

LEGISLATIVE DEFINITIONS AROUND LEARNERS VULNERABLE TO EXCLUSION

Country Report: Finland

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



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See the [Legislative Definitions around Learners Vulnerable to Exclusion web area](#) for further information about this activity.



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INTRODUCTION

Since the foundation of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) in 1996, there have been key conceptual changes in the thinking behind and policy priorities for developments on the journey towards inclusive education.

A first shift was from the concept of special educational needs (SEN) to special needs education (SNE). This represented a move away from focusing on the learner (special educational needs), towards a focus on the provision that learners who experience difficulties at school may need (special needs education). The term '**special needs education**' widened the focus beyond learners with disabilities to include learners who appeared to be failing in school for a wide variety of reasons – for example, children living in poverty or those from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds. Special needs education, however, continued the deficit or medical model that still saw the problems as being within the learner.

There has never been an agreed definition of SEN or SNE that could be used across countries. The groups of learners considered to have **special needs** requiring additional provision largely differ across countries.

Inclusion requires a move away from a concern with the categories a learner may or may not fall into, to focus on the barriers some learners experience that lead to marginalisation and exclusion. This leads to an overall focus on **learners vulnerable to exclusion** by the education system. Agency work focuses on supporting the development of **inclusive education** systems in its member countries to ensure every learner's right to inclusive and equitable educational opportunities. This aim is directed at **all learners**, while recognising the need to specifically address specific **learners vulnerable to exclusion**.

Agency work acknowledges that every learner has their own unique experiences of discrimination and/or barriers to learning. All aspects of Agency work aim to consider everything and anything that can marginalise learners and increase their chances of exclusion (European Agency, 2021¹). This requires a move away from a medical approach and labelling with separate provision for different groups, towards a rights-based approach that focuses on the barriers within the system ([European Agency, 2022a](#)).

Central to this commitment and understanding of inclusive education are the legal definitions or descriptions in policy that Agency member countries use to identify and potentially label learners to make additional provision and resources available for them based on their needs.

The Agency also acknowledges the growing need to take account of **intersectionality** – the interconnected nature of all social categorisations – when considering the needs of all learners. Intersectionality is the understanding that a person, group of people,

¹ European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2021. *Multi-Annual Work Programme 2021–2027 Parameters*. Odense, Denmark. Unpublished



organisation or social problem is affected and impacted upon by a number of pressures, forces, levers, discriminations and disadvantages. It considers everything and anything that can marginalise learners and increase their chances of exclusion. This includes, but is not limited to:

... gender, remoteness, wealth, disability, ethnicity, language, migration, displacement, incarceration, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, religion and other beliefs and attitudes ([UNESCO, 2020](#), p. 4).

The Agency's current [Multi-Annual Work Programme](#) (2021–2027) highlights the concept of intersectionality.

The Legislative Definitions around Learners Vulnerable to Exclusion activity

[Legislative Definitions around Learners Vulnerable to Exclusion](#) aimed to collect information from Agency member countries focusing on legislative definitions around learners vulnerable to exclusion in education systems. It collected evidence to indicate where countries currently stand regarding the **definition of** and **approach to** learner groups and risk factors within inclusive education systems. There was a particular focus on legislative definitions and descriptions around a broad vision of inclusive education for **all learners**.

Specifically, the activity examined how Agency member countries legally define and describe learners' needs in terms of considering them as groups of **learners with special needs** or **learners vulnerable to exclusion**. It also considered how **anti-discrimination legislation** and **legislation for inclusive education** define and/or describe learners' needs, and explored the concept of **intersectionality**.

In the activity, the term '**learners' needs**' is understood as a way to highlight a requirement for educational provision and/or support without applying a label based on an external factor that in some way describes or impacts upon an individual or group of learners. Using the non-categorical term 'learners' needs' would be an **ideal** approach for countries to take and is in line with the Agency position on inclusive education systems ([European Agency, 2022b](#)).

The **reality** – as evidenced by analysing countries' legislative definitions or descriptions in policy around learners' needs – clearly indicates that legislation and policy documents describe learners' needs with less of a focus on learner requirements for provision and support, and more on externally generated labels that identify groups of learner characteristics.

The activity uses the terms '**categories of groups of learners**' and '**groups of learners**'. They refer to the groups of learners identified through the analysis conducted in this activity. However, it must be made clear that references to categories of groups of learners do not in any way endorse or promote the labelling of learners. The term 'groups of learners' has been applied as a way of investigating where and how country legislation and policy make distinctions between different groups of learners who may be vulnerable to exclusion.



