

6. IMMIGRANT STUDENTS IN THE FINNISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the issues concerning immigrant students in the Finnish educational system. In this chapter, an immigrant refers to a person who has moved to Finland as a refugee, asylum seeker or returnee, or for other reasons (Finnish Immigration Service, 2018). The concepts of an immigrant student, a student of immigrant origin and a student with an immigrant background are used interchangeably, based on the definition of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2015, p. 19), which describes such students as having both parents born outside of Finland. This definition includes both first-generation and second-generation immigrants. First-generation immigrant students and their parents are foreign born. Second-generation immigrant students were born in Finland, but their parents are foreign born.

This chapter presents a brief history of immigration in Finland and discusses the main principles before shedding light on the main problems with immigrant education. Last, this chapter addresses ways to overcome the challenges and develop the educational system for immigrants in Finland.

BACKGROUND

Over the past two decades, the number of people with foreign backgrounds has increased steadily in Finland. A person is considered to have a foreign background if both of his or her parents or only known parent were born outside of Finland. At the end of 2016, the number of people with foreign backgrounds totalled 365,000, comprising 6.6% of the country's entire population. Of these people with foreign backgrounds, 307,000 (84%) were first-generation immigrants and the rest (58,000) were the second generation who were born in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2017). Following the worldwide refugee crisis in 2015, Finland received 32,478 asylum seekers, 10 times higher than in previous years (Ministry of the Interior, 2017). At the end of 2016, almost 244,000 foreign citizens lived in Finland, comprising 4.4% of the country's population. Of the approximately 180 nationalities represented, the largest groups were Estonians, Russians and Iraqis (Statistics Finland, 2016).

The proportion of foreign-language students (who speak languages other than Finnish, Swedish or Sami) to all students increased in Finnish basic education, general

upper secondary education and vocational education between 2011 and 2015. In 2011, 4.3% of the students in basic education were foreign-language students, which increased to 6% in 2015. In 2015, foreign-language students comprised 5.1% of the student population in general upper secondary education and 8.2% in vocational upper secondary education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2017, April 21).

PRINCIPLES OF IMMIGRANT EDUCATION IN FINLAND

Organisation of Education for Immigrant Youth

The basic rights established by the Constitution of Finland (731/1999) also concern foreigners residing in the country. According to Section 6, without an acceptable reason, no one shall be treated differently from other persons on the grounds of sex, gender, origin, language, conviction, religion, opinion, health, disability or other reasons that concern his or her person. The right of everyone to use his or her language is provided in Section 17, which states that the Sami, as indigenous people, as well as the Roma and other groups, have the right to maintain their language and culture. Immigrant education in Finland aims to offer settlers the opportunities to function as equal members of society and provide them with the same educational benefits as those of other Finns (Finnish National Board of Education, 2005). Section 16 guarantees everyone the right to basic education, free of charge. However, the realisation of this section causes problems among students above the compulsory school age (Finnish National Board of Education, 2005).

All children permanently residing in Finland are subject to a compulsory basic education, which lasts ten years. When a child turns six years old, he or she starts pre-primary education, which lasts one year. The basic education starts at the age of seven and ends on completion of the comprehensive school syllabus, after the ninth grade or 10 years after beginning the compulsory education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). Children coming to Finland are usually placed with a group that corresponds with their knowledge and skills (Finnish National Board of Education, 2005, p. 8). Immigrant children of compulsory school age (7–17 years old) or pre-school age (six years old) can participate in instruction in preparation for their basic education, which corresponds to a one-year syllabus (Basic Education Act, Amendment 1037/2008, §9). While the instruction is not mandatory, it is usually beneficial for giving immigrant children the best springboard to basic education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016, p. 13). Instruction takes into consideration that students represent different ages and learning capabilities, and it aims to support students' language skills in Finnish and their mother tongue and equip them with the skills they need to attend pre-school or basic education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2015a). Immigrants who are above the compulsory school age can complete their basic education in a general upper secondary school for adult students, in a folk high school or as part of a study programme for adults held at a general upper secondary school for young people (Finnish National Board