FINNISH NORMATIVE STEERING IN EDUCATION AND YOUNG STUDENTS WITH A REFUGEE BACKGROUND

The number of people seeking asylum in Europe has increased considerably in recent years and thus education as a part of integration has become one of the key issues in the area of social and public policy. The aim of this Master’s thesis is to find out how young refugee students are taken into account in the Finnish normative steering in education. The theoretical framework of this study is built on educational equality and social functions of education, and the analysis covers all levels of education from basic education to higher education, including transition points between different educational levels. The data consist of key Finnish educational normative steering documents, namely legislation and regulation documents as well as national core curriculums. The analysis was conducted by combining interpretive policy analysis and theory-guided content analysis.

The key finding is that refugee students appear discursively invisible in the Finnish normative steering in education, as they are incorporated in broader categories such as “immigrants” or “foreign language students”. One possible explanation for the invisibility might derive from universalism as the basis for Finnish educational policies, so that, for example, educational goals and special needs are mainly approached from the individual perspective rather than those of specific minority groups. Both preparation education and integration training can be viewed as an exception, as they are targeted almost solely for immigrants. The aim of these preparatory and integration trainings is to promote studying and labour market abilities of immigrants as well as support integration to the Finnish society.

Of the social functions of education, as interpreted from the national core curriculums, the Finnish education system emphasizes qualification function and social integration function for students with a refugee background. In general, the ethos of educational equality continues to be dominant in the Finnish education policy and the publicly expressed goals of integration in the national core curriculums seem to follow the idea of multiculturalism. According to the policy analysis, emphasis on self-directed learning, individualism and high level of local level autonomy in the spirit of new governance might lead to regional inequality, emphasis of Finnish language teaching over students’ own first language teaching and even to segregation both within the education system and in the labour market. The policy analysis also suggests that refugees entering Finland at older age might be comparatively worse off because the most extensive support for learning and studying is centred on basic education level.