

A SERIES OF SMALL REALIZATIONS: MY FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE IN FINLAND

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ABSTRACT

As a Fulbright Teaching Fellow in Finland, I researched Finnish pedagogical strategies and systemic norms that implement competence-based learning. In working with classroom teachers, school administrators, government officials and university experts, I saw how Finnish schools are identifying structural and cultural norms that enhance and hinder that goal. This paper is an abridged recollection of my findings, as well as how the research process evolved my personal and professional identities.

Keywords: curriculum change • transversal competences • teacher autonomy • assessment • Finland • comparative education



BACKGROUND

My journey to the Fulbright Distinguished Award in Teaching started with an analogy about a bicycle. In Ted Dintersmith and Tony Wagner's 2015 book, *Most Likely to Succeed*, the authors characterize meaningful learning through the lens of riding a bike. As a kid, or adult, or teen, you learn to ride a bike through scaffolding supports (like training wheels and an encouraging adult) and with failure (scraped hands and bruised knees). Over time, hesitation gives way to confidence and eventually, the skill becomes one exerted without much brain power. To Dintersmith and Wagner, this is the epitome of learning that sticks. But the opposite, they argue, is the approach of most classrooms.

If you contextualize the bike analogy in a typical high school, students would construct a diagram of the parts of a bicycle and memorize the history of its creation. While they would learn about different types of bikes and watch videos of others riding one, they would never actually get on a bike themselves. They would never enter what cognitive scientists deem the 'learning pit' – the place where one encounters a challenge, struggles with it, and eventually develops support and skill sets to emerge on the other side.

A NATIONAL CORE CURRICULUM FOR FINLAND

One year after Dintersmith and Wagner's book, in 2016, Finland published a new national core curriculum. It made headlines because it reconceptualized learning, in that it prioritized the mastery of seven transversal competences (over the traditional mastery of content knowledge). The curriculum was a response to several ongoing conversations in the world of education. As digitalization hit schools and students accessed more information than ever before, a teacher's job was reimagined. Jenna Lähdemäki, a Finnish researcher, wrote "the 2016 curriculum started with the understanding that the impact of globalization and the need for a sustainable future were reshaping the skills and competences needed to succeed in society and working life." (Lahdemaki, 2019)

In design, the Finnish curriculum argues that facts are a vehicle to develop new ways of thinking and skill sets. Thus, when kids enter the reality of adult life, where unknowns appear daily, they can question the situation at hand to acquire and comprehend necessary information. More importantly, they can use those skill sets to translate information into relevant action.

This curriculum came at a time when I was questioning my own teaching practice and my purpose in a classroom. The idea of transferring 500 years of world history to my teenage students felt defeatist and largely irrational. However, developing critical thinking skills and habits, learning to evaluate a source for credibility and bias, making sense of an overwhelming amount of information, and crafting an evidence-based argument built on multiple perspectives... felt purposeful.

And so I left my classroom in suburban New Jersey. I went to Helsinki, seven years after its curriculum redesign, to see what a system built on this premise looked like. I wanted to learn how a school's policies and culture, as well as a teacher's instructional strategies, could actualize competence-based learning. But what I found was a system still in flux. In simple terms, I had not accounted for the realistic constraints of implementing such large scale change.

GETTING TO KNOW THE FINNISH SCHOOL SYSTEM

I spent my first month in Finnish schools confused – why was I seeing classrooms that functioned so similarly to those back home? As I spent more time with teachers and in classrooms, however, I observed the roots of change. I learned more about the Finnish education system and saw several structural barriers that complicated the process. As such, my research questions shifted, towards understanding the challenges and successes of implementing competence-based learning and teaching.

Between January and June of 2022, I observed classrooms in upper secondary schools (grades 10-12) and comprehensive schools (Grades 1-9), accounting for insight into both primary (elementary) and lower secondary (junior high) education. I returned to these schools several times and often had the chance to work with new teachers. Although my background is in the social sciences, the classrooms I observed represented a spectrum of disciplines – English, History, Working Life, Art, Mathematics, Music, Philosophy, and Crafts. This allowed me to test competence learning’s holistic capabilities, rather than testing its suitability in one subject. In total, twenty six Finnish educators and relevant professionals sat with me, many of them on several occasions, to talk about their perception of curriculum change, teacher training, professional development, and the pressures they face. In these interviews, educators shared with me their hopes and a much deeper context of the Finnish education system.

Inherently, I filtered my observations of Finnish classrooms through my own experiences, specifically the last seven years at a high school in New Jersey. Many of my follow-up questions came from this lens. To account for that, I had to identify the ways in which my assumptions were on display. This allowed me to examine my judgments, practices, and belief systems. And in doing so, I saw how my research, and my own identity as an educator, evolved.

