

## Bloomsbury Education and Childhood Studies Article Template

### Curriculum in Primary Education (Finland)

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Finnish curriculum thought, core curriculum, local curriculum, continuous assessment, class teacher

### Glossary terms

**Bildung/Didaktik:** Bildung is sometimes defined, very adequately, as a general theory of becoming human. In the Finnish context, Bildung, *sivistys*, stands for education emphasizing one's development to autonomy, and accordingly, one's ability to make ethical decisions when participating to the advancement of the culture and society. Didaktik stands for a curriculum tradition drawing on Bildung (=Bildung/Didaktik), and still having an impact on education in Finland. Didaktik has traditionally stressed the importance of classroom curriculum, and the autonomous role of the teacher. It is the task of the teacher to interpret, not just to implement curriculum.

**Curriculum:** Curriculum is a widespread curriculum tradition having its roots in the nineteenth century America. Since then, it has had a bureaucratic-administrative character prioritizing functionality, efficiency, predictability, and accountability. Tyler's (1949) *Basic principles of Curriculum and Instruction* addressing rational curriculum planning is mentioned as the icon of the field. The concept is often used as an antithesis to the subject-based approach of teaching when highlighting the child-centered curriculum and the comprehensive objectives of education. The instrumentalization of education, utility as a criteria for curriculum knowledge, is built in the Curriculum. It is the task of the teacher to implement the curriculum.

### The objectives of education according to Basic Education Act:

1. The purpose of education referred to in this Act is to support pupils' growth into humanity and into ethically responsible membership of society and to provide them with knowledge and skills needed in life. Furthermore, the aim of pre-primary education, as part of early childhood education, is to improve children's capacity for learning.

2. Education shall promote civilisation and equality in society and pupils' prerequisites for participating in education and otherwise developing themselves during their lives.

3. The aim of education shall further be to secure adequate equity in education throughout the country.

**Transversal competencies:** Transversal competence refers to an entity consisting of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and will. There are seven competencies in the core curriculum in Finland that cross the boundaries of and link different fields of knowledge and skills. These competencies are: 1. Thinking and learning to learn, 2. Cultural competence, interaction, and self-expression, 3. Taking care of oneself and managing daily life, 4. Multiliteracy, 5. Competence in information and communication technology (ICT), 6. Working life competence and entrepreneurship, and 7. Participation, involvement and building a sustainable future.

**Multidisciplinary learning modules:** Multidisciplinary learning modules are study periods of integrative instruction based on co-operation between subjects. There has to be at least one multidisciplinary learning module included in pupils' studies every school year; the topics of the modules are planned locally.

## **Text of the article**

### **Research on curriculum**

Finnish curriculum thought is a mixture of two main lines of Western curriculum thought: *Bildung/Didaktik* and *Curriculum*. The ideal of *Bildung* still prevailed in Finland in the first

half of the 20th century. After World War II education ideas were adopted not from Germany but from the United States. The spirit of *Bildung* inherited from German philosophy and science of education, and the American Tyler rationale highlighting rational planning and

educational psychology, have influenced the Finnish curriculum (Autio 2014; Saari, Salmela & Vilkkilä 2014; see also Rinne 1984).

In Finland, a major structural educational reform, comprehensive school reform, was established in the 1970s. The old dual, segregating, and thus, unequal, education system was replaced with a uniform comprehensive school system (grades 1–9), and its curriculum (Ahonen 2003). Since then, the curriculum for basic education has been revised approximately every 10 years.

The 1970 core curriculum direct steering of schools and teachers represented strongly centralized, science-based curriculum design (Rinne 1984; Saari et al. 2014). Similar to all curricula thereafter (Vitikka 2009: 61, 64), it was divided into two parts: A general part

covered contents such as general goals, and a subject part covered the objectives and core contents of teaching for each school subject. (e.g., Rinne 1984.)

From the 1980s onwards, more responsibility for the curriculum design was distributed to the local authorities (municipalities and schools) following the new dynamics of Finnish society. Deregulation was taken to the extreme with the 1994 core curriculum that accentuated school-level curriculum design, and teacher autonomy (e.g., Rokka 2011: 23-31). With deregulation, the doors opened to the values of a market-oriented and competitive educational policy: segregation of schools, and increased accountability (e.g., Ahonen 2003: 186-7; Saari et al. 2014: 194-5).

