

Finland

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

In Finland, education is considered a fundamental right of all citizens, and the main objective of Finnish education policy is to offer all citizens equal opportunities to receive education, regardless of age, nationality, place of residence, financial situation, or mother tongue.¹

The Finnish government determines the general objectives of basic education and the allocation of instruction time among subjects. The National Agency for Education, reporting to the Ministry of Education and Culture, draws up the national core curricula for basic and upper secondary general education, as well as early childhood education and care. The agency also financially supports education, offers training services, and organizes education development projects. Municipalities have significant freedom in organizing schooling along the general national guidelines, and schools and teachers have autonomy regarding pedagogical practices and methods of student assessment within the guidelines of the municipal curriculum that has been prepared based on the national core curriculum.

The majority of students attend publicly funded schools. Municipalities or consolidations of municipalities maintain most primary and upper secondary level institutions. Private schools receive the same amount of public funding as other schools and follow the same policies.

Before compulsory education begins, a child must participate in one year of preprimary education, which municipalities are obligated to provide. Compulsory education usually starts the year in which a child turns 7 years old. The basic education syllabus spans nine years (Grades 1 to 9), which nearly all children complete by attending comprehensive school. Basic education is free of charge for all students and includes textbooks and other materials, a free daily meal, school health care, and other welfare services.

The upper secondary level comprises general and vocational education. Both have a three-year syllabus, and they both provide general eligibility for university of applied science and university studies. The first national examination, the matriculation examination, takes place at the end of general upper secondary education. In 2021, compulsory education was extended until a child turns 18 and includes preprimary, basic, and upper secondary education. Upper secondary education is now free of charge like lower levels of education.²

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Finland has participated in PIRLS since 2011. Finland also participates in several other international student assessments. Several articles and reports have been published exploring the strengths and weaknesses of the Finnish education system in light of PIRLS and other reading literacy assessments. Different reading literacy assessments have had an impact on development of the national core curriculum in early childhood, basic, and upper secondary education, as well as on development of a national literacy strategy.³ Results of the assessments also have generated several initiatives to increase reading.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

A new core curriculum for basic education⁴ was introduced in Finland in 2014 and implemented in 2016. The curriculum establishes the learning objectives in each subject and describes the content on a general level. In the new basic education curriculum, the following seven transversal competency areas intersect all school subjects: Thinking and Learning to Learn; Cultural Competence, Interaction, and Self-Expression; Taking Care of Oneself and Managing Daily Life; Multiliteracy; Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Competence; Working Life Competence and Entrepreneurship; and Participation, Involvement, and Building a Sustainable Future.⁵ The national core curriculum has guidelines for teaching reading under the subject Mother Tongue and Literature. The transversal competencies of Multiliteracy and ICT Competence have a strong focus on literacy and reading skills as well. Multiliteracy is defined as the ability to find, interpret, produce, and evaluate different kinds of age-appropriate texts when information is presented by systems of verbal, visual, auditive, numeric, and kinesthetic symbols and their combinations. ICT Competence comprises practical skills and personal production, responsible and safe use of ICT, information management and inquiry-based and creative work, and interaction and networking.

In addition to the learning objectives and subject matter content, the national core curriculum stipulates the minimum amount of instruction time for each subject as a number of lessons per week per year. For Mother Tongue and Literature, the minimum amount of instruction is 14 lessons per week (45 minutes per lesson) across Grades 1 and 2, 18 lessons per week across Grades 3 to 6, and 10 lessons per week across Grades 7 to 9. Municipalities decide how to distribute lessons per week for each grade across the grade spans; for instance, they could distribute the 18 lessons per week across Grades 3 to 6 as 5 lessons per week for third grade, 5 lessons per week for fourth grade, 4 lessons per week for fifth grade, and 4 lessons per week for sixth grade. Mother Tongue and Literature must be taught in every grade of the basic education cycle. Municipalities may decide to exceed the minimum amount of instruction time.