As with the journey towards inclusive education, legal definitions may be developing towards **learners vulnerable to exclusion** and the consideration of **intersectionality**. Therefore, to respect the context of all countries, information on **special needs** categories is considered, as well as definitions considering **all learners**.

Please refer to the [Legislative Definitions around Learners' Needs – Policy Brief](#) for more information about the activity.

How the country reports were prepared

Agency team members compiled evidence from 35 Agency member countries.

Agency team members collected the information in this country report from Agency reports, the [country information pages](#) and [Eurydice](#) sources. The extracts focus on identifying **legal definitions** around learners vulnerable to exclusion. They do not cover the different forms of provision for these learners. However, it is recognised that in some cases there may be *operational* definitions rather than *legal* definitions.

The extracts are considered evidence of a *legal definition* and are included if they explain how a term is understood within legislation and policy. In some cases, there may not be an extract that provides this information; however, the legal documents provide indirect evidence that a legal definition may exist. Where this indirect evidence was found, it has been included.

It is to be expected that there may not be information available in response to every question, as country contexts differ and each country is at a different stage on the journey to develop inclusive education. Therefore, a wide range of questions was selected to allow evidence to be collected from every Agency member country.

Each of the first three sections begins by clarifying key terminology.

This report includes three sections with information that the Agency team compiled:

1. [Legal definitions of special needs](#)
2. [Legal definitions of learners vulnerable to exclusion](#)
3. [Legal definitions of inclusive education](#).

Section 4 contains [additional questions](#) that country representatives could choose to answer. Country representatives also had the option to review and amend sections 1–3.

The completed country reports served to identify trends within and across countries on legal definitions related to learners vulnerable to exclusion. The activity report, [Legislative Definitions around Learners' Needs: A snapshot of European country approaches](#), explains how the country reports were used for the analysis and presents the findings.



LEGISLATIVE DEFINITIONS AROUND LEARNERS' NEEDS IN FINLAND

1. Legal definition of special needs

A learner with special needs is understood as a learner who:

... for a wide variety of reasons, require[s] additional support and adaptive pedagogical methods in order to participate and meet learning objectives in an education programme. Reasons may include (but are not limited to) disadvantages in physical, behavioural, intellectual, emotional and social capacities ([UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012](#), p. 83).

1.1 There is a legal definition of special needs

Evidence

Education must be provided according to learners' capabilities, so as to promote their healthy growth and development. Learners are entitled to receive sufficient support for growth, learning and school attendance directly as the need arises ([Basic Education Act](#)) ([Eurydice](#)).

Learners in pre-primary, primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary school have the right to learner welfare services (also known as student welfare). These consist of student welfare services as specified in the education provider's curriculum, including the services of psychologists and school social workers as well as learner healthcare services.

[Learner Welfare Act](#) (in Finnish)

1.2 The legal definition of special needs is found in laws and policies

Evidence

[Basic Education Act](#)

[Learner Welfare Act](#)

1.3 The legal definition of special needs is found in strategies and programmes

Evidence

[Special education strategy 2007](#)

Defines the terms intensified and special support.

[Special support in pre-primary and primary education](#)

Enhanced special support: Children and young people with severe mental health problems, multiple or severe disabilities, developmental disabilities or autism spectrum disorders need intensive and multidisciplinary special support for their learning and rehabilitation. In addition, this group may include children who are home-schooled.



Enhanced special support is not in the legislation of pre-primary, primary and lower-secondary education, but it is used in the development work.

1.4a Does your country's legal definition of special needs specify particular groups of learners?

Yes.

1.4b Which specific learner groups does the legal definition of special needs address?

Specific learner groups	Evidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learners with disabilities• Learners with an illness• Learners with delayed development• Learners with emotional dysfunction• Learners with difficulties in school attendance	Basic Education Act (Eurydice)
The decision on special needs support may be made if the pupil cannot be taught otherwise owing to a disability, illness, delayed development or emotional dysfunction or some other corresponding reason.	Basic Education Act (Eurydice)

2. Learners legally considered vulnerable to exclusion from education

Within this document, the term **learners vulnerable to exclusion** encompasses all learners whose educational experience is 'impacted upon by a number of pressures, forces, levers, discriminations and disadvantages' (European Agency, 2021, p. 6). These learners may or may not fall into categories of special needs and a special type of provision may or may not be available to support them.

Although there may not be an official definition of learners vulnerable to exclusion, learner groups which are addressed in different legal documents as receiving support and not identified as learners with special needs are listed here.

2.1 There is a legal definition of learners vulnerable to exclusion from education

Evidence

[Basic Education Act:](#)

Section 16, Intensified Support: A learner who needs regular or multiple forms of support for their learning or schooling must be provided with intensified support in accordance with their learning plan.