In the twenty-first century, the curriculum policy has returned to stronger centralized steering. The 2004 and 2014 curricula (Finnish National Core Curriculum 2014) are normative documents giving firm guidance (FNCC 2014; Rokka 2011: 32). The increased steering is justified by the need for equality and high quality of education and by ensuring favourable circumstances for students' growth and learning (FNCC 2014: 9). The local curriculum is still part of the steering of education.

Bildung-Didaktik and Curriculum have both influenced on the form of the curriculum (e.g., Autio 2014; Malinen 1992). *Lehrplan*, drawing from Didaktik and emphasizing knowledge “worthy of educational processes” (Künzli 1998: 32), is a curriculum model focusing on the content. It is a subject-based approach. *Curriculum*, often presented in its Deweyan version, accentuates the organization of curriculum around child-centered and comprehensive aims. It focuses on learning experiences. (Rokka 2011; Vitikka et al. 2012.) Since the 1970s, these two curriculum models together have formed the basic structure of the Finnish curriculum (Rokka 2011; Vitikka et al. 2012). With the 2014 core curriculum, there was a shift to competence-based curriculum in line with the Curriculum tradition.

In terms of impact of the primary school curriculum, the Finnish Education Evaluation Center (FINECC) carries out thematic and systems evaluation. Evaluation of the implementation of the national core curriculum for pre-primary and primary education is one of the current research issues.

### **Curriculum structure**

The FNCC 2014 is divided into two parts. The general part covers contents such as the significance of local curricula and the local curriculum process, mission and general goals of basic education, and assessment. The part covering subject content is divided by grades (1 and 2 and 3–6). According to FNCC 2014, students acquire competence in individual fields of knowledge and in competence that crosses the subject boundaries (**transversal competencies** and **multidisciplinary learning modules**).

Unlike the 2004 core curriculum that emphasized subject contents, the FNCC 2014 emphasized the general objectives in terms of key competences. To ensure the new status of competencies, they have been taken into account in the definition of the objectives and content areas of the subjects. Therefore, the links between the objectives of competencies and of the subjects, are very clearly pointed out. This move toward emphasizing general objectives, instead of subject-matter teaching, is a fairly dramatic shift in the Finnish education. (Hardy & Uljens 2018: 64).

### **Curriculum process**

The government determines the general national **education objectives** (Basic Education Act 628/1998 and Government Decree 422/2012) and the distribution of lesson hours for different subjects. The Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE) working together with the Ministry of Education and Culture, determines the objectives and core contents of subjects and cross-curricular themes. The FNCC 2014 process led by the FNAE was carried out as an interactive process.

A national curriculum is not directly implemented in primary schools. The practice of education providers forming their own curricula, has become a consistent policy. The local curriculum, the outcome of an integrative curriculum process together with local education authorities and schools, is a significant part of the steering of education. The task of the local curriculum is to set out and implement national targets and goals, and tasks considered important locally FNCC (2014:9).

Because Finnish teachers have an academic education (for primary school teachers since 1979), they are active participants in designing the curriculum. Until today, the autonomous

role of the teacher remains accentuated (Saari et. al. 2014; Sahlberg 2015). It is supported by research-based teacher education highlighting scientific thinking (Sahlberg 2015).

## **Textbooks**

A shift from textbooks to multiple (e.g., digital) learning materials is currently occurring. Students are audiences and producers of texts of various kinds, using different media devices and platforms. Due to the transfer, teachers have to take account of varied meaning-making patterns and practices. (Kulju et al. 2018.) As the use of literacy in everyday life depends on context and purpose, and literacy and meaning making are multimodal, the shift from textbooks to multiple teaching and learning materials is evident.

However, textbooks are still in use. Since 1992, learning materials have not been authorized by the government. Private publishers independently interpret the curricula in educational resources. Learning materials are typically created by a team, and they are usually meant for one subject and for one grade. (Tainio 2012.) In the Finnish system, all learning materials are free of charge.