Separate mother tongue curricula are used for Finnish and the minority languages: Swedish, Sámi, Finnish Romany, and Finnish sign language. The guidelines for teaching reading are

essentially the same (especially for Finnish, Swedish, and Sámi); however, some differences and language-specific areas of emphasis exist. The following description is based on the curriculum for Finnish as the mother tongue because it is the curriculum taught to the vast majority of students.

The general objective of the national curriculum for Mother Tongue and Literature is for students to become active and responsible communicators and readers. Instruction must be founded on students' linguistic and cultural skills and experience and offer opportunities for diversified communication (including reading) through which students can build identity and self-esteem. Each subject must have a foundation in a range of texts and be conceived broadly; texts can be spoken or written, fictional or factual, verbal, figurative, vocal, graphic, or a combination of these.

In Grades 1 and 2, the focuses of teaching Mother Tongue and Literature are on creating a foundation for reading and writing skills, and developing skills to learn and interact. The aim of teaching is to build interest in language, expression, and the production and interpretation of various texts. Mother Tongue and Literature has four content areas in Grades 1 and 2: acting in interactive situations; interpreting texts; producing texts; and understanding language, literature, and culture. Objectives for interpreting texts are as follows:

- Learn to read and practice the necessary concepts in sound, letter, syllable, word, sentence, ending sign, title, text, and image
- Support comprehension skills and practice comprehension strategies
- Read and interpret diverse texts and their meanings and structures; interpret texts with images; interpret children's literature, simple informational texts, and media texts
- Consider the meanings of words and phrases as well as word choices in texts and expand the range of concepts
- Get acquainted with different ways of expressing time, order, and place, especially in narrative, descriptive, and directing texts, and learn to use the basic concepts of narration, such as the main character, the place and time of the event, and the plot
- Share reading experiences in different ways, discuss the contents of texts, and practice narrating the text in one's own words; practice searching for information by making observations about their surroundings, as well as practice telling information to others

Furthermore, in the transversal competency area of Multiliteracy, students are encouraged to use and produce different kinds of texts, enjoy them, and express themselves through them. Students' basic reading and writing skills should develop and become more fluent through literacy practices of different subject lessons. They also are guided to consider the relationship between the imaginary and the real world, and the background of the author and purpose of text to develop critical thinking. In the area of ICT Competence, students are guided to use key search engines, try different tools, and complete small assignments to acquire information on different topics and matters of personal interest.

In Grades 3 to 6, teaching focuses on consolidating learning and interaction skills, the hobby of reading, and fluent and varied reading and writing skills. In connection with the interpretation and production of texts, students examine the features of language and the means of literature. Reading short texts progresses to reading complete works and sharing diverse reading experiences. Content areas are the same as in Grades 1 and 2 but objectives for interpreting texts are as follows:

- Practice fluent reading of various texts, such as fiction, nonfiction, and media texts that combine image and text, and use text comprehension strategies and thinking skills appropriate to the situation and goal; observe and evaluate one's own reading skills
- Deepen text interpretation skills by researching and comparing diverse texts; learn to recognize the linguistic and textual features of narrative, descriptive, guiding, and simple positional texts
- Practice explaining, comparing, and reflecting on the meanings of words, their synonyms, language images, sayings, concepts, and their hierarchies; classify words by meaning and form (word categories); consider the meanings of the different pronouns and learn the inflection of verbs in personality and tense forms
- Read and listen to jointly selected and self-selected literature for children and young people, including entire works
- Search for information from a variety of sources and expand knowledge through reading
- Practice evaluating the reliability of texts and sources

