed in the meeting, an official decision concerning special support is made. Following this decision, an individual education plan is created.

***Special Support***

Finally, the third tier is special support, which is provided partly or fully in special education settings or schools. A child with ASD might be referred to special support if intensified support is not sufficient. In other words, the pedagogical evaluation has been completed. Furthermore, a psycho-medical evaluation is done if needed. The third tier of support also means that an IEP is drawn up. Special support is always an official administrative decision that is followed-up at least annually. Below is an example of an IEP (see Figure 5.5).

***Individual education plan***

<p><b>BASIC INFORMATION</b></p> <p>Teacher:</p> <p>Child:</p> <p>Academic year: _____ →</p> <p>Class:</p> <p>Date of birth:</p> <p>Guardians:</p>
<p><b>Special support decision</b></p> <p>Special support decision date</p> <p>Special support decision maker: e.g. principal</p> <p>Compulsory education start date;</p>
<p><b>Document type: Individualized education plan</b></p> <p>Date of preparation:</p> <p>Level of support: special support</p>

Teachers responsible for preparation:
Other responsible persons:
Participated in the preparation of the document: (Names)
<b>ARRANGEMENT FOR TEACHING AND SUPPORT MEASURES</b>
Special needs and readiness for learning:
Child's goal in learning and schooling:
Goals regarding other development:
Cooperation between vocational educators:
General teaching arrangements:
Special teaching arrangements:
Evaluation and monitoring of progress:
Self-assessment
<b>SUPPORT PLANNED FOR CHILD</b>
Support planned for child:
Form of support:
Differentiation of teaching:
Other solutions:
Cooperation between the child and guardians, support provided by the child's home:
<b>OTHER SERVICES</b>
Other services in accordance with the decision concerning special support and the responsibilities of other parties
Morning and afternoon activities:
School transportation arrangements:
<b>SUBJECTS</b>
Subjects:
Adapted subjects:
Number of weekly lessons per year
Course contents
Goals:
Evaluation:
Self-assessment
Evaluation of comprehensive principles, criteria and dates
<b>PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTS USED DURING PREPARATION</b>
Preparation date of learning plan:
Preparation date of pedagogical statement:
Specialist's statement and dates of issue:
Other documents:
<b>REVISION OF THE IEP</b>
Revision date of the IEP
Evaluation of the implementation date:

Evaluation of the implementation: Evaluation of process: Assessment of the suitability of support procedures: Participation in evaluation:
---

**Fig. 5.5** Individual education plan form

The IEP contains basic information about a child and the date on which the special support decision was made. In addition, if the child requires an extension that is eleven years instead of nine years, the date when the child is to start compulsory education will be marked in the plan. The plan contains information on arrangements for teaching and a description of the means for evaluating the progress of the child. The support provided to the child is described in a detailed way. If the child needs other services, for example speech therapy, the plan needs to have a description of how the other services are linked with the support provided by the school. If a child needs morning or afternoon activities before and after schooldays, these will be described in the plan. Finally, the plan describes whether the syllabi of some subjects are individualized.

If a child studies according to her/his individual syllabus, which can be individualized partly or entirely, the child's performance will be assessed based on the objectives established for her/him personally and defined in the IEP. In such a case, the child's performance and progress are not assessed in relation to the descriptions of good performance given in the national core curriculum.

The revision information is also an important content of IEP. The plan includes information on how and when the IEP is evaluated, and what needs to be done after the evaluation. The purpose of this part of the plan is to ensure that the schooling of a child who needs intensified support is followed and evaluated on a regular basis, at least once a year, and that the content of the IEP is changed whenever necessary. It is also possible that if the child does not need any more special support his/her schooling will be facilitated by providing intensified support.

Children with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities (PIMD) usually have many complex needs, such as intellectual, physical, sensory, and communicative impairments. In Finland, the education for this group of children is mostly offered in special classes and is based on the five functional areas. This means that teaching aims at integrating the functional methods of teaching to academic content areas. Consequently, instead of teaching mathematics by using traditional text books children are taught mathematics skills in a functional manner, for example, by using coins in a store or by playing a mathematics games that is based on the use of virtual money to buy things.

The five functional areas are motor skills, language and communication, social skills, activities of daily living, and cognitive skills. Each child has an IEP of his/her own in which the goals, content, and methods of teaching each functional area are described in a detailed way. Thus, learning in accordance with the five functional areas entails highly individualized goals, contents, and methods for each child. The goal for teaching motor skills, for instance, can include instruction on how to tie shoelaces. The teaching of language and communication skills can include, for example, how to use pictures to initiate interaction, the teaching of social skills

can aim at teaching a child to share things with other people. In addition, the training of activities of daily living can include practices how to dress independently, and the goal of the training of cognitive skills can be, for instance, to learn numbers from 1 to 10. When teaching is organized in accordance with the five functional areas, assessment will be based on the progress made in the subject of the activity and on the individualized objectives established in the IEP.

