



Supporting the school path of visually impaired students in Finland

Kirsi Salonen & Anu Pakkanen 31.5.2024

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About us



Anu Pakkanen

- Counselling teacher
- Master of Education
- Special needs teacher
- Specialist in visually impaired skills



Kirsi Salonen

- Counselling teacher
- Master of Education
- Special needs teacher
- Specialist in visually impaired skills



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OPETUSHALLITUS
UTBILDNINGSTYRELSSEN



What is Valteri?

- Valteri is a national **Centre for Learning and Consulting** that operates under the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI)
- Valteri supports local schools by offering **counselling services** for the children and students from early childhood education, pre-primary education and to primary and lower secondary education
- **Provides training** for teachers, special education assistants, principals etc.
- Valteri also provides publications (for example learning materials and equipment)
- In each Valteri Centre is also a **Valteri School** (from preschool to 9th grade)

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Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting - Student's path



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Basic educational system in Finland

Pre-primary education (1y)

- For six years old children

Basic education (9y)

For 7 to 16 years old

- Comprehensive schools
(primary education & lower secondary education)

Upper secondary education

- Compulsory education until the age of 18 (new law from 1.8.2021)
- Vocational education, general upper secondary education

Pre-primary, basic education and upper secondary education are free of charge



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The fundamental principle of Finnish education is to provide **equal opportunities** for learning and growth to **every student**.

Support for students plays a key role. This entails removing barriers to learning (physical, attitudinal or pedagogical), early intervention and support and welfare.



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Key principles

- Special education is provided primarily in mainstream education
- Student's right to have early, preventive support in learning and growth
- Student welfare as a basis for good learning
- Well-planned support
- Support is provided primarily for a student in his/her own teaching group by various flexible arrangements
- Each teacher is responsible for the overall learning and well-being of their teaching group
- Cross administrative and multi-professional approach
- From medical approach to pedagogical assessment

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Special education

Every student has a right

- to attend a school **near his/her home**
- **to be supported** in learning, personal development and welfare

Education for children with special educational needs is provided according to individual needs and situation.

