

Conclusions of the National Audit Office

Immigrant students and the effectiveness of basic education

There has been a steady rise in the number of immigrant students in basic education in the 2000s. Positive net migration and an age structure that differs from the natives mean that this trend will continue in the coming years. Thus, there is a continuous pressure to expand support services intended for immigrant students. Providing these services makes sense from the perspective of government finances because a smoothly functioning education system that takes into account the special needs of immigrant students is perhaps the most effective way to integrate young immigrants into Finnish society.

Under the Basic Education Act and the national core curriculum for basic education, students should be provided with equal learning opportunities and opportunities to continue their studies and to develop themselves. Thus, the main question asked in the audit was: How well does this overall objective apply to immigrant students? Firstly, the issue was approached by comparing the effectiveness of basic education among immigrant and native students. Effectiveness was measured using the PISA 2012 test scores of 15 year-old students. Secondly, it was examined how immigrant students have been supported in the learning of Finnish and their own mother tongue by the age of 15. Thirdly, it was examined how immigrant students prepare for upper secondary level studies. As immigrant students are not a homogeneous group, consideration was also given to the effect of their country of origin and their age of arrival.

Basic education does not provide all immigrant students with equal opportunities

According to the audit observations, the situation among immigrant students is not in all respects identical to non-immigrant students. At the age of 15, immigrant students lag significantly behind the native students in mathematical, reading and scientific skills. The gap remains even after the statistical control of the most important background factors (student's gender, grade, socio-economic status, language spoken at home and the age of arrival). With first-generation immigrants, there is a substantial improvement in performance whereas with second-generation immigrants the skill difference is not closing at the same rate. On average, their performance is weaker than the performance of first-generation immigrants after controlling the above-mentioned background factors, and the gaps in mathematical, reading and scientific skills are equivalent to one year's studies.

Performance gaps between native and immigrant students are wider than elsewhere in Europe

In the audit, the gaps identified in Finland between immigrant and native students in mathematical and reading skills were compared with those in other Western European countries and a small number of countries that have traditionally taken a large number of immigrants. The results show that Finland had the widest gaps between the immigrant and native students even after the most important background factors of students and a small number of school-related factors had been statistically controlled. In international research literature such

gaps are mainly interpreted as different treatment of immigrant students. In other words, in Finland the gap is fairly wide at the end of basic education and in any case wider than in the countries compared.

Immigrant students are more often on lower grades than other youngsters of the same age

According to the audit observations, immigrant students are often placed in basic education on lower grades than other youngsters of the same age. About 60 per cent of first-generation immigrants study on lower grades than other students in their age cohort (on seventh or eighth grade at the age of 15). This is partially because they attend for a year in instruction preparing for basic education before entering to normal classes. Of the second-generation immigrant students, about 24 per cent were studying on lower grades compared to 14 per cent among native students of the same age. The country of origin of the students or their parents has an effect on the grade level of students. However, it does not fully explain why immigrant students are often on lower grades than other youngsters of the same age.

After statistically controlling for the grade of the student the performance gaps in mathematical, reading and scientific skills decrease by about 40 points (especially between first-generation immigrant and native students), which roughly corresponds to one school year's studies.

The background of students has an effect on performance gaps

On average, the socio-economic status of immigrant students is weaker than that of native students. When the students' grade level and gender as well as the education and occupational status of their parents are statistically controlled there is a further narrowing of the native-immigrant performance gaps. The language spoken at home also has an effect, especially on reading skills. Students using languages other than Finnish or Swedish at home have weaker performance in reading. After controlling of this and the above-mentioned factors, the gap in mathematical and scientific skills between the natives and second-generation immigrants is equivalent to studies of slightly more than one year. In reading skills the gap is slightly less than a year.

The country of origin of immigrant students affects their performance

Immigrants are not a homogeneous group as they come to Finland for many different reasons and from very different countries with very different education systems. For this reason, the performance gaps were also examined in relation to the students' countries of origin. Audit observations indicate that there are wide differences in the performance depending on where the students or their parents come from.

Immigrant students studied their mother tongue in slightly smaller groups

According to the results of the PISA 2012 survey, there were no differences in the hours of instruction reported by immigrant and native students. Immigrant students, especially second-generation immigrants, had a slightly higher number of hours of instruction in mother tongue and literature than non-immigrant students. Immigrant students also studied mother tongue and literature in slightly smaller groups than

native students at the age of 15. This is partially because many of them follow Finnish as the second language syllabus in which teaching groups are smaller.

The results of the PISA 2012 survey suggest that about half of the first-generation immigrants had studied Finnish in remedial teaching programmes. The percentage was slightly lower among second-generation immigrants. There were differences in the responses, depending on which country the students or their parents had come from. The amount of remedial teaching provided to students from Russia, Estonia and Iraq was above average, whereas the figures for students from Somalia, former Yugoslavia and Turkey were below average. The amount of support was dependent on the age of arrival so that immigrants arriving in Finland at an older age had been given more remedial teaching. About half of all immigrant students had attended classes in which they studied their own mother tongue. Here too there were differences, depending on which country the students or their parents had come from. About one third of all immigrant students had attended classes in which the teaching was in their own mother tongue.

There were only few differences in school grades in mathematics and mother tongue and literature between immigrant and native students. However, as the above results show, the PISA scores of immigrant students were significantly below those of the native students after controlling the school grading and grade levels.

Immigrant students view school more positively than the native students

The results of the PISA 2012 survey suggest that on average, immigrant students have a more positive attitude towards the school than non-immigrant students. The support provided by teachers, teacher student relations, sense of belonging to the school, attitude towards the learning activities and learning outcomes were more positively viewed by immigrant students than by native students. The disciplinary climate was the only area that immigrant students viewed more negatively than native students.

Recommendations of the National Audit Office

The National Audit Office recommends that the Ministry of Education and Culture

1. ensures that the support required by second-generation immigrants in language-learning and other learning is at adequate levels. It should especially be ensured that their skills and their ability to continue their studies are similar to non-immigrant students
2. examines whether weakest performing first- and second generation immigrant students should be provided with additional support to ensure integration and the ability to continue their studies
3. finds out why performance gaps between immigrant and native students are on average wider than in other Nordic countries and many other Northern European countries
4. ensures that assessment practices of immigrant and native students are identical in basic education and that criteria corresponding to the actual skill levels of students are applied