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**The road to learning via small group in elementary school**

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## **Introduction**

In my article I discuss small group teaching. I have researched small group teaching and I am writing a doctoral thesis on this subject. The name of the research is "The road to learning via small group. Evaluation of small-group instruction in elementary education in comprehensive school". This study has its origin in my interest in the special needs education arranged in Vaasa. When I moved from general instruction to special needs instruction as a special class teacher, I ended up in a small class in elementary instruction. I noticed how important it is to offer a student the support he or she needs in time. The cooperation with the multi-professional staff was rewarding. However, the opinions of parents and teachers on the profitability of a small group varied, so my interest to study the issue more closely was aroused. Another basis for starting my study was unwinding my long work experience to research. As Niikko (2007, 214) states, research is often seen as a natural part of work and professionalism.

Another significant reason for my study is also the constant juxtaposition of general education and special needs education. This research is a case study. In Finland, in Vaasa, small groups have been invested in for several years by establishing small groups in almost every primary school. A small group is a special class where an individual plan is written for every student concerning the arrangement of his or her studies (HOJKS=IEP.)

My study is also an evaluation research, whose objective is to evaluate small-group activity. I try to evaluate small-group instruction as a provider of early support and as an alternative to elementary instruction in a general instruction classroom. The aim of my research is to find out what kind of alternative a small group is when a child is starting school. At the same time I will try to discover what kinds of experiences teachers have of small-group students, their integration and success in general education. One objective is also to study how small groups have succeeded in their task, in other words what kinds of experiences students have of their small-group time and how head teachers and

administrators have found small-group instruction. My research material consists of the theme interviews of three special class teachers, four class teachers' essays, questionnaires to fifteen former small-group students and the theme interviews of two leading administrators in education.

The number of special education students has doubled in Finland in comprehensive school from 1997 to 2007. More than 7 per cent of all students in basic education have been transferred to special needs education. In order to avoid transfers to special needs education far away from a student's nearest school, the concept of neighbourhood schools should be developed. Every child should have a chance to start and go to school in the closest school, i.e. the neighbourhood school even when he or she ends up in small-group instruction.

The latest topic that has aroused discussion has been the outline prepared in the Ministry of Education. It follows the government's programme of action and is intended to change the law on basic education concerning special needs education. If put into practice, it would change the arrangements of special needs education so that the decision on special support for students, in other words, on transfers to special needs education would be for a fixed term and for a period of two years at most at a time, unless the grounds for the decision are an obvious need for special needs education, such as disability. The decision could be made during pre-primary education or the first grades. It would be an administrative decision and it could be appealed against, but the HOJKS (IEP) drawn up for the student would not be eligible for appeal. The alteration in the law sounds like a reduction, which is aimed at basic education and in which a decrease in the amount of special needs education is striven for.

The reason for transfer or acceptance to special needs education is not always learning difficulties or diagnoses. If the whole family is feeling badly, the children are usually the first to react. Problems may show at school as behaviour disorders of the child or as other kinds of difficulties at school. The affairs of the child and the family are, however, usually tackled too late.

The following figure shows some of the most common reasons why students are transferred to small-class instruction.