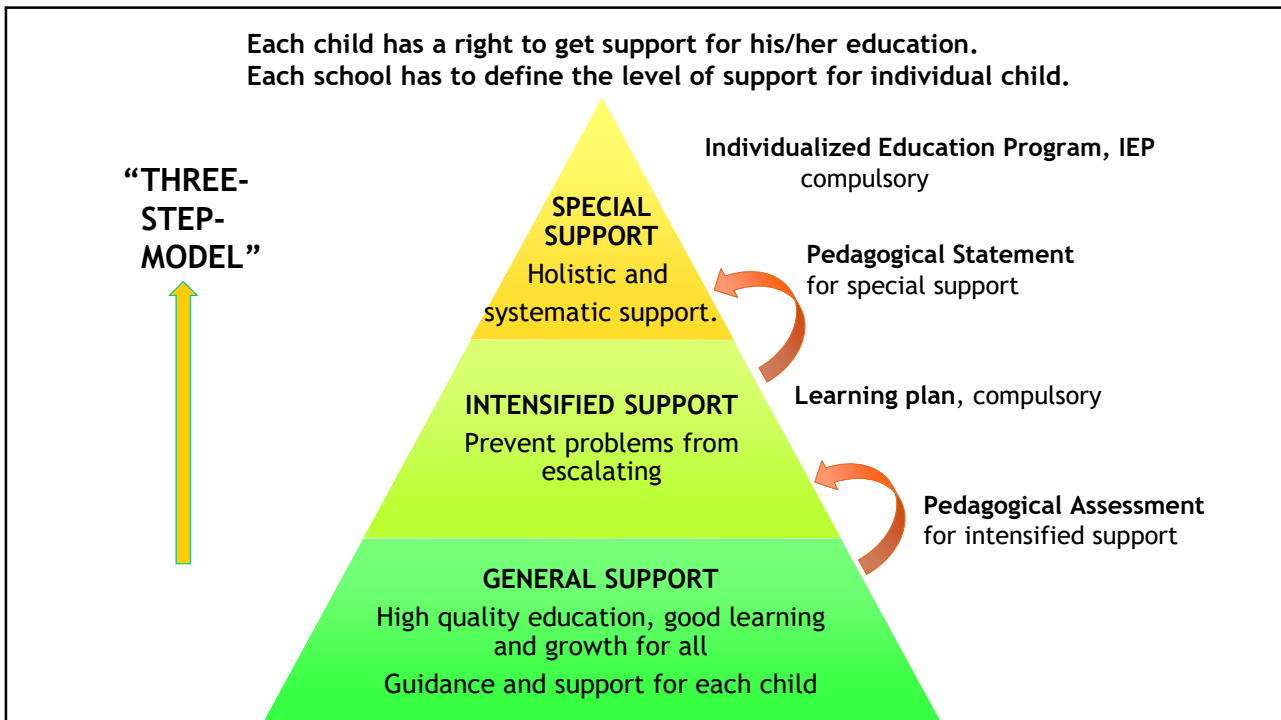
Student might attend

- regular classrooms with IEP (Individualized Education Program)
- regular classrooms with part time special education
- special education classes attached and cooperated with regular classes
- special education schools in municipalities
- The State Special School - Valteri (rare)

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General support

- all students of compulsory school age have the right to general support
- caring, concern and a good atmosphere in a school community promote students' development and support good learning
- dealing with the diversity of students as well as possible
- differentiating instruction
- cooperation between teachers
- modifying teaching groups in a flexible manner
- remedial teaching
- part-time special-needs education can also be used

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Intensified support

- Intensified support is provided when general support is not sufficient
- students in need of regular support or in need of several forms of support at the same time must be provided with intensified support
- based on a **pedagogical assessment** in accordance with a **learning plan** prepared
- support must be organized according to each student's developmental phase and individual needs
- each student's learning and schooling must be monitored and assessed regularly
- more prominent role of
 - part-time special-needs education
 - individual guidance counselling
 - use of flexible teaching groups
 - home-school cooperation
 - student welfare services

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Special support

- special support is provided for students who cannot achieve their growth, development or learning goals through other support measures
- prior to making a decision on special support, the education provider must arrange a hearing for the student and his/her guardians and prepare a **pedagogical statement**
- pedagogical statement will be re-assessed at least after the second grade and prior to moving on to the seventh grade and whenever the student's support needs change
- special support consists of special-needs education and other forms of support available in basic education
- An Individualized Education Program (IEP) has to be drawn up

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Individualized Education Program, IEP

- Based on the approved curriculum
- Provides persistent support for the student's individual learning and growth process
- Is done in collaboration with teachers, special education teachers, parents and other experts
- A list of the subjects that the student studies according to individualized syllabi and the objectives and core contents of these subjects
- The student's opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in different ways
- The plan must be revised as required, however, at least once per school year, to correspond to the student's needs
- It must always be ensured that the interpretation and assistant services, and other special aid required are available. Also other support forms, student welfare services, rehabilitation needed and guidance and counseling have to be arranged.



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Our responsibilities

- School/school district is obliged to ensure that student's right to appropriate support meets practice
- School management is responsible for arranging the support and pedagogical solutions and considering these needs within the whole school
- Teacher is responsible for considering the variation of students' backgrounds and pedagogical needs within classroom -> teacher guides students to recognize their strengths, challenges, and needs for support in learning

Differentiation in teaching is the primary support method



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Curriculum

- The Finnish National Agency for Education is responsible for the national core curriculum
- The education providers has drawn up their local curriculum based on the national core curriculum
- There are two general syllabi: one of these is divided into subjects, while the other is based on activity areas
- The activity area-based curriculum is used in the Finnish basic education to support students with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities and who could benefit more from skills that support independent life coping
- The activity areas are motor skills, language and communication, social skills, activities of daily living and cognitive skills

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Teacher education in Finland

- **Teacher training in Finland is arranged by universities and vocational institutes of higher education**
- **Early childhood education and care teachers** get a bachelor's degree in educational science, the extent of which is 180 credits (ETCS).
- **Classroom teachers** get a master's degree in educational science (300 ETCS cr).
- **Subject teachers** get a Master's degree, (300 ETCS cr). Includes subject and pedagogical studies.
- **Special-education teachers** get a Master's degree in educational science (ETCS 300 cr).