Furthermore, teaching interpreting texts is intertwined with producing texts. Teaching should encourage the student to develop his or her knowledge of and interest in literature, media, and other texts by creating opportunities for positive reading, satisfying the student's need for information, and sharing reading experiences, also in multimedia environments. In the transversal competency area of Multiliteracy, students are expected to make progress in their command of basic reading and writing skills and techniques in different environments and contexts. They practice analyzing fiction, nonfiction, and argumentation and recognizing the difference among them. The students are guided in observing and interpreting their textual environment to realize that texts have different purposes that influence the choice of devices used in them. Additionally, in the area of ICT Competence students are encouraged to use search engines to find information in several different sources. They are guided in using sources to produce information and to practice evaluating information critically. The students are encouraged to seek modes of expression that are suitable for them as well as to use ICT in documenting and assessing their working process and products.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

In Finland, teachers' collective working agreements specify that they should participate in professional development for three days during each school year.⁶ However, school development and teachers' professional learning often are integrated in projects, with additional time spent on professional development. Teacher employers, such as municipalities, typically are responsible for organizing and funding their staff's professional development. The content and focus of in-service training vary among municipalities and regional authorities.

The Finnish National Agency for Education provides funding for teachers' professional development that municipalities can apply for, and it provides in-service training that usually focuses on topics relevant to national education policy and new curricula.⁷ Professional development opportunities are usually free of charge, and only teacher replacement costs and occasional travel costs are paid by the school or municipality.

There have been several professional development programs, especially after the PIRLS 2016 cycle, that have focused on reading. Programs called LUKILOKI,⁸ Luki-ILO,⁹ and Gränsland¹⁰ (for Swedish-speaking teachers) provide theory and practice worth 15 study credits to all primary to upper secondary level teachers who are interested in teaching reading and writing. In addition, several institutions, organizations, and projects, such as The Finnish Institute for Children's Literature¹¹ and the New Literacies Program,¹² have provided information and ready-to-use materials for teachers to use within school development days as well as in lessons.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Reading is assessed within the subject of Mother Tongue and Literature. Teachers are responsible for student assessment in the classroom and may decide on the methods of assessment, which typically include examinations made by teachers, examinations based on the textbook, and continual observation of student progress. Curriculum has included instructions for teachers at Grades 6 and 9 about what skills and knowledge a student should have to earn Mark 8 ("good"). This instruction was extended to some other marks in fall 2021.

The only national examination students may take is the matriculation examination, which includes an essay and reading comprehension tasks, that takes place at the end of general upper secondary school.

According to the Basic Education Act,¹³ external evaluations such as national and international assessments are used to measure learning outcomes. Large-scale national assessments focus on school subjects, are sample-based, and are conducted by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). Reading proficiency is included in assessments of the subject Mother Tongue and Literature, where the latest national assessment (Finnish¹⁴ and Swedish¹⁵) was administered to ninth grade students in 2019. The evaluation covered interpreting and producing texts and understanding language, literature, and culture. In 2018, FINEEC started a longitudinal

assessment of development of students' skills during comprehensive school in mathematics and Mother Tongue and Literature. The same students are assessed in several grades.¹⁶ FINEEC also has assessed the learning outcomes in Sámi languages,¹⁷ the Romany language,¹⁸ and Finnish sign language¹⁹ in lower secondary schools. In addition to national assessment, international assessments (such as the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement [IEA]'s PIRLS and International Computer and Information Literacy Study [ICILS], and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]'s Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA]) are used to monitor reading proficiency.²⁰ They are also used to renew curriculum and learning objectives.

