



This paper is taken from

*Europe's Future: Citizenship in a Changing World
Proceedings of the thirteenth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2011

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-02-7**

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*Lestinen, L. (2011) Migrant education: The case of Finland, in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) Europe's
Future: Citizenship in a Changing World. London: CiCe, pp. 114 - 117*

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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Migrant education: the case of Finland

*Leena Lestinen
University of Jyväskylä (Finland)*

Immigration has been increasing rapidly in Finland since the 1990s, although the number of migrants is still relatively small in the European context. In 2009, there were 2.9 % foreign citizens (155,705 persons) of the population. In 2009, there were 3.6% foreign-language pupils (about 17,000 persons) of all pupils in basic education. In 2008 in vocational upper secondary education there were 4.9 % and in general upper secondary education 2.9 % foreign-language students of all students. Most migrants live in the southern part of the country, mainly in the Helsinki area. The rapid rise in migration has created great challenges to create political and legal strategies and actions, reform public services and renew attitudes in order to realise and support equal participation in society.

Access to educational provision

In the Constitution of Finland (731/1999) educational rights are considered fundamental rights. It is stated that 'everybody has a right to have basic education without any charge' (16 §). According to the Basic Education Act (628/1998), children permanently residing in the country must have compulsory education of nine years or equivalent study. Education providers, mainly municipalities, can take migrants who are not living permanently in the country into schools. How these educational rights have been realised in the case of undocumented migrants has not yet been a visible issue in policy discussion: this may be because their number is estimated to be quite small in Finland.

Equality of opportunities means that the educational rights of migrants are considered equal to those of the majority population. Compulsory education (basic education), through single-structure comprehensive schools, is for school-aged children (7-16 years) and voluntary pre-primary education (pre-school) 6 years old children. This is provided free, including school meals, teaching materials, school transport and pupil welfare services. Further stages of education, general upper secondary education, vocational upper secondary education and training, and higher education, are also open to migrants.

In compulsory education the prior learning of migrants is assessed within the criteria of the teaching-learning objectives of the core curricula, using special tests. However, teachers are not specifically trained in the assessment of migrant pupils. The education of migrants is arranged within mainstream education, in which pupils can have guidance, counselling and support based on their needs: for example, it is possible to have individualised teaching and remedial teaching throughout basic education. The aim is that migrant pupils achieve equality, including functional bilinguality and multiculturality. Migrants can also have advice, guidance and support to access non-compulsory education. Continuity of guidance and support is seen as important.

Policies targeting specific needs of migrants

Specific measures targeted at migrant pupils and students include preparatory training for basic, vocational, and polytechnic education, studies in Finnish or Swedish as a secondary language from pre-primary education through secondary education, as well as studies in one's mother tongue. After compulsory education, migrants may attend voluntary additional teaching (at 10th grade), possibly tailored for them. Flexible selection may be applied in vocational education. However, the transition phase to studies in vocational upper secondary education has been criticised because of the level of drop-outs. More extensive access to language studies and other targeted measures are needed. Increasing diversity has created the vital task of developing in-service professional training and pre-service teacher education.

New opportunities supporting migrants in the wider community

The aim of integration is a two-way adaptation in society. It is possible for migrants to learn their mother tongue in school, but these courses are not considered an opportunity for the majority population to learn migrant languages and cultures. This is only possible if the migrant language in question is a widely-used European language, and therefore conventionally included in the foreign-language programme of a school. Migrant parents are encouraged to participate in school life, especially in matters concerning their children. They are introduced to the school system through school-related discussions with teachers and other school staff. However, there are no actual policies or specific measures to harness opportunities brought by diversity in school communities. Nor are there policies to enhance social integration, or to monitor segregation.

Intercultural education for all

Appreciation of diversity is included in the value basis of the core curricula, and the cultural diversification brought about by migration should be reflected in instruction. Implementation is decided at the local level, within local policy priorities and resources. But the core curriculum for basic education requires that pupils learn about human rights, cultural identity and internationalism, integrated through the curriculum. The Finnish National Board of Education has a core curriculum for thirteen religions: the aim is not only to provide the pupils knowledge about their own religious traditions, but to also introduce them to other religions and life-views. This provides a major way in which local curriculum materials are modified for intercultural education for all. There are also inclusive practices in the school's operational culture. For example, new migrants are placed in Finnish or Swedish speaking teaching groups of their own age as soon as possible after preparatory training to strengthen equal participation and create friendly relationships among pupils. Although the school culture reflects Finnish tradition, the ethos at the local level is usually favourable to adapting daily school life to meet differing cultural needs, e.g. concerning dress codes, school menus or religious habits. Education to develop internationalism in a wider context is realised through NGO-initiated campaigns in which schools participate frequently. Bringing migrants into the teacher workforce is difficult because of strict qualification requirements, but authorities have supported training for migrant teachers to meet the regulations and

expectations of the Finnish system. The state also encourages and supports teacher education and in-service education to include intercultural education more extensively in their programmes. The generally shared view is that all teachers in the country need some enhancement in their readiness to work with migrant pupils.

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