## **Summary**

In Finland, children with ASD have the right to high-quality education as well as the opportunity to receive individualized guidance and support for learning and school attendance on all schooldays of the year. The individualized support arrangements for children with ASD are based on the Finnish comprehensive school system's three-tiered support model (Basic Education Act 642/2010, Basic Education Act 628/1998). The three-tiers of support in Finland are general support, intensified support, and special support. The support is based on a child's pedagogical needs, which are determined by teachers' professional observations. The three-tiered support model was developed to ensure that the children's right to support is fulfilled. The support model is structured in a manner that the level of support can be changed easily, if the needs of the child change. Consequently, the child's pedagogical support arrangements can be changed depending on the nature and the extent of the child's support needs and strengths (Finnish Basic Education Act, 642/2010).

Those children who are in tier three and require special support might have a very individualized syllabus. They study according to their individual syllabus, which can be individualized partly or entirely, their performances are assessed based on the objectives established for them personally and defined in the individualized education plan. In such a case, the child's performance and progress is not assessed in relation to the descriptions of good performance defined in the national core curriculum. Instead, five functional skill areas consisting of motor skills, language and communication, social skills, activities of daily living, and cognitive skills are assessed, taught, and followed up.

Headmasters, teachers, and all other adults working in the school should believe in and highly value the potential of each and every child with ASD regardless of the extent of their support needs. This requires individualized education arrangements and careful monitoring to ensure that needs are constantly being met.

## **Case stories**

Next is an exploration of the cases of two children with ASD, Kalle and Maija. Both Kalle and Maija were diagnosed with ASD before entering Finnish basic education. However, the diagnosis did not mean that they would automatically be placed in intensified or special support. Their support was always determined by their individual needs and how demanding these support needs might be. For example, the support arrangements have not been based on their psycho-medical diagnosis. In the following, we will utilize Kalle's and Maija's cases to illustrate fictional examples of how individualized support works in practice.

### ***Kalle's case***

Kalle is a 10-year-old 5th grade child who has a passion for watching cooking programs. He also loves to cook with his father and two-year-older brother. Kalle is a very social and likable character. He has many friends both at and outside school. Kalle was diagnosed with low functioning autism at a very young age. He does not communicate verbally. He uses different types of assisting devices to communicate, for example, communication apps on his touchscreen computer device.

Since Kalle had a history various assessments, medical diagnosis, and rehabilitation before entering basic education, he had a special support decision when he started school. Based on his intensive support needs, Kalle needed multidisciplinary teams of professionals (rehabilitative staff and school staff) working together to support him. When Kalle started first grade he was studying in a self-contained special class within mainstream basic education. In the beginning of his education, he spent a lot of time working in this own home classroom with teaching, paraprofessionals, and personal assistants. Unfortunately, Kalle's early education was tainted by his fear of social situations. He received individualized support in preschool at the age of six, which helped him in the beginning of his education. When Kalle went to second grade, he was placed in a special school. His fear of social situations increased again, therefore, he spent the last two months of third grade, and the entire fourth grade in a children's hospital school. During this intensive treatment period, he gained more strength in social competence and he returned to the special school for the fifth and sixth grades.

Currently, as a 5th grader, he is still under special support based on his extensive needs, but he spends many lessons in regular mainstream classes in a nearby school with children without such intensive support needs. Kalle studies in accordance with the five functional areas. Teachers and other professionals use information about his interests in cooking as a strength when planning his individual education goals, for instance, teaching math skills with practical measuring activities when cooking and baking. Kalle also has certain individualized functional goals for his supported communicative skills. Although he is very advanced in using his tablet computer, twice a year his education plan is updated so that his language skills develop with \ more advanced use of assistive technology (e.g., an iPad) and vocabulary.

### ***Maija's case***

Maija is a child with ASD who is attending 5th grade. She is very talented in music and in math. Although she has been academically successful since the first grade, her abilities are challenged by some of the characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome. Because of her occasional barriers in social interaction with peers, she can feel frustrated and lonely. Maija's first experiences of school go back to a special education daycare group when she was five years old. After a year in an integrated kindergarten group with children with and without special education needs, Maija began in a special education pre-school group. As a first grader, Maija started in a local general education school. During first grade, her teacher discovered her abilities and started to support them. The special education teacher worked in collaboration



with classroom assistants, and they utilized structured and individualized pedagogical methods as much as they could. At this point, it was considered important that Maija received intensified support so that her needs and abilities were supported as much as possible, and her support arrangements were assessed frequently. Since Maija received individualized intensified support between the first and fourth grade, she is currently under general support in the 5th grade.

