

# *Policies and Provision for Gifted and Talented Youth in Finland: Special Needs Education and Gifted Pupils*

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**Abstract:** This paper delves into the policies and provisions for gifted and talented youth in Finland, with a focus on its special needs education and gifted pupils. Finland's education system, renowned for its high equality in PISA results, has a well - developed special education history. However, gifted education has long been a gap in legislation. The trend of individualism in Finnish education has brought some opportunities for gifted students, such as curriculum flexibility and acceleration options. Finnish special needs education has strengths like inclusive education and high - quality teachers. Nevertheless, it faces criticisms, including insufficient attention to gifted pupils and an over - emphasis on equality at the expense of individual excellence. In response to PISA score declines, Finland has introduced "phenomenon teaching." Whether these changes can improve educational performance remains to be seen.

## 1. Introduction

Because of its students' successive excellent performance in the Program For International Students Assessment (PISA), Finland attracts the global attention and is believed to have become one of the most powerful countries in education over the past two decades[1][2]. Many researchers began to analyse the education system of Finland and tried to figure out the reasons behind its success. They soon recognize that the high overall score of Finland in PISA is accompanied by high equality education outcomes, which suggests that there is a small disparity in scores of different subjects and between top students and lowest students, urban students and rural students, and boys and girls[3]. "equal opportunity and high-quality education for all" has always been the leading principle of Finnish education, and also been one of the main strengthens of its educational system[4]. When analysts continue to explore the approaches that are used to achieve such educational equality, they find special education plays a vital role in guaranteeing the equality of Finnish education, where pupils with learning or other disabilities are especially taken care of[5]. Special Education focuses on helping children with backward learning, and providing condition as much as possible for meeting their learning needs[6]. Disadvantaged and disabled students in Finland are well supported by the government and school. However, another special group of students who should have been included in special education is not given the attention they deserve. Education for gifted students in Finland seems traditionally blank, especially in legislation[3]. The education policy put more emphasis on the

equality of educational outcomes than individual excellence, but this does not mean they completely ignore unique value of individuals. In fact, rather, since 1990s, the trend toward individualism has been developing with the reform of Finnish basic education[3][7]. Individualism can be regarded as a substitute or rudimentary for Finland's gifted Education[8], because the core principles of individualism and gifted education are both making educational plans based on individual development and needs of students[3].

This paper will begin with a review of the history of Finnish special education and its impact on the development of gifted education, and then look at current situation of gifted education in Finland. Secondly, it will objectively analyse the strengths of Finland's special needs education and also discuss about some critiques on it. Finally, an attempt will be made to examine the future development and possible challenges of the gifted education in Finland.

## **2. An overview of special education in Finland and its impact on the gifted**

The origin of official special education in Finland could be traced back to the early 20th century, when government firstly established special schools and classes for pupils with visible handicaps (the deaf, blind, mentally retarded, and physically handicapped)[9]. However, until 1950s, despite the gradual increase of students' number, the whole enrolment of special schools was still relatively low, and the services available for disabled children were very limited[10]. This stage of special education was still in its infancy, both in terms of teaching facilities and relevant policies, and it was only for certain disabled children studying at separate schools or classes, but anyway, it was a signal that the Finnish government was beginning to pay attention to the individual needs of special students.