In universities there is no special education program for teachers teaching visually impaired children. Special education teachers only receive a short introduction to visual impairment in their training. Valteri's role in training teachers and supporting students is therefore significant.

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Students with visual impairment

<p>The Finnish Register of Visual Impairment Annual Statistics in 2022: 571 children and young persons between 0-17 years of age</p>		
<p>In Valteri counselling services there are 528 children and students with VI studying in local schools</p>		
<p>Students with blindness:</p> <p>37</p>	<p>Students with low vision:</p> <p>471</p>	<p>Students with Batten disease (JNCL -diagnose):</p> <p>20</p>
<p>In Valteri school: 39 students with low vision, blindness, CVI or MDVI</p>		



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Valteri services

COUNSELLING AND SUPPORT

- Counselling visits and consultation
- Support periods
- Evaluation and assessment
- Rehabilitation
- Work guidance

IN-SERVICE TRAINING

- Training projects
- Tailored training packages
- Training calendar

PUBLICATIONS

- Professional literature
- Learning materials and equipment
- Evaluation and assessment materials



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Consulting teachers for the VI students in Valteri



- Mikael, Mikkele ★
- Mäntykangas, Kuopio
- Onerva, Jyväskylä ★
- Ruskis & Skilla, Helsinki ★★
- Tervaväylä, Oulu ★
- Tampere (Counselling Services)
- Turku (Counselling Services)
- Vaasa (Counselling Services)

13 consulting teachers in 4 Valteri Centers

- 11 Finnish speaking services ★
- 2 Swedish speaking services ★



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Reaching visually impaired children into the scope of services

- Valteri has a connection to most of the children with VI in Finland.
- The Valteri support for VI students covers the whole school path from (early childhood education to) pre-primary to school (basic education) and the transition to the second grade.
- When a child is diagnosed with visual impairment in the hospital, the hospital's rehabilitation workers talk to family about Valteri's services.
- In each wellbeing services county has a hospital's rehabilitation worker for VI children.
- Each child has a named counselling teacher from Valteri.
- Counselling teachers work in active cooperation with the hospital's rehabilitation workers as well as the families.



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Organizing counselling

- Finland is a large country, in which IV students are located all over, decentralized
- Counselling services for VI students are organized from four centers
- Following aspects are considered while organizing counselling:
 - Area
 - Language (finnish - swedish)
 - Age / grade
 - Low vision / blind
 - MDVI (multiple disabilities)
 - Batten disease (JNCL)
- 30-70 students / consulting teacher (13)
- Approximately 350 counselling visits / academic year



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Consulting teacher for VI student

- Understands what vision impairment means to student
- Understands the support needs related to the visual impairments
 - functional vision assessment (also getting to know the papers of the hospital)
 - need of help / assistance and aids for learning / vision
- Is aware of the special features of evaluation and the learning needs of VI students
- Helps and support local schoolteachers to write out IEP or Learning plan
- Knows about of the special teaching / learning aids and learning materials
- Is a member of the child´s multi-professional team
- Improves the accessibility of the environment, also focuses social barriers



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The most common situations for which consulting is needed?