Section 17: 'The decision on special-needs support may be made before the start of pre-primary or basic education or during pre-primary or basic education without a prior



pedagogical examination and enhanced support if it is evident based on a psychological or medical examination that the pupil cannot be taught otherwise owing to a disability, illness, delayed development or emotional dysfunction or some other corresponding reason.'

Section 29: 'The education provider shall draw up a plan, in connection with curriculum design, for safeguarding pupils against violence, bullying and harassment, execute the plan and supervise adherence to it and its implementation'.

2.2 The legal definition of learners vulnerable to exclusion from education is found in laws and policies

Evidence

No information.

2.3 The legal definition of learners vulnerable to exclusion from education is found in strategies and programmes

Evidence

No information.

2.4a Do your country's legislation, policies or strategies specify particular groups of learners?

Yes.

2.4b Which specific learner groups are legally considered to be vulnerable to exclusion from education across legislation, policies or strategies?

Specific learner groups	Evidence
Learners have a right to receive support regardless of the reason for the learning difficulties. The learning difficulties may be caused by difficulty with reading and writing, mathematics or attention, an illness, a disability or a life situation.	The General Upper-Secondary Schools Act (Country information)
... learners who are struggling with their studies because of special linguistic difficulties or other learning difficulties are entitled to receive special needs education and other support for learning as required by their individual needs.	The General Upper-Secondary Schools Act (Country information)
Remedial teaching and part-time special-needs education 1. A pupil who has temporarily fallen behind in studies or otherwise needs short-term support in learning shall be entitled to remedial teaching.	Basic Education Act (Eurydice)



2.5a Does anti-discrimination and equal rights legislation address different learner groups in the education system?

Yes.

2.5b Which specific learner groups are listed in anti-discrimination and equal rights legislation?

Specific learner groups	Evidence
Learners who are bilingual (Roma, Sami and sign language)	The Finnish Constitution (Eurydice) Sámi Language Act in 2003 (Eurydice)
Learners with an immigrant background	The Basic Education Act (Eurydice)
Learners according to sex, age, origin, language, religion, belief, opinion, state of health, disability	The Finnish Constitution (Eurydice)

3. Legal definition of inclusive education

The Agency views **inclusive education** as:

... a systemic approach to providing high quality education in mainstream schools that effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the learners from the school's local community ([European Agency, 2015](#), p. 2).

In inclusive education:

Learners are placed at the centre of a system that needs to be able to recognise, accept and respond to learner diversity. Inclusive education aims to respond to the principles of efficiency, equality and equity, where diversity is perceived as an asset. Learners also need to be prepared to engage in society, to access meaningful citizenship and to acknowledge the values of human rights, freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination ([Soriano, Watkins and Ebersold, 2017](#), p. 6).

3.1 There is a legal definition of inclusive education

Evidence

No information.

3.2 The legal definition of inclusive education is found in laws and policies

Evidence

[National Core Curriculum for basic education \(Regulation\)](#) (in Finnish)

The school's operating methods, teaching arrangements, learning environments and their suitability for the learner are examined first. This examination assesses whether it is



possible to implement more suitable pedagogical solutions by making changes to these aspects. The examination and planning of the support uses the results of any other assessments and takes into account any earlier support provided for the learner.

Primarily, support is provided for a learner in their own teaching group and school by means of various flexible arrangements, unless the learner's best interests necessitate their transfer to another teaching group or school to provide support.

3.3 The legal definition of inclusive education is found in strategies and programmes

Evidence

Inclusive education has been tentatively defined in the development work of the Right to Learn programme (in [Right to Learn](#) – Final report of the working group preparing measures to promote support for learning, support for children and inclusion in early childhood education and care and in pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education).

3.4 Do legal documents related to inclusive education refer to all learners, specific learner groups, or both all learners and specific learner groups?

Legal documents refer to both all learners and specific learner groups.

4. Additional questions

4.1 Are there other specific learner groups that receive additional support within the education system that have not been accounted for in this document? If yes, which legal documents (legislation, policies or strategies) address them?

The system is based more on the need of support than on the different groups of learners.

4.2a Is the term or concept of 'intersectionality' mentioned in legislation?

Yes.

4.2b Share details on how the concept is mentioned in the legislation

[The Finnish Constitution](#)

4.3a Are there any proposals/plans for changes in legislation focused on learners vulnerable to exclusion?

Yes.

4.3b What proposals or plans exist for changes in legislation focused on learners vulnerable to exclusion?

The Right to Learn workforce is currently planning the changes in legislation. The workforce presented the [final report and recommendations](#) on 4 November 2022.

4.4 Do you have any further comments?

No information.