Entering the 1960s, special education expanded rapidly, mainly because of changes in the compulsory education system[11]. The old school parallel system, including elementary and middle school was reorganized to be a nine year comprehensive school system, which includes lower grades 1-6 and upper grades 7-9. Although this unification may contribute to the availability of basic education for all to some extent, it might pose problems for teachers' teaching with a common curriculum in such a heterogeneous comprehensive school [5]. Therefore, special education was used as a solution. There were two most notable developments in this period of time: the government made special educational plans for students with all possible difficulties for the first time (speech disorders, reading, writing or any other learning difficulties); Less isolated special education was emphasized due to the new idea of integration[9]. In 1970s, part-time special education exploded and gradually became the dominant form of special education[11]. This showed that the government paid more and more attention to meeting the individual learning needs of students, and exceptions were made not only for children with disabilities, also for those with other learning difficulties. However, special education here was used as a means of equalizing the educational opportunities for weakest pupils in schools, and its final goal was to obtain relatively equal educational outcomes and high overall scores[3]. Thus, from this perspective, it perhaps suppressed the development of special education for the gifted, which may cause educational disparity. Furthermore, Finnish National Curriculum before 1980s was strongly centralized with little local flexibility, which specified what was to be taught in each subject and at each level, so it was quite hard for teachers or schools to make any adaptations for meeting individual needs of pupils, let alone develop gifted education [12]. Based on the 1983 Basic Education Act, the curriculum underwent the first reform in 1985, when decentralization of education and teacher autonomy emerged for the first time. Decentralization allowed municipalities to design their own curricula and decide their education process, schools as well as teachers were given more decision-making power, and class teachers could be more differentiated in teaching. Hereafter, the National Curriculum became a framework called Core Curriculum[3]. Core Curriculum redesign happened several times and during this time, municipal

autonomy in education continued to increase. Accordingly, special education thrived due to the growing emphasis on pupils' individual needs. Besides, this trend of decentralization gave birth to individualism, which means individual needs of students have become the main focus of teaching [13]. Although in order to avoid learning outcomes diverging, the objectives and evaluation criteria of school subjects were specified, the trend of individualism still continued at the beginning of 21st century [14]. Individualism allowed schools to adjust the curriculum to the needs of their students, and teachers were better able to teach students in accordance with their aptitude[3]. Actually, so far, there had been many policies and provisions that are conducive to the development of gifted students. Next, these gifted educational opportunities in Finland under the megatrend of individualism will be introduced and analyzed.

## **2.1. Finland's gifted special needs education in the 21st century**

This part focuses on exploring the improvements of legislative provision for educational opportunities for the gifted. Although individual differences are widely acknowledged, there is no explicit mention about gifted students or any other words referring to that group of people in relevant Finnish school legislation[9]. Due to the cultural background, equality in education is the main theme of their laws and regulations. They pay more attention to the negative effects of gifted education, so the decision-makers and educators avoid using this term[3]. Nevertheless, a strong direction to individualization in education brings about many benefits to gifted pupils [15]. In fact, individualism is in a sense Finland's gifted education, because they have numerous similarities [16]. Educators' professional ethics code created in 1998 stresses respecting pupils' right, the value of individuals, and learners' uniqueness[17]. Individualization supported by educational policies allows diverse decentralized and deregulated education, which allocates a high level of autonomy and differentiation in school teaching, and also provides freedom of choice to parents and students. According to the 1998 Basic Education Act, schools can design more individualized curriculum according to their own condition, decide the way the inner system is organized, provide contents of teaching beyond the listed subjects in the Core Curriculum. The Core Curriculum from the top works just as a "framework" or general guideline, not real "curriculum". Parents can choose schools for their children on the basis of students' interests and their own priorities, and can be more selective than just choose the surrounding schools. Additionally, the educational policy allows plenty of possibilities for students to obtain acceleration opportunities in study. Parents can choose to send their children to school as early as the age of 6 (the usual age was 7), if they think their children need it. Moreover, there are a variety of acceleration provisions provided by school for meeting individual needs, such as skipping class, sharing classes with higher grade, extra-curricular activities and so forth. Another important provision for acceleration is ungraded schools, where students are allowed to complete their studies on a flexible schedule. This ungraded system has been applied to most upper secondary schools since 1994 and Some schools are also experimenting with the elementary level to use this system. Provisions for acceleration above are all manifestations of gifted education in Finland. Although there is a lack of official procedures or nominations for the gifted, the individualism shows most of the characteristics of gifted education[3]. Apart from free choices, other provisions are more representative. For example, in recent years, voluntary groups for pupils to develop their talents are arranged in elementary school, and national academic competitions in different subjects are held annually for those pupils who want to challenge themselves. In addition, enrichment alternatives, for example, intensive course, summer course, evening or weekend meetings are available to gifted students, and many sponsored projects and special schools aim to foster creative talents in art and sports. Special needs education are well developed in the 21st century, and educational opportunities for gifted pupils are increasing.