CONNECTING DOTS BETWEEN FINNISH AND AMERICAN SCHOOLS

Throughout this learning process, the overarching question was: How do Finnish schools transfer to a different context, such as the United States, and more specifically, New Jersey? To answer this question, I think of Finnish approaches that require minimal money, fancy equipment, or country dependent resources. Finnish schools make use of the human capital at their fingertips, strategically align values with goals, precisely evaluate and monitor results, and implement change alongside the larger community.

One commonality amongst Finnish schools and teachers is how they leverage the nearby community. It is regular practice to visit a nearby business or organization that employs concepts students are learning about. Coursework is supplemented by testimony from relevant experts – ranging from university professors, local professionals, relevant nonprofits, artists, and even global contacts. Field trips, or getting outside of the classroom, are encouraged and easily facilitated. In some cases, the community funds learning experiences for students.

American school districts can also reimagine the learning environment. There are small businesses, nearby universities, local artists, nonprofits, and other professionals in every American municipality. Schools can visit these places or host relevant experts to add a sense of practical implementation to abstract theories and concepts. And with the help of digital conferencing

tools, like Zoom, a school's range is global. Likewise, American schools can implement the Finnish idea of "Project Week," where just two classes meet each day. Each class is given a 3-hour block, in which teachers undertake in depth and multi-step group projects, simulation experiences, or field trips.

Additionally, school leaders must enable teachers to experiment with interdisciplinary modules. For example, one school I visited offered a course that challenged students to design their own escape rooms. The class blended the mathematical premises of game design, probability, and using equations to solve puzzles. Students also designed their rooms in English (a foreign language) and applied historical knowledge for the game's plot. Along the way, students heard from University experts in these fields, and received feedback on their projects at various stages. In the same school, another course blended art, business, ethics, marketing and fashion. This course, referred to as 'Ethical Hat Production,' engages students' artistic capabilities without forgetting the practical and production aspects of the fashion industry.

Another key takeaway is Finland's approach to assessment. Multiple choice is rarely used because it is not considered a test of knowledge, mastery or metacognition. Secondly, emphasis is placed on peer and self-directed feedback. These strategies are easily transferable. American teachers can also approach assessment and feedback as cyclical, instead of just regarding the final product. Peer and self-feedback can be triggered by consistently asking students: What is challenging you? What do you feel confident in? What changes do you need to make to continue? A student's honest, thoughtful reflections can be considered an assessment of its own. As Finnish schools demonstrate, there are a range of alternatives to the default exam model.

Beyond individual classrooms, the Finnish system highlights a standardized exam built on skill-based questions. In recent years, matriculation exams incorporate questions based on a variety of multimedia sources. Using these, students must pose a solution, prediction, or justify an argument. American teachers can employ these types of questions immediately. And systemically, standardized state exams, AP Exams, and other national tests can rely less on multiple choice questions and more on critical thinking. While this would mean changes to grading systems and challenges from for-profit testing companies, certain American exams (like the Advanced Placement Capstone exam) are already moving towards this model.

Of course, Finnish schools can also learn from their American counterparts. Throughout my Fulbright, I missed walking into a classroom alive with the chattiness of 25 or so teenagers. My students are used to group projects. Likewise, my colleagues and I operate in a system that assumes our ability and desire to collaborate. My students are also open to sharing parts of their lives with one another and myself. Their random, off-topic questions deepen conversations and consistently teach me something new. This also provides access to their honest feedback, which is the most useful professional development I receive.

Finnish schools operate under different cultural norms. Given the high level of teacher autonomy and trust, it is less common for Finnish teachers to collaborate or to co-plan. More so, the Finnish classrooms I saw were calmer, and random questions less likely. It was rare to witness expressive outbursts. Generating conversation amongst a group took more time. In this regard, the collaborative culture and open dialogue of American schools can help actualize competence learning in Finland.

