

Finland: Routes for Special Needs Clients (Reititin)

Type of provider

Keskuspuisto Vocational College, which operates at different locations in Southern Finland, is an upper secondary vocational special education institution and development centre for special needs education. The Invalid Foundation – the Orton Foundation – maintains Keskuspuisto and Orton Pro, which cooperate on the Reititin project.

Objectives

Reititin (literally: router) provides clients with routes to working life or studying. Individualised solutions for a highly marginalised and diverse group of learners.

Assessment approaches

Interview and preliminary evaluation. Observation in e.g. daily tasks during a longer observance phase. A multi-professional team: special needs teachers, guidance counsellor, social worker, occupational therapist... Access to a physiotherapist and psychology services. Interpreters (for the interview) and a Finnish as a foreign language teacher for immigrants with special needs.

Target Group

Special needs clients, immigrants and refugees with special needs.

Potential transferability/ scalability

Needs support, resources. Pooling resources an advantage. Clients have access to many services from the same place, but not every service at once. The clients, especially immigrants with special needs, are in the margins– and are at a risk of being excluded from society. They benefit greatly from special needs colleges and individualised solutions.

Summaries or Basic elements of analysis

Routes to working life, studying etc. for special needs clients. Combined expertise available for clients through cooperation. Immigrants with special needs are in an especially vulnerable position; giving them the support they need is a way of including them in society, integration. Follow-up needed – doable considering the number of clients.

Introduction in keywords

- Routes for Special Needs Clients (Reititin)
- Finland
- routes to studying, working life for special needs clients
- immigrants with special needs are in an especially vulnerable position
- assessment through interviews, observation
- emphasis on activities, not evaluation
- individualised solutions

5 areas descriptive text

Organisation and Description of the tool(s) (which skills are assessed)

Keskuspuisto Vocational College, which operates at different locations in Southern Finland, is an upper secondary vocational special education institution and development centre for special needs education. It is a part of the Invalid Foundation (Invaliidisäätiö) – the Orton Foundation– which was founded in 1940. Originally, it provided treatment, rehabilitation and vocational training for veterans of the Winter War; what work could, for example, a farmer do, if he had lost a limb? These days, the foundation also maintains the activities of Orton Oy, a company providing health care services, and a unit called Orton Pro, which is more work-orientated and focused on daily activities.

Reititin (literally: router) was born out of a need for cooperation between these units, combining their different services. It aims to provide the clients with routes to education or working life, finding them a place somewhere. A multi-professional team assesses the client, who also has access to additional services, if needed. Inclusiveness is a guiding principle. “We take each individual as they are, and we try to accommodate our services to their needs,” says Liisa Metsola, development director for Keskuspuisto Vocational College.

Implementation (how the tool is used, how the assessors are trained, how often it is used)

In the Reititin project, assessment occurs mainly through interviews and observation. Immigrant clients may need an interpreter. Initially, there is a preliminary evaluation, based on an interview, in which they discuss the client’s background, experiences, how they came to Finland etc. In the service, there is a one-month observation period: how the client manages, say, daily activities. The emphasis is never on the fact that the client is being evaluated; they are simply observed during certain tasks. Based on the observation, they identify the client’s strengths, and then try to find them a suitable place, be it studying, apprenticeship training, work experience or even employment. Many clients are very practical, even though their cognitive skills may not be that high.

The teachers at Keskuspuisto are university trained and have special needs teaching degrees. They are prepared to consider the challenges that the students face in their vocational training, and can devise

solutions for how the students could complete their degrees or be able to work. The Reitin project includes the services of special needs teachers, a guidance counsellor, social worker and occupational therapist. When needed, the client has access to a physiotherapist and psychology services. A Finnish as a foreign language teacher is involved in the process to help develop the clients' language skills. There is also a one-to-one instructor, who works closely with the clients.

Description of the target groups

The clients of the Reitin project have various challenges in their lives that affect their studies. As a group, they benefit greatly from individualised solutions and special needs colleges. Some clients have not been diagnosed earlier. Some of the newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees have been injured in bombings. There are even clients who are reluctant to use the service, because they have a degree from their home country – even though they have perhaps since been injured and would need the extra support.

Many clients have gone through very traumatic experiences. It is important to “defuse” the experiences, so that they can build new lives. Generally, the clients are very motivated and see the benefits of education or training. Immigrant clients may also want to find employment to support relatives in their home country. Sometimes it is more difficult to work with Finnish clients who are, for instance, unemployed and suffer from mental health problems. Nevertheless, although Reitin brings together professionals from various fields, some prospective clients may be too traumatised to be able to study or work. Of course, it is possible

Policy context

Keskuspuisto operates as a non-profit organisation and is primarily funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture. When a great number of immigrants and refugees had arrived to the capital area, the organisation started working with the City of Helsinki. The city bought their services for special needs clients, starting with a group of ten students.

The target group is marginal, but one that is “very often forgotten”. Immigrants with special needs are in an especially vulnerable position. As Metsola puts it: “Finland takes immigrants with special needs, but I don't think that there is a clear mechanism [for] how the society is going to take care of them. So they are left in the margin, and they are in (...) real danger of being excluded (...) from the Finnish society.” Another criticism is the drawn-out process of seeking and being granted asylum, which is mentally taxing and may interfere with studies. Nevertheless, providing meaningful activities is key. Clients must have easier access to education and employment, because these are ways to integrate and learn about the society.

Reitin ties in well with the Finnish vocational education reform, because it centres on the students. “We should think about their needs, and not our own needs to offer education,” says Metsola. Additionally, although it may seem like many services focused on just one client, the client does not receive every service at once, but the services they need– and benefit from.

Impact for assessees

Special needs clients have challenges in their lives that affect their chances of finding employment. This can be especially difficult for immigrants and refugees with special needs, a doubly marginalised group. The college must accommodate the service to their needs, rather than the other way around.

One aspect is improved self-confidence. The clients have skills and competences, which might not have been validated before, but are now acknowledged. "This sense of accomplishment [is] very important, whether you are a Finn or (...) an immigrant," Metsola points out. The other aspect is that, whatever the background of the client, the service can provide them with concrete routes to studying or working life. One client is unable to practice his former vocation because of an illness that affects muscle strength, but has gone to different workplaces to see what sort of work he would be able to do.

Assessment makes what the clients can do transparent, which employers appreciate. Yet more tools are needed for the recognition of prior learning; how well does the work a client performs, for instance, in a café, correspond to the demands in the curriculum for a certain degree? Follow-up is also needed, and would be feasible considering the number of clients.

<http://www.keskuspuisto.fi/en.php>;

<http://www.ortonpro.fi/orton-pro-in-english/>;

<http://invalidisaatio.fi/invalidisaatio/briefly-in-english/>