## 2.2. Two main strengths of special needs education in Finland

As Finland's success in PISA is closely related to the boom of various forms of special education [5], and special education is inextricably intertwined with individualism, which can be seen as Finnish-style gifted education[8], it must be interesting to explore the features of Finnish-style special needs education, and what makes it unique and superior to others. Thus, the essay will introduce its two main advantages next.

In Finland, the leading principle for education policies is to arrange high quality and equality education for all. Therefore, all educational practices, for example, inclusive education, a high level of teachers in all grades, a high degree of autonomy for teachers and schools, are carried out under the goal of high-quality and equitable learning outcomes.

Special needs education is primarily in the main stream basic education, only a minority of pupils who cannot cope in traditional classroom even with intensified support attending separate special schools. Special needs education in Finland has a strong principle of inclusion. Most of the special needs educational programs are part-time or called inclusive special education (Statistics Finland, 2008). Students in need study in groups or classes alongside with their peers. This particular pattern allows students to have easy access to special help, but does not put them in special status. They are considered not as "different" or "disabled", but pupils who need temporary special support. Once they are identified that they could handle by themselves, they can stop special education any time. Getting help without being labeled "the weak" could partly keep pupils from negative effects of special education. Students with special needs may be more willing to ask for help. They do not take it as a shame, and will not be ridiculed or looked down upon by other peer. Besides services for students with learning difficulties, nowadays there are many interested-based projects. Although the legislation avoid "the gifted", there are still many educational opportunities for gifted pupils. All students including gifted students could be free to pursue academic fields that they like or are interested in confidently, which differs Finnish special needs education from general gifted education. On the one hand, it provides practical help, on the other hand, it may avoids the possible disadvantages brought about by special needs education, which might be the greatest strength of Finnish educational system. Thus, it is believed that highly inclusive special needs education or part-time special education in Finland is one of the most prominent features of Finnish Education.

Furthermore, another outstanding feature of Finnish education is the high quality of teachers. Setting a high bar in teacher quality is not only the key to raising educational standard, but also could generate equal opportunities in education. In Finland, the teacher is one of the most popular and respected professions. According to OECD Teaching and Learning survey (2013), 57% primary schools' teachers in Finland agree that the teaching profession is valued in society. Exploration about how and why Finland could make teachers' status so high and teaching profession so attractive might give us some insights into its successful education system. Moreover, teachers' important role in promoting special needs education can be also observed.

Teachers as knowledge holders have enjoyed a relatively high social status since a long time ago, because during colonial period, teachers played a critical role in building a national Finnish identity and inculcating national consciousness. After that, teacher education and training were established to maintain the high quality education provision to people. At this stage, teachers were regarded as heroes who restored the image of the country, cultivated citizens' characters, and promoted sense of patriotism. Education was seen as a means for producing model citizens that could themselves educate, civilizing and improving the morals of the population. Standard for teachers became increasingly higher. Only high achieving students could be selected into teaching. Students who wanted to enter a teaching college must take lengthy entrance examinations and adhere to a set of strict codes of conduct at college. Besides, the requirement of teaching profession was reinforced in 1979, when all class

teachers were required to obtain a master degree, including pedagogical studies and practice. They were required not only to become educators, also to become qualified researchers. Teachers of all grades should acquire homogeneous academic professional training at universities, which usually focused on writing, reading, mathematical, language and behavioral issues. Apart from the general requirements of teachers, staffs for special needs education are more demanding, because they not only need to have a good knowledge of special education, but also be proficient in interaction and communication skills. They have heavier burden in teaching, training and background work, such as school meeting, material design and so forth. The high standard of all teachers with high degree of autonomy ensures a relatively high-quality education to all diverse students, especially the gifted.