- The new teacher needs information about the child's functional vision
- Adults think that the child's eyesight is better than it really is
- Problems using aids
- How to apply what you do in physical education class, craft class and visual art class
- Weak mobility skills and lack of practice
- Uncertainty about when a white cane is necessary



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The counselling visit is planned carefully

- The initiative for the counselling visit comes from
 - pre-primary units or school
 - parents
 - rehabilitation workers
 - consulting teacher
- The timetable and the program of the day is planned according to the needs of the student
- Consulting teachers offers the knowledge of VI, up to date methods and materials
- Counselling visits takes usually 4-6 hours. Cost for the municipality is 345 €.
- Cooperation with the hospital's rehabilitation workers is important



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Counselling visits are pedagogical

- Multi-professional work is important.
- Together with the consulting teacher, **the rehabilitation staff from Valteri** may also attend the counselling visits, for example a low vision specialist, an orientation and mobility specialist, an ICT device specialist, an occupational therapist, a speech therapist or a physiotherapist. A cooperative visit with a psychologist is also a possibility.
- Also **special education needs assistant from Valteri** can attend to counselling visits and focus on work with VI student's assistant.
- A counselling visit is an interactive situation where all participants learn from each other.

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During the counselling visit

- Meeting the student, observing his/her school day and getting to know the overall situation in the everyday life of the school.
- Explaining what the vision impairment means for learning and in everyday life. If needed, functional vision assessment for the student.
- Supporting the teachers and the assistants, guiding with pedagogical documents and statements.
- Ensuring the functioning of present aids and assessing the need for new aids.
- The organization of learning environment and the teaching materials & methods used.
- A consulting teacher usually participates in multiprofessional meetings during counselling visit.
- After a counselling visit a consulting teacher sends a written summary and plans to home and school. → *What is the next step and how Valteri is involved in future?*

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Support periods in Valteri 1/3

- Support period in Valteri is multi-professional work. It includes: education, functional vision, ICT and mobility assessments, rehabilitation, materials, leisure time activities and accommodation in Valteri
- Support period includes for example:
 - Vision assessments and counselling
 - Aid assessments and counselling
 - ICT devices and counselling
 - Mobility skill assessments and counselling
 - Communication methods assessments and counselling
- Support period is recommended for students with low vision in pre-primary, 2th grade, 6th grade and 9th grade
- Blind students: twice a year from grades 1 to 5, once a year in preschool and from grades 6 to 9



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Support periods in Valteri 2/3

- 3-7 students / group
- Support period lasts for one school week
- The students of the group are mainly same aged/same needs
- An individual support period is also possible at Valteri or/and in local school
- Gathering background information from school, home and hospital before support period
- The main goal is to support learning; for example study techniques, study aids, materials, etc. Also individual goals.
- Assessments:
 - by consulting teachers, low vision therapists, ICT -workers and other professionals
- Rehabilitation offered if needed (supports learning and strengthens learning conditions)



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Support periods in Valteri 3/3

- Concentrating on student's study situation:
 - How to use study aids at schoolwork
 - Special study techniques in various subjects
 - Individual assessment on vision and optical aids, ICT-skills, mobility skills...
 - Social contacts with peers
- After and during support course
 - Multi-professional overview to school and home
 - Individual written summary based on multi-professional work and assessments
- Each year approximately 150 students with VI participate support periods in Valteri or in local schools.



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Tips and tools bank

- We have an instruction bank in Google drive and we share instructions and e.g. How to -videos to schools and home
- Orientation & Mobility, Independent Living Skills, arts and crafts, PE, Assistive technology, Braille device and computer, electronic books
- After the Support period or Counselling visit, it is assessed which instructions are necessary at each point
- We try not to provide too much information at once. The school must have clear understanding of which things are important to learn right now
- Should the guideline/information bank be increased and made more open?