## **Teaching resources**

Textbooks are usually accompanied by a workbook or by other kinds of supplementary learning material and always with a guidebook for teachers (Tainio 2012). There is also a broad scale of online support material for teaching maintained by the FNAE.

## **Standards**

Standardization is one of the globally common features of education policies and reform principles employed in attempts to improve the quality of education, especially in terms of raising student achievement. Outcomes-based education reform in the 1980s, followed by standards-based education policies in the 1990s along with external standardized testing and school evaluation systems, shifted the focus of attention to educational outcomes. (Sahlberg 2015: 144-145.) It is due to the *Bildung-Didaktik* tradition, Autio (2014) suggests, that the Finnish educational system is surprisingly immune to standardization. The ideology is to

steer through information, support and funding. Thus, not only the teacher autonomy but also the autonomy of schools is unique to Finnish educational system.

## Content

The school year comprises 190 school days. The minimum number of weekly lessons for students is 20 for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades, 22 for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, 24 for 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and 25 for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades. In Table 1 there is an example of a weekly schedule for 2<sup>nd</sup> graders (children aged 8 years).

**Table 1: A Schedule for a 2<sup>nd</sup> Grader**

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8.05-8.50	Math A (rt)		MT & L (ct)	MDL	
8.55-9.40	MT & L (rt)	MDL	PE	R / E	PE
A break outdoors					
10.15-10.40	L	U	N	C	H
10.40-11.20	ES	MDL	MDL	MDL	Math (rt)
11.20-12.05	VA+Library	Crafts	MDL	MDL	MT & L
A break outdoors					
12.20-13.05	Math B	Math (rt)			Music

Subjects in grades 1-6 are Native Language and Literature, Second National Language, Foreign Languages, Mathematics, Environmental Studies, Religion, Ethics, History and Social Studies (starting in Grade 4), Music, Visual arts, Crafts, Physical Education and Guidance Counseling. There are also optional lessons, for example, in art and skill subjects. (FNCC 2014.)

## Assessment

Instead of national exams, student assessment in primary education is based on continuous assessment. No school inspectorate or school rankings based on student performance exist,

which leaves teachers considerable room to maneuver in planning pedagogical activities and assessment of student learning. (Salokangas & Kauko 2015.) Finnish educational policies and practices, in many respects, run counter to the dominating doctrines of the global education reform movement, emphasizing, among others accountability, or quality assurance (Varjo, Simola & Rinne 2013: 53).

Student assessment in Finland can be divided into three types. The classroom assessment by teachers include diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment of the students as part of teaching and learning. Teachers are supposed to design various assessment methods. There is a comprehensive evaluation of students' progress after each semester with a report card indicating performance in academic and nonacademic subjects, and in behaviour and engagement (Sahlberg 2015: 93-94). In grades 1–7 verbal assessments and/or numerical grades are used. Assessments in grades 2 and 6 are more regulate and more informative for students and their families. There is also external assessment. Regular national assessments are carried out by the FINECC using sample-based methodology including about 10 percent of an age cohort.

### **Stakeholders**

Curricula processes are carried out in collaboration with the teacher education and research, educational providers, schools, and other interest groups identified as important actors in the field. Students and their parents are involved in the process. There is also an open online platform for all citizens to participate.

### **Other influences**

Curriculum-development processes are no longer limited simply to the individual nation-state, but to an increasing degree, reflect both national and transnational (“global”) influences (Hardy and Uljens 2018: 50). In the FNCC 2014, the concept of globalization is connected to working life through globalization of the economy, for example (FNCC 2014: 24). The expression often used in the FNCC 2014 is globalizing and rapidly changing world (e.g., FNCC 2014: 149). In addition, transversal competencies reflect partly a Europeanisation process as they correspond with the eight key-competencies advanced by European Union

(Hardy & Uljens 2018: 63-64). The FNCC 2014 is a mixture of the non-selective, uniform comprehensive school combined to influences of globalization (Mäkinen & Kujala 2017).

### Further reading and online resources

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