### **2.3. Some criticisms about Finnish special needs education**

Many domestic educators in Finland believe that Finnish enviable achievements in PISA are mainly due to inclusive special needs education with high-quality teaching workforce. However, Finland's education system has been criticized by some people for leveling out students, which makes gifted pupils suffer a lot. They argue that the educational provisions mostly focus on the average students and weakest ones but few educational opportunities are provided for the gifted. Although improvements in special needs education have been made to encourage educational innovations, there is a lack of general understanding of gifted pupils, let alone funding and research on them. Both their educational needs in social aspects and school curriculum have not been met. Besides, some maintain that gifted pupils should have equal consideration under legislation just like those with learning disabilities. It is unfair to put students with extraordinary IQ in the same learning context as ordinary students, and expect them to wait for and help the underachievers. It fails to respect the right of the most gifted children to develop their potential. Long-term neglect of this group will not only waste talents but also undermine the overall quality of national education[18]. Gifted children's special education is especially advocated by those politicians and industrialists who want to secure international competitiveness of the country. In the course of Europe integration, with national borders gradually blurring, in particular, industry representatives demand increasing investment in first-rate education and know-how.

Nevertheless, some other critical thinkers look at the problem from another perspective. They acknowledge that Finland does need gifted education, but the emphasis should be on "education", not "the gifted". They explain that gifted education generally requires the children to "achieve", to tap their potential as much as possible. This premise is self-evident and rarely questioned. Even if underachieving may be a real and severe problem, the other side of the coin should be seen as well: "Why should children 'achieve' all the time" [19]. Nowadays, more and more children are feeling exhausted, because they are suffering from various social fears and under pressure from all sides, like teachers, parents, society and themselves. They might often feel inferior and depressed, because they did not achieve what they were expected (Ruokonen, 2005). The final goal of achieving is seldom made explicit, but the implicit meaning is very easy to know: Achieving a high social status, securing a good job and earning a lot of money [19]. However, what these critical thinkers advocate is to achieve a happy life through education. They contend that students should be considered as independent individuals and encouraged to achieve self-fulfilment in their life without the feeling of depression and underachievement. That means children's psychological needs should be put in the first place. Every child has the right to feel that he is loved because he is a human individual, not because of his academic achievement. In spite of their giftedness, gifted children and youngsters should not be taken for granted by teachers and parents as mature adults. Unconditional care and love are the most important things in all education, and are no exception in so called gifted special education. Achievement in school is not the necessary approach to obtaining respect and love from

others. Probably gifted education is a must for Finland's education, but It is quite important that the objectives and curriculum of gifted education would be planned by real specialists in education, who know the natural law of human development and could avoid turning human children into industrial products. The aim of gifted education is to educate bright students and nurture their gifts, rather than produce gifted individual.

### 3. Discussion

Although Finland is still the best performer among European countries in the PISA, Its unstoppable momentum has gradually waned in the past decade. There was a continuing decline of Finland's ranking in PISA. In particular, in 2009 and 2012, Finland experienced a decline in the number of high-score students, who attained level 5 or 6 on PISA's 6 points system, in all three subjects of reading, mathematics, and science. In the 2015 results, Finland saw drops in all three categories: 11 points in science, 5 points in reading and 10 points in maths. Finland is currently ranked 13th in mathematics, fifth in science and fourth in reading [20]. High-achieving students in Finland were once regarded as an example to be emulated. Now, It is questioned about what caused the decline and how to address it.

