

Abstract

Special needs education in basic education

Measured by the number of pupils, the provision of special needs education in basic education has clearly increased in the last decade. The number of pupils admitted and transferred to special needs education went up by some 60 per cent in 2000–2010. This has specifically resulted from an increase in the provision of special needs education, as the number of pupils receiving special needs education on a part-time basis has remained stable, excepting a small jump in the early part of the decade caused by a change in the manner in which the statistics are compiled. Along with the growing number of special needs pupils, there has also been an increase in resources allocated to special needs education. In 2010, the share of special needs teachers was some 14 per cent of all teachers in basic education. Special needs education has thus been the most important form of support received by pupils in basic education, also when measured by resource allocation. Consequently, its direct and indirect significance to government finances is obvious. When successful, special needs education supports the pupils' development, learning and integration in society and reduces their risk of exclusion.

The aim of the National Audit Office's audit of special needs education in basic education was to examine the arrangements for and impacts of special needs education, and to strive to get an idea of how well the general goal of the Basic Education Act, or providing education according to the pupils' age and capabilities so as to promote healthy growth and development in the pupils, is achieved. Drawing on extensive register data, the audit examined the change in special needs education in 2001–2010, paying attention to differences between various age groups and municipalities in the offer and arrangement of special needs education, as well as to the grounds on which it was provided and the resources allocated to it. In addition, the audit looked at the impacts of special needs education by examining special needs pupils' transition to and progress in secondary education, their attainment of secondary qualifications and their employment status four years after completing basic education. While the statistical data used in the audit describes the quantity of special needs education provided, it is unable to assess the content or quality of the support given to the pupils. In addition to statistical analyses, the practices of special needs education were investigated through interviews and imaginary cases (vignettes) in ten municipalities.

The audit revealed that special needs education has not been available equally in different parts of the country and for all age groups. The support provided for a pupil affected by similar learning difficulties varied from one municipality to another. In some cases, these differences were relatively major. There should be more focus on differences between municipalities, and the support system should be developed further to ensure that the pupil's right to receive support is implemented equally in all parts of the country.

As the number of special needs pupils has increased, individualisation of subjects has become considerably more wide-spread. This trend gives rise to concern, as a young person having studied according to an individualised syllabus will have poorer capabilities for pursuing further studies. The audit results indicate that the growing number of students transferred to special needs education has not increased the share of pupils moving on to secondary education or helped the pupils complete secondary level studies. The individualisation of syllabi and the reasons for this practice should thus be studied in closer detail and, on this basis, an effort should be made to harmonise the practices of local authorities, for example in connection with the basic education curriculum reform.

The audit also noted a clear drop in full-time integration of special needs pupils in mainstream education in the higher comprehensive school. In order to better achieve the goal of also providing special needs education in a mainstream teaching group in the higher comprehensive school, the subject teaching system and pedagogical practices in classes 7-9 of the comprehensive school should be made more supportive of integration.

Along with the growing number of special needs pupils, the resources allocated to special needs education have also been increased. While statistics are not currently produced separately for all costs of special needs education, a scrutiny of the teacher numbers gives us an idea of the extent of these activities. In 2010, the share of special needs teachers was nearly 14 per cent of teachers in basic education. The impacts of an increase in the provision of special needs education or in resources allocated to it are, however, difficult to assess reliably, as the statistics on special needs education are incomplete. Attention should be paid to producing statistics on intensified and special support to provide a clearer picture of the allocation and needs of support resources and to enable reliable monitoring and assessment of the impacts and effectiveness of the support.

The audit results indicate that the socio-economic backgrounds of students who have been transferred to special needs education and who are following an individualised syllabus are less advantaged than the socio-economic backgrounds of pupils who are studying according to the mainstream syllabus in basic education. International studies looking into the backgrounds of special needs pupils have also arrived at the same conclusion. Based on these results it would thus seem that in municipalities and regions where the socio-economic background of the working-age population is less advantaged, the need for special support is also greater. In the context of reforming the grant system of local governments for basic services, the suitability of not only the parents' educational background but also other indicators of social advantage or disadvantage should thus be considered a calculation criterion for government transfers for basic education, with the aim of both taking into account local needs and narrowing the gaps between municipalities in the provision of special needs education.