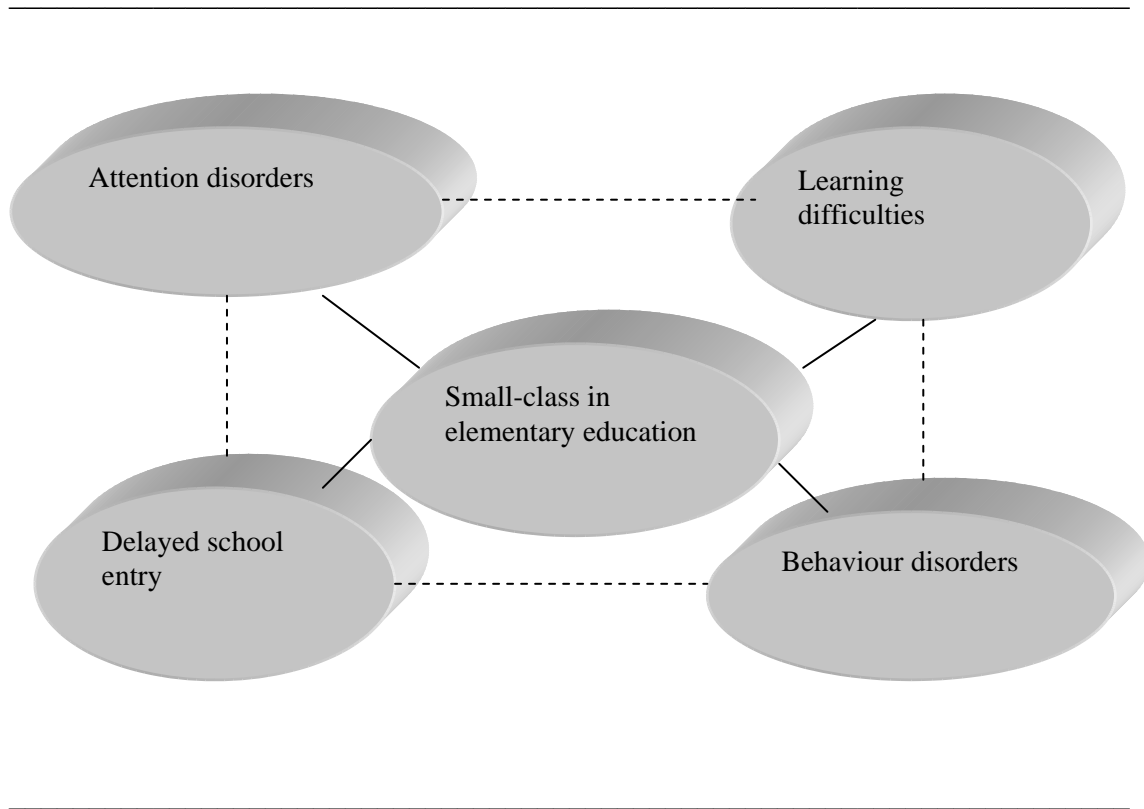


FIGURE 1. Reasons for placing students in a small- class on elementary education.

Early involvement and stopping children from becoming displaced would be important. According to Lämsä's research (2009) children in danger of becoming displaced lack the opportunity for support especially from adults, which is an indispensable precondition for healthy and balanced growth. The one to recognize the need for support can be a parent or a teacher. This is made easier if the daily activity of the school is properly arranged. By this I mean groups of students which are of the right size and formed systematically, and students' opportunity to receive attention and individual instruction. Special needs education should also be sufficient and varied for those who need it.

## **Small group offers early support**

Finding the child's need for support as early as possible and starting early rehabilitation at kindergarten age is emphasized in the outline of special needs education. The Finnish National Board of Education (2002, 8-9) also points out that the objective of pre-primary and elementary education is to support and follow the student's physical, mental, social, cognitive, and emotional development and to prevent any difficulties that may arise. The purpose of education is to guarantee the learner beneficial teaching arrangements that correspond to his talent for learning and to write him HOJKS (IEP), in other words, an individual plan concerning instruction arrangements. Individual goals and the measures related to them are defined in it. The aim is to build a strong bridge between the joints of moving from one class or school to another and to increase co-operation with homes. The support the child is given is always brought close to him and it is provided adequately. Teaching arrangements should also be flexible so that every learner would be able to study under optimum conditions. Teachers have been taken into account by providing them with updating career training in the field of special needs education.

The figure 2 shows small-class instruction in the school system.