## References

- Ahtiainen, R., Beirad, M., Hautamäki, J., Hilasvuori, T., Lintuvuori, wt al. (2012). Tehostettu ja erityistä tukea tarvitsevien oppilaiden opetuksen kehittäminen 2007-2011. Kehittävän arvioinnin loppuraportti [Development of special educational needs education between 2007 and 2011] (Final report). Helsinki, Finland: Finnish Ministry of Education, Basic Education Act 628/1998 Amendments up to 1136/2010, <http://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1998/en19980628.pdf> . Accessed 9 May 2017.
- Björn, P. M., Aro, M., Koponen, T., Fuchs, L. S., & Fuchs, D. H. (2016). The Many Faces of Special Education Within RTI Frame-works in the United States and Finland. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 39 (1), 58-66. doi:10.1177/0731948715594787
- Distribution of lesson hours in basic education. (2012), [http://oph.fi/download/179422\\_distribution\\_of\\_lesson\\_hours\\_in\\_basic\\_education\\_2012](http://oph.fi/download/179422_distribution_of_lesson_hours_in_basic_education_2012.pdf) .pdf. Accessed 17 April 2017.
- Eurydice (2015) Finland: Teaching and Learning in Single Structure Education. Retrieved from [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php?title=Finland:Teaching\\_and\\_Learning\\_in\\_Single\\_Structure\\_Education&printable=yes](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php?title=Finland:Teaching_and_Learning_in_Single_Structure_Education&printable=yes). Accessed 17 April 2017.
- Finnish National Agency for Education (2016). The new curricula in a nutshell, [http://www.oph.fi/english/curricula\\_and\\_qualifications/basic\\_education/curricula\\_2014](http://www.oph.fi/english/curricula_and_qualifications/basic_education/curricula_2014) . Accessed 17 April 2017.
- Finnish National Board of Education (2014a). Esiopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014 [National core curricula for pre-primary education 2014], [http://www.oph.fi/download/163781\\_esiopetuksen\\_opetussuunnitelman\\_perusteet\\_2014](http://www.oph.fi/download/163781_esiopetuksen_opetussuunnitelman_perusteet_2014.pdf).pdf. Accessed 17 April 2017.
- Finnish National Board of Education (2014b). Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014 [National core curricula for basic education 2014], [http://www.oph.fi/download/163777\\_perusopetuksen\\_opetussuunnitelman\\_perusteet\\_2014](http://www.oph.fi/download/163777_perusopetuksen_opetussuunnitelman_perusteet_2014.pdf).pdf. Accessed 17 April 2017.
- Itkonen, T., & Jahnukainen, M. (2010). Disability or learning difficulty? Politicians or teachers? Constructing special education students in Finland and the United States. *Comparative Sociology*, 9(2), 182-201.
- Kirjavainen, T., Jahnukainen, M., & Pulkkinen, J. (2013). Työpäperi. Perusopetuksen erityisoppilaiden toisen asteen opinnot. 19.9.2013. Valtiontalouden tarkastusvirasto 68/54/2010,

[https://www.vtv.fi/files/3566/Tyopaperi\\_Perusopetuksen\\_erityisoppilaiden\\_toisen\\_aste\\_en\\_opinnot.pdf](https://www.vtv.fi/files/3566/Tyopaperi_Perusopetuksen_erityisoppilaiden_toisen_aste_en_opinnot.pdf). Accessed 17 April 2017.

Official Statistics of Finland. (2012). 'Special Education 2013'. Retrieved from [http://www.stat.fi/til/erop/2013/erop\\_2013\\_2014-06-12\\_tie\\_001\\_en.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/erop/2013/erop_2013_2014-06-12_tie_001_en.html) Stenström. Accessed 17 April 2017.

Pesonen, H. (2016). Sense of belonging for students with intensive special education needs. An exploration of students' belonging and teachers' role in implementing support. Doctoral dissertation. University of Helsinki, Helsinki.

Thunebeg, H., Vainikainen, M-P., Ahtiainen, R., Lintuvuori, M., Salo, K., & Hautamäki, J. (2013). Education is special for all – the Finnish support model. *Gemeinsam Leben*, 21(2), 67-78.

Vipunen - Education Statistics Finland (2016). Pupils receiving special support, [https://vipunen.fi/en-gb/\\_layouts/15/xlviewer.aspx?id=/en-gb/Reports/Erityisopetus%20-%20Erityinen%20ja%20tehostettu%20tuki%20-%20Opetuksen%20yksil%C3%B6list%C3%A4minen\\_EN.xlsb](https://vipunen.fi/en-gb/_layouts/15/xlviewer.aspx?id=/en-gb/Reports/Erityisopetus%20-%20Erityinen%20ja%20tehostettu%20tuki%20-%20Opetuksen%20yksil%C3%B6list%C3%A4minen_EN.xlsb). Accessed 17 April 2017.