Special Reading Initiatives

In the last decade, there have been over 40 initiatives, projects, or professional development programs regarding literacy skills and especially interest in reading (e.g., projects by The Finnish Reading Center).²¹ As in the core curriculum, the concept of multiliteracy is highlighted in several national reading initiatives. In 2017, the Ministry of Education and Culture set a National Literacy Forum to draft guidelines on how to develop children's literacy and interest in reading. This work was continued in 2019 by the Literacy Movement program led by the Finnish National Agency for Education, which promotes the importance of both multiliteracy and multilingualism.²² On the basis of the program, Finland's first National Literacy Strategy has been created. The aim of the strategy is to make literacy skills widely recognized in all fields and develop practices so everyone receives support and reinforcement for their own literacy throughout their lives. The strategy aims to strengthen multiliteracy skills and encourage reading.²³

Many of the campaigns and programs in Finland aim to strengthen not only children's reading of printed materials but also their reading of online texts and their media literacy skills (e.g., New Literacies Program²⁴ and CRITICAL²⁵). Many initiatives focus on promoting the joy of reading, for example, by donating book packages to schools (*Lukuklaani*²⁶), by introducing new children's literature (e.g., *Lukemo*²⁷), by introducing reading diploma applications (e.g., *Lukutaito kuuluu kaikille*²⁸), or by facilitating author visits to schools (The Finnish Reading Center²⁹). Immigrant families and multilingualism are also noted as The Finnish Reading Center studies the capacity of immigrant families, Kindergartens, and schools to support children's multilingualism and knowledge of their own mother tongue.³⁰

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In March 2020, the Finnish government decided on measures to address the coronavirus outbreak, leading to a rapid transition to distance learning at all levels of education. School buildings were closed throughout Finland from March 18 to May 13. However, contact (in-person) teaching for Grades 1 to 3 was allowed to continue for the children of parents working in sectors critical to the functioning of society and for students who required it according to decisions on special needs support. Despite the right to contact teaching for these students, it was recommended that all students participate in distance learning if possible.³¹ In the autumn semester of 2020, basic education was organized as contact teaching. If contact teaching could not be arranged safely due to the coronavirus situation, temporary legislation allowed the transition to distance learning at the school, municipality, or regional level in academic year 2020–2021.³² Hybrid instruction, where some students study at school while others learn at home (e.g., due to quarantine), has also taken place. After the nationwide school closure in spring 2020, distance learning has been used in Grades 1 to 9 only in individual classes, schools, or small areas for as short a time as possible to stop the coronavirus from spreading. The Helsinki metropolitan area has required the most distance learning arrangements in Finland.

In general, the education system proved to be quite flexible as students switched to distance learning by using digital tools.³³ Teaching and guidance were provided in real time (e.g., through Microsoft Teams), in nonreal time (e.g., using the Wilma communication system), or through a combination of these.³⁴ Schools and teachers themselves decided on the method of instruction during the distance learning periods. Some teachers had online meetings in every lesson, some used online lessons only occasionally to give instructions and new assignments, and some gave task packages that students returned via an online learning environment or over email. Schools were required to provide a computer or other digital device to any student who did not have equipment at home.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

Several national studies on the exceptional situation caused by the pandemic have been conducted at different levels of education, and the effects of the pandemic on student learning have been diverse.³⁵ Studies show that the lack of contact teaching especially affected students already in need of support and students who belong to language minorities. Distance learning requires good learning and study capabilities that not every student has. Consequently, the different levels of support received by students at home created inequality.³⁶ Also, not all students had access to a quiet working space, especially in families with many children.³⁷

Students' own views on distance learning have been varied. Some students indicated that distance learning suited them and they learned more effectively at home than at school.³⁸ However,

one-third of primary school students indicated that they learned less than usual during distance learning. According to students, self-motivating was the most difficult part of distance learning.³⁹

Policy and Practice Changes

After the start of the pandemic, the Finnish government introduced temporary legislation that enabled distance learning. The pandemic also emphasized teachers' need for e-learning pedagogy, which has been noted in teacher education and in-service teachers' professional development.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

Due to the lockdown of schools in spring 2020, only one-third of student data was gathered in the field trial. In addition, scoring the open-ended student responses was challenging due to distance working. In spring 2021, during PIRLS main data collection, there were no nationwide school closures; however, some classes were quarantined for two weeks or several students were absent. Achieving a high enough participation rate at the classroom level was challenging for schools.

Suggested Readings

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