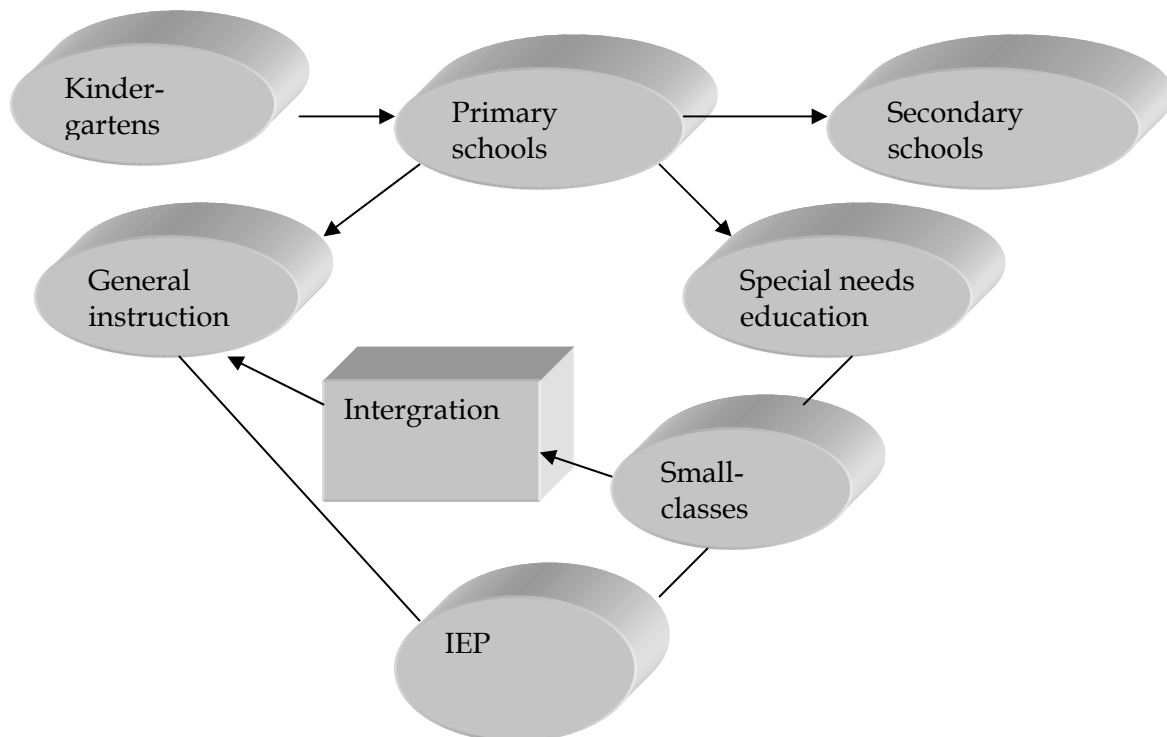
Small-group activity demands a lot. It is not only teaching the student and distributing knowledge but also moulding the atmosphere, taking individuality into consideration and multi-professional co-operation with parents and various quarters. Investing in general education classroom instruction, in other words, reducing group sizes, developing integration, and increasing the number of aides is also needed. In the long run, small-group instruction works for preventing a student's displacement.

The entry to a small group usually takes place on the basis of a recommendation from a special kindergarten teacher or the statement of a school psychologist, but there can also be temporary students without a statement. Students always enter as special needs students. They can have various kinds of learning difficulties, shyness, concentration difficulty or over activity. According to the findings, small groups consist of very many

different kinds of students. Many of them have learning difficulties, attention or behaviour disorders.

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FIGURE 2. *Small-class instruction in the school system.*

The small groups in Vaasa also receive children with delayed school entry and, to an ever increasing degree, immigrant children. Students are usually transferred to special needs education on grounds of a school psychologist's statement. The number of students is 10 at the most. A small group is instructed by a special class teacher, and a special needs assistant is often also placed in the class. A small group is a kind of diagnostic year for many students as for considering the place for their future instruction. A student can stay in a small group for the first three years of his elementary education, if necessary. The aim

is, however, to move permanently into a bigger class of general education after the two or three years of elementary education.

Agreeing on common objectives with various quarters is important even before school starts because then everybody commits themselves to doing their share for achieving the goal. Early intervention and providing support are considered important. The aim is to secure solutions and means in the school community to support a student's learning. The basis of a student's well-being is built in the communities in which he lives most of his time, in other words, in the day-care centre, at school and at home. By the side of the widely understood concept of family, the most significant communities for development are the communities of pre-school education and basic education. Kangasniemi (2006, 27) is on the same lines, in other words, a child's development is always community-related.

If parents receive enough information about their child's learning and possible need for special needs education through tests of readiness for school while the child is in pre-primary education, it will be easier for them to take a view on their child starting school in a small group. Sufficient introduction of small groups by ambulant special kindergarten teachers and primary school teachers ensures the thwarting of prejudices and fears. Multi-professional co-operation between pre-primary school and primary school even before school starts is compatible with the child's interests. The right place to start school guarantees the development of successes and self-esteem. If the small group is also located in the student's neighbourhood school, the parents will also be pleased with the child's placement in a small group. However, it must not be used as an alternative for delayed school entry, which was also brought out in the evaluations. Kauffman and Pullen (1996, 2-4) also emphasize the significance of the right place to start school. The general education classroom is a good choice for most students but some need an alternative class that suits them better, in other words, a special needs class, where support is easily available. According to Kauffman and Pullen (1996, 5), some students can receive excellent instruction in a special needs class but many only receive what they would also get in general education.