Some people point out that brightest children of Finland are not exactly thriving. Finland deliberately avoids doing anything special for them. On the contrary, they are taught in the same way as any other child in school, which means they also receive inclusive, child-centered teaching delivered by specially well-prepared teachers who could differentiate their instruction on the basis of pupils' individual needs, ability, and previous achievement. Differentiated instruction is certainly consistent with the culture and self-concept of Finland, and because of its obvious appeal in terms of fairness and individualization, it is also very popular with other educators. Proponents of differentiated special education claim that there is no need to provide special programs or schools for gifted students, because it is expected that every school and teacher adjusts their instructions to meet unique individual learning needs of all pupils, including the gifted. However, such solemn, wishful assertion is not necessarily in accordance with reality on the ground. Apart from more than 50 special high schools in Finland, which, to some extent, are considered as well to be special schools for gifted children, there is an underground network of families, particularly in big cities, like Helsinki, scrambling to send their children into the primary and middle schools that have high entrance rate of good high schools and universities

Although in some countries, like Singapore, the special education for gifted students is explicit and supported by policies, while in some other countries, like Finland, it is officially evasive, these advanced countries all share a common characteristic—that is providing intensified educational opportunities for gifted children and youngsters.

Faced with declining PISA results and progressive rival countries, Finns are eager to find out the problems in their education, and there have been many attempts to change in recent year. For example, the Finland's Core Curriculum for basic education was renewed in 2014 and the new one was launched nationwide in August 2016. The redesigned Core Curriculum introduced a new concept: 'phenomenon teaching', which replaced traditional subject-based classes like history, math and foreign languages with interdisciplinary courses based on broader topics. Officials said this new method would not only teach integrated knowledge and skills, also have the added benefit of taking the needs of gifted students better into account. The designers of the new educational approach claimed that the central pillar of the new system—referred to as phenomenon teaching - was designed to better allow pupils to perform at their own capability. Phenomenon teaching used an overarching topic to connect instruction over several different subject areas. The theory went that in this way, pupils would gain a deeper knowledge of the material and would be given more opportunities to come

up with questions independent. This new development was expected to boost the role of advanced students in the classroom, as it would provide additional challenges for them.

Nevertheless, the outcome of these changes remains to be seen. Whether it will promote or worsen the educational performance of Finland also need to be explored in the future. Above all, It is important to develop a new political system that gives teachers and schools sufficient motivation to promote the academic development of all their students. Just as culture should embrace excellence as well as equity, so should the education system be required to raise the ceiling on educational achievement even as it will also lift the floor.

#### 4. Conclusion

Gifted Education is a unique existence for Finland. It goes together with Finnish special education, but they are different in nature. Special education in Finland has a long history of development, and still thrives currently, while gifted special education has always been a blank in tradition. Special education gains considerable support form government policies, while gifted education is officially shunned. Educators offer numerous help to students with learning difficulties, but they offer nothing special for the gifted, and they think wishfully that gifted pupils could success by themselves without any special support. The long-term focus on disadvantaged groups in education derives from the deeply rooted cultural background of the Finns—the unremitting pursuit of social justice[6]. Although in the process of developing special education, many educational opportunities are available to gifted pupils. But these opportunities are far from enough for them. They cannot challenge themselves under correct instruction, and teachers also lack the professional knowledge about how to work with gifted children in mainstream classroom. The results of PISA show that even without gifted education, Finland’s education system still works very well, which is ascribed to the adherence to the equal and high-quality education opportunities for al. However, this is criticized for not respecting equal right of the gifted. Critics argue that gifted children should also obtain additional support they need just like children with learning disabilities. In addition to public appeal, the drop-off of the number of top students in the PISA also sounds the alarm for Finnish government. They Ministry of Education has issued a new Corn Curriculum and introduced a new approach called ‘phenomenon teaching’, which is expected to better cater for gifted students, but now the results still remain to be seen. No matter what, it is wise for Finland to make a change first, and learn from other advanced countries.

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