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In-service training on visual impairment issues

- Valteri´s consulting teachers provides in-service training
 - for those who have VI student in their school
 - class teachers, subject teachers, special education teachers, school assistants, school principals,
 - for rehabilitation workers, university students etc.
- Training calendar offers every year in-service training for professionals in local schools
 - low vision, blindness, CVI
 - training takes place in the beginning of school year
 - organized at Valteri or local level
- Tailored training packages and training projects in local schools / hospitals
- Tailored training packages for the universities



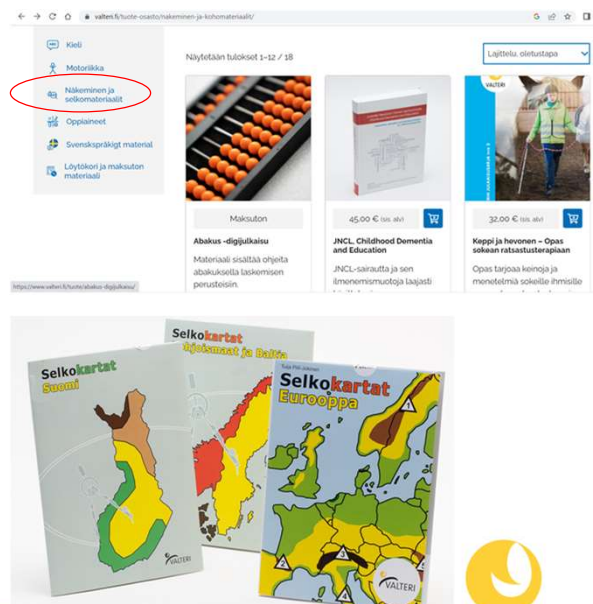
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Publication

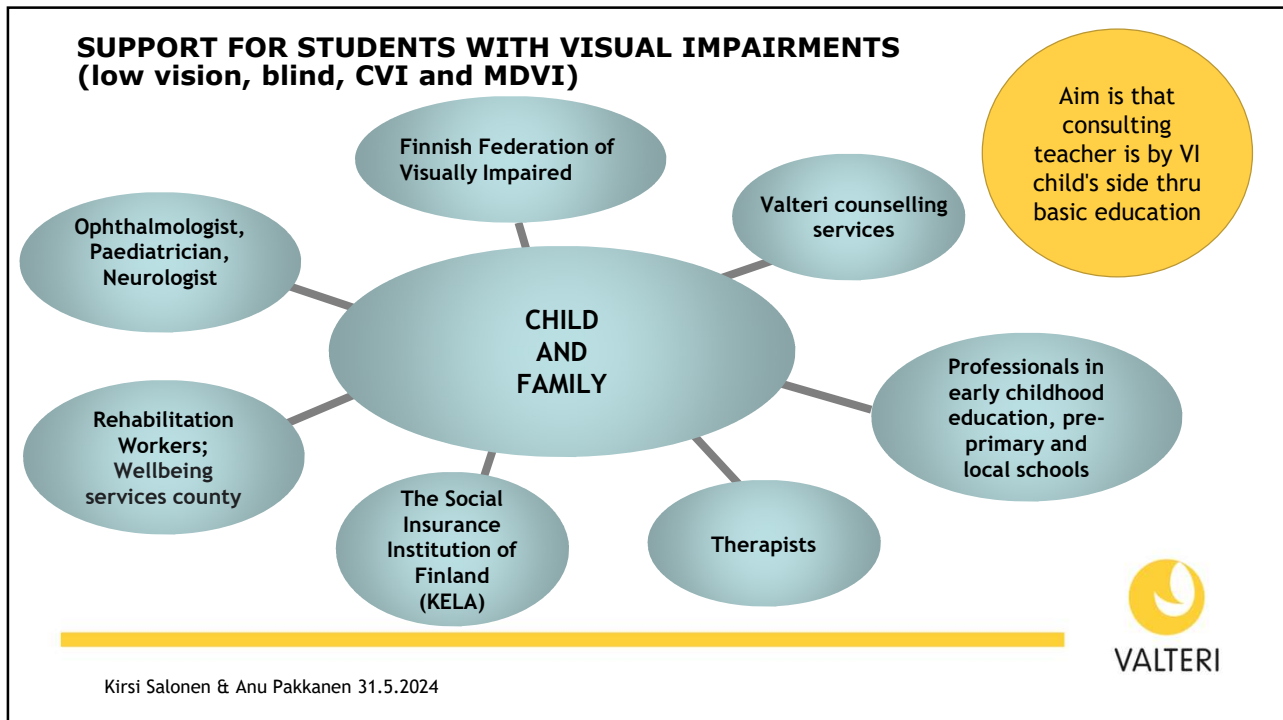
- Modified and individually designed materials for students with low vision: Maps and pictures
- Guide books / materials for professional staff
- Audio books & Braille books & Electronical books are produced by Celia (national library for accessible literature) <https://www.celia.fi/eng/>