The practice is that students of a small group of elementary education are integrated into other classes of elementary education as quickly as possible. The results of earlier research on integration vary. It is advocated by Saloviita (1999) and Ihatsu, Ruoho and Happonen (1999) as well as Kauffman (1999). Haapaniemi (2003) and Kuorelahti (2000), on the other hand, prefer segregated solutions.

According to the findings teachers consider integration lessons beneficial. Starting them with lessons in art subjects and with students getting gradually acquainted with each other is found successful. However, students often feel that they have not made friends with students in general education. This is something that teachers should pay attention to in the future by arranging more pair and group work in the class. Bullying could also be made to stop by increasing collaboration between students. The pace of studying has been found faster in the general education classroom than in the small group. Using an aide in the classroom could bring help to the situation. The special needs assistant following the student in integrated lessons has also been found functional.

### **Every pupil is an individual person**

Special needs education involves a lot of tolerating difference. When not all students are similar or behave in a desired way, they may start to irritate the teacher and other students. Heterogeneous students set their challenge in a small group as well. According to Kivinen, Rinne & Kivirauma (1985, 36) a student is supposed to behave in a certain way at school and therefore, he should be able to control himself according to the expectations of the school community. Kääriäinen, Laaksonen & Wiegand (1997, 72, 86) point out that problems which occur especially in a teaching situation can often be interpreted only to be caused by the student. Teachers may be satisfied with stating that the reason for the student's behaviour is the fact that the student has learning difficulties or that he has a behaviour disorder. In this way, the responsibility is shifted on the student only, without evaluating the activity of the whole community. Naukkarinen (1998, 185) observes that the



situation mentioned above can be regarded as the weakness of the environment to meet the student's individual needs.

Saloviita (2009, 43) states that the objective has to be the intention that nearly all students behave in the same way, as one class, when they can also be taught together. Viittala (2006, 30) also emphasizes that the starting point of inclusive education is the acceptance of children's diversity and the creation of a positive view on others. According to my study, this is not, however, a realistic idea because every student is an individual, who behaves in his own way in the class. Vehkakoski (2000, 68-70) states that when a child is considered a problem, his shortcomings and abnormalities are pointed out. When discussing different and deviant children, it is good to ponder what normality is. A child can be found normal in some situations and deviant in another context. According to Tauriainen (2000, 74), the acceptance of a child's individuality also hinders defining the need of special support. Lipsky and Gartner (1987, 103) propose individualization of instruction, in which case it becomes possible for all students. You can well ask whether special needs education meets the needs of the student, teachers, school or somebody else. Stainback and Stainback (1984, 104-109) point out that in a combined school system the best features of general education and special needs education are brought into use to make flexible instruction successful.

Kauffman and Pullen (1996, 1-2) point out that all students will not learn everything anyway, regardless of the group size or teaching method. According to the leading school administrators in Vaasa, a lot of resources are spent on small groups so they would find it interesting to calculate what other things you could get with the same amount of money and benefit both general and special needs education.

## **Student's nearest school is the best alternative**

So that the transfer to special needs education could be made, the co-operation between pre-primary school and comprehensive school must be started early enough. However, openness has proved to be the best basis for the beginning co-operation. Discovering the child's learning readiness reliably is possible even when he is in pre-primary school with the help of development evaluation made by parents, child welfare clinics, day care and school staff. The concept of learning readiness, which has been used side by side with school readiness, would, therefore, be a better alternative. For this purpose, the child's skill level and knowledge level, objective level, personality, learning strategies and the significance of the learning environment should be unravelled. Follow-up and evaluation as well as possible quarters of collaboration should be made clear very early. Mäkinen (1997, 31-32) suggests a solution of a flexible school start on the basis of the child's individual level of maturity and not of a certain age of compulsory education. According to this research parents are not, however, willing to transfer a child to special needs education straight from pre-primary school or from general education although the child's possible learning difficulties and undeveloped state of attentiveness and social skills have already shown themselves in pre-primary school or in the first form of general education.

