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Commentary on a Finnish Study Tour

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Abstract

This article provides a commentary on the scope of a National Louis University study tour to Finland and learning about the history of approaches to curriculum for Finnish comprehensive schools. A brief summary of a new curriculum being phased in between 2016-2019 is provided.

Seven days.

What can you really learn in a week?



Finland.

Three cities.

Five schools.

What can you really learn in a week?

Sixteen National Louis University College of Education 2017 study tour participants exploring their surroundings



and

Meeting and talking with

In-service and preservice teachers,

Principals and assistant principals,

Faculty from the University of Jyväskylä, and

Education leaders from the Finnish Agency for Education, the Trade Union of Education,
and the Ministry of Education and Culture.

What can you really learn in a week?

But, we have to confess that it really wasn't just one week. Most of our tour group participated in a book club, reading and discussing *Finnish Lessons 2.0* (Sahlberg, 2015) during monthly meetings from September through February. And then there was Pasi Sahlberg himself, who videoconferenced with our book club, suggested the cities we should visit, and connected us with the Finnish Director General at the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation (CIMO) for further assistance.

What can you really learn in a week?

Three cities: Helsinki, Jyväskylä, and Turku.

Five schools: child care center, grades 1-6, grades 7-9, vocational high school, immigrant adult ed vocational institute.

Expert guidance and well-informed travelers who were university and school faculty and administrators along with a few friends.
Sixteen participants times seven days.

Let me share just a bit about our learning related to Finland's new curriculum.

When we entered the teacher's lounge of the Teacher Training School at the University of Jyväskylä, we noticed several volumes on display, including an edited book by Eija Kimonen and Raimo Nevalainen. As we finished our midday school lunch, Raimo, a lecturer at the university, gave me a warm welcome and kindly shared a copy of the book, *Reforming Teaching and Teacher Education: Bright Prospects for Active Schools* (2017). The edited volume includes chapters by contributors from Finland, China, Japan, Latvia, Norway, Romania, and the United States.

The chapter that was of most interest was "Educational Change and School Culture: Curriculum Change in the Finnish School System" (Nevalainen, Kimonen, & Alsbury, 2017). This is because many of us went to Finland to consider what may be different in the preparation of teachers and the conduct of school. The authors summarize current changes in education occurring around the world, including reform focused on:

- standardization over contextualization,
- efficiencies over human agency,
- centralized over localized locus of educational control,
- policy-oriented over empowerment-oriented teacher professionalism, and
- school choice (p. 197, underlining added).

They contrast the above reforms with Finnish education and, in some cases, with findings from studies completed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of curriculum, both a brief history of approaches to curriculum (classical versus idealistic) for Finnish comprehensive schools (lower level, grades 1-6; and upper level, grades 7-9) from 1970 to 2014, and consideration of the connection between curriculum and school culture. One interesting section discusses a 1990's focus on dynamic school-developed curriculum:

A school organization that follows a school-based curriculum has its own culture that can be changed and improved. This requires collegial cooperation and in-depth reflection on thought and action models. The objective is to empower teachers to influence the direction and development of reforms. (p. 216)

However, not all teachers welcomed this opportunity, sensing a lack of their own preparation for this work, concern with the time to be invested, and finding collaboration to be a challenge in their school setting.

Nevalainen, Kimonen, and Alsbury end the chapter with a description of the new 2014 Finnish National Core Curriculum and a recognition of the need for continuing education for teachers to

enact the curriculum as it is phased in between 2016-2019. New concepts in the curriculum include “‘school culture,’ which is based on a learning community, and ‘transversal competence,’ which refers to the competencies needed in the future” (p. 213). Seven interconnected competence dimensions are described:

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. ICT competence;
6. employability competence and entrepreneurship; and
7. participation, involvement, and ability to build a sustainable future (pp. 213-214).

The authors conclude that “development of transversal competencies in students, as well as the creation and implementation of local curricula, all require schools and teachers to promote a collegial and collaborative school culture” (p. 214). They view the school as a learning organization “which requires teachers to critically reflect on their own operating principles and practices as well as to renew them; in other words, they have to create a new school context” (p. 215).

As our visit to the Teacher Training School at the University of Jyväskylä came to a close, we learned more about changes in the preservice teacher preparation curriculum to enable future teachers to effectively implement the 2014 Finnish National Core Curriculum, including competency to lead change in the development of school culture. This echoed an introductory presentation we had heard earlier in the week on the renewal of teacher education by a speaker from the Ministry of Education and Culture.

What can you really learn in a week?

Those of us who went on the tour came away with a strong bond—a bond not just because we had traveled together, but a bond affirming our appreciation for what Sahlberg calls “the Finnish Way” (Sahlberg, 2015). Many of us went to Finland to consider what may be different in the preparation of teachers and the conduct of school. What we found was a respect for students, teachers, learning, and cooperation.

Arlene Borthwick is Associate Dean and Professor at the National College of Education, National Louis University in Chicago. Her teaching, research, and service has focused on technology in education. She has participated in study tours to Costa Rica, New Zealand, and Finland, serving as primary organizer for the latter two professional development offerings.

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Web Resources

University of Jyväskylä Teacher Training School

<https://www.norssi.jyu.fi/info/university-of-jyvaskyla-teacher-training-school>