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Cooperation with different parties

- Neighborhood school, hospital's rehabilitation worker and consulting teacher working together enables the student's support to be timely and information flows. The consulting teacher plays central role in this.
- Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired organizes leisure activities for children and young people. Sometimes, for example, in accepting one's own visual impairment or an assistive device, peer support can be more effective than the support offered by Valteri or the neighborhood school.
- The legislation on privacy protection has become stricter, which partly makes cooperation more difficult. The family must give us comprehensive permissions to access information, so that e.g. ophthalmologist's statements can be asked.
- Valteri also has strict regulations on what data can be stored in our own systems.

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How does the student get the necessary aids?

- During Valteri´s support period, the most suitable aids are being assessed
- Hospitals lend small aids such as small magnifiers
- Most hospitals also lend or rent Braille Displays and video magnifiers for children under the age of 13
- Computers and iPads are bought by schools
- In some areas schools also must buy large aids such as video magnifiers
- KELA, the social Insurance institution of Finland, a government agency, offers necessary aids for everyone over the age of 13

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Accessibility Library Celia

- National library for accessible literature and publishing in Finland
- Operates under of the Ministry of Education and Culture and cooperates with Valteri
- Produces and distributes literature in accessible formats, such as talking books and braille books, together with public libraries and publishers
- Produces and distributes textbooks in accessible formats to all educational levels
- Celia's textbooks and learning materials are free for schools
- At the moment Celia is renewing the learning materials for Pre-school

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What works well in Finnish system?

- The basic training for teachers and school assistants is really good
→ They are usually able to support students well even with a fairly small introduction
- Individual support and a learning plan or an Individualized Education Program (IEP) support a visually impaired student very well
- Cooperation with hospital's rehabilitation worker and other parties works very well
- Most of the Finnish VI students are getting Valteri's services
- Students get the aids they need, and all schools use computers for studying, which also supports VI students

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The challenges in Finnish systems

- Many visually impairment experts in Valteri will retire in the near future (consulting teachers, low vision therapists, mobility therapists, ICT-experts). How is visual impairment competence guaranteed?
- Valteri's services cost money and the municipalities' financial situations are currently weak. Equality in access to services has been compromised.
- There are long distances in Finland it takes time to reach students
- How do we guarantee keeping up with the development? Where are we able to find the time for developing ourselves and our services?
- How could research collaboration be increased in Valteri's operations regarding VI students?
- The number of visually impaired students decreases. Or does it?

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Training new experts for VI field

- There are so few visually impaired students in Finland that the university cannot have a separate program for teachers that specialize in visual impairment. In the training of special education teachers, the aim is to have broad competence
- Before becoming a consulting teacher in Valteri teacher usually has a long work experience in special education
- New consulting teachers for VI students study vocational degree of Specialist in visually impaired skills
 - The training includes vision assessments and counselling, aid assessments and counselling, mobility skill assessments and counselling and ICT devices and counselling
 - The training takes place alongside work
- Teachers in Valteri-school are being trained to VI issues by Valteri's internal mentoring

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Similarities and differences



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website: www.valteri.fi/en/

You can also find us (in Finnish) on
[Facebook](#) , [X](#) and [Instagram](#):



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Thank you!

Kirsi Salonen
kirsi.salonen@valteri.fi

Anu Pakkanen
anu.pakkanen@valteri.fi

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