Ikonen and Ojala (2002, 16-17) are emphatic about every child's right to receive instruction in the school where they belong to because of their places of residence, regardless of whether they need any special services to support their learning. When the children of the neighbourhood go to the same school, they are equal to each other and their social skills increase. Studying in a neighbourhood school also helps in developing and maintaining friendships outside school hours because children get acquainted with other children from their neighbourhood in a natural context. This principle supports the idea of inclusion.

Graf's (1992) argument that a great number of the children placed in special needs education are children of ethnic minorities. This also goes for small groups, for the number

of immigrant families has increased manifold in Finland compared to earlier years. Almost all schools and classes have immigrant children. Park, Turnbull, Turnbull & Rutherford (2002, 151-170) have studied special needs students' social backgrounds and noticed that most of the children in special needs education come from families in the lower income brackets. Graf (1992) has also come to the same result, stating that the children of ethnic minorities also belong to this group.

### **Early involvement**

A significant result is that the co-operation between school and kindergarten should already be started before the child starts school. If children that need special support already received all possible help in pre-primary education, some of them could move straight to the primary education class of general instruction. Likewise the possible transition to the small group of the student's neighbourhood school straight from preschool would provide the necessary support right at the beginning of the child's studies. To avoid students becoming stigmatized, general and special needs education students must stay together a lot so that friendships can be created. If the school community does not support the development of social relations, students cannot have a feeling of togetherness and at the same time, their learning can become more difficult. (Strully & Strully 1996, 142-148.) School could also arrange small events and projects, where the students are gathered from different classes.

In addition to listening to their wishes, families must also be supported in questions concerning coping and parenthood. School is not responsible for a child's education but school must reinforce the educational methods of homes. According to Vuorikoski (2007, 471), as a task of professionals, education is more arduous than instruction, which is shown by the dispute on educational responsibility between school and parents. Teachers admit that they often think over whether they are teachers or educators. At least

understanding towards the difficulties of the family helps in the child's situation and in understanding his trouble.

The best helper of a different and individual student is a teacher who is a personality himself. The teacher can take up the correct attitude to a child's successes and failures. Naturally, the teacher has to be competent and follow his time. Uusikylä (2006, 59-71) states that personality is a crucial instrument for a teacher and developing it must be taken care of. Also Jahnukainen (2001) points out the significance of teacher personalities.

A small group in elementary education can be the best solution for students who need support at the beginning of their studies, although Saloviita (2007, 73-76) criticizes small groups because they are special needs education classes. What is good about them is especially the small group size and the fact that, therefore, the teacher has more time for each student. Students' learning results have also proved good and students' self-esteem has improved. What is bad about small groups is the status of a special needs class. Labelling a student a special needs student can isolate the student from general education students. This is apparent in practice at least among older students. From the point of view of the school, the special needs student status is profitable because the student brings one and a half times the normal teaching hour resource to the school.

Teachers feel that integration and transition from a small group to general instruction is individual in each student's case but not without problems. So that the transition would be easier when the time comes, a sufficient number of integration lessons should be given in the student's future class of general instruction. Simultaneous teaching should also be developed between the teachers and classes and the exchange of information between the parents and school should be increased. Multi-professional co-operation is found important between individuals from various lines of work and it is noticed to help teachers to carry on in their work. Teachers are particularly concerned about taking children's readiness for school into consideration, the implementation of the neighbourhood school principle, loading small groups with ADHD students and the sufficiency of resources in both general instruction and special needs education.

A student should receive constant support, also after being transferred to general instruction, especially at the joints of education. According to the experiences of former small-group students, they had received remedial teaching in general instruction. However, they had felt that the pace of studies was too fast there. They had also had difficulties in getting mates in the new general instruction class. They had also been bullied because of their small-group background. The label of a small-group student seemed to last long.

According to head teachers and the leading school administration, the small-group system requires plenty of resources, so it is necessary to consider the possible alternatives in the future. If the aim is to make all students study in neighbourhood schools and in general instruction classrooms, the development and learning of a student can be supported with small groups and flexible teaching arrangements.

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