A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

A stark contrast between Finnish and American schools is the relative equality. All of the schools I visited had well-kept facilities, big windows, equal resources, and high-quality/performing teachers. No school is labeled as “bad.” While high school students choose a nearby school to attend, this decision is based on special programming or location as opposed to quality. As one parent said, *“If my family moves, no matter where we go, my children will have a good school.”*

This isn’t by happenstance. The national government provides equal funding to all schools in Finland. Private schools as Americans know them do not exist- no academic institution can charge tuition; they are funded through public dollars. The national government also supplements schools with additional challenges. For example, those with higher levels of immigrant students may require additional teachers to teach Finnish as a Second Language or other supports. And while individual municipalities use local tax dollars to further fund their schools, this does not create resource disparity. Wealthier communities provide funds to less populated towns (that may have less at their disposal). When I spoke with a Deputy Mayor in the capital region, he commented *“What’s the point if all schools aren’t on the same playing field?”*

The mentality of “taking care of all” is evident in the fundamental trust that permeates Finnish society. When I first arrived in January, I was taken aback by seeing young kids on public transport by themselves. Seeing groups of teenagers walking around the city at midday was also jarring. One teacher, who lived in the Bay Area of California for several years, commented on why he feels that raising kids in Finland is easier. *“In the States,”* he said, *“I always had to take my kids to their activities. It meant leaving work, or figuring out alternate means. But here, my kids can take the bus or tram to where they need to be.”*

Trust in overall society carries into the professional life of teachers. In the 1980s, Finland did away with formal observations. Instead, teachers have “coaching” discussions with administrators. One principal explained, *“We talk mostly about what a teacher needs to feel supported in their work/life balance.”* When I told him about the system in New Jersey, he balked a bit. The idea of set observations, where teachers are “graded” along a rubric, felt *“unnecessarily hierarchical.”*

Trust in teachers also changes interactions with parents. One teacher said of his twenty year career, “*I think there have been three times that parents have questioned me on something.*” Interactions are largely initiated by teachers to communicate updates and discuss the growth of a student. And even when a parent reaches out, it tends to be curious or to communicate information about their child. Although teachers remarked that contact with parents has increased in recent years, only a few could think of a contentious guardian interaction. As one teacher said, the expectation is that “*I am doing what is in the best interest of their child.*”

Trust also changes the logistics of Finnish upper secondary schools. Students schedule their own courses, much like in American universities. Certain classes are offered in the earliest time slot (8:15) or latest (3:00), but students can choose classes at times that benefit them. Given the safety and availability of public transport, students can arrive at different times each morning. They don't rely on a common bus schedule or family members for rides. Similarly, students leave when they are done with classes for the day. Additionally, it is standard to have fifteen minutes between class periods. In this time, or during a free period, students make use of communal spaces. Hallways are peppered with couches, high top tables, and other informal seating arrangements. Here, students will catch up on homework, study, spend time with friends, or take advantage of activities like ping pong, foosball, and air hockey tables.

TAKEAWAYS

When I recount my Finnish experience, I can discern patterns and overarching themes, takeaways that will make me a better teacher, researcher, and advocate for change. My Fulbright provided the luxury of analyzing two systems simultaneously. While my data collection focused on Finnish schools, my subconscious always linked back to the school I come from and the kids I left behind. Moving forward, I will carry more leverage when pushing for change in my New Jersey school. I witnessed a range of solutions, from Finnish educators, that could help with parallel issues in the States. Further, I saw how a nation builds itself around equal funding and communal safety, and how policy shapes much of that.

My Fulbright allowed me to collaborate with Finnish teachers. Together, we created projects and conversations between our students. I am excited to continue this exchange and open my students to Finnish culture and a global outlook. Equally, getting to know six other American teachers on my grant taught me about my own country's education system. Our different educational and

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cultural norms gave me a better understanding of systemic change in the US. Our conversations challenged my preconceptions of what school looks like and introduced me to a variety of new perspectives, ideas, and pedagogical strategies.

From my first week in Helsinki, I was invited in by people – for coffee and board games at my advisor’s home or family dinners with the teachers I worked with. Through this budding network, I experienced Finnish hockey culture, national parks, day trips to seaside towns, running the Helsinki half marathon, *mammi*, Fazer chocolate, locally grown blueberries, fresh honey, *lohikeitto* (salmon soup) and so many pastries. These weren’t academic learning experiences, but more so, tangible reminders of what home feels like.

NOTES

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Snowshoeing the trails in Kuusamo, Finnish lapland.
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BIOGRAPHY

Kathryn Picardo has taught social studies in Livingston High School for seven years. She teaches modern world history and gender studies. She also helped design and now advises the AP Capstone program, a two-year research program that immerses high school sophomores and juniors in academic inquiry. In this role, Kathryn collaborates with other departments to design and implement a skill-based curriculum. She is also a peer-reviewer for the Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers (ASSERT). Kathryn earned her BA in History and Secondary Education from the College of New Jersey and an MA in Educational Leadership from Montclair State University. In 2022, Kathryn served as a Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching grantee in Finland. She can be reached at kathrynpicardo@gmail.com
