Promoting Well-Being:

FINNISH STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING STUDENT SUPPORT

By Elizabeth Ko

Tervetuloa!

Welcome, reader!

My name is Elizabeth and I am an elementary school counselor in Cincinnati, Ohio. As a grantee of the 2025-2026 Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Research Program, I had the wonderful privilege of spending 4 months in Finland where I got to meet and collaborate with many, many passionate educators. This report is a broad summary of the content that I collected from the wide variety of sources that I encountered as I was exploring my project's core questions. I hope you enjoy this glimpse into the world of Finnish education!

Thank you for reading! Kiitos paljon!

Elizabeth

PS: For more stories and photos from my adventures in Helsinki and beyond, please check out my blog:

https://sites.google.com/view/sisuschoolcounseling/blog

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Author's Note

This report is only a summary of what I learned in Finland during my time there. While I have made every attempt to capture it as accurately as possible (and I still am just scratching the surface!), please know that my observations and generalizations are not necessarily representative of all schools or educators in Finland.

Also, Finnish readers may be surprised by which aspects of the system I chose to include in this report. Although many topics won't seem noteworthy to the Finns, I have chosen to highlight features that stood out to me as an American viewer looking in.

I also am aware that educational policies and publications, in their lofty and idealistic way, often differ dramatically from what is really happening in actual schools. Even so, I still think that the Finnish education system's well-articulated mission and pragmatic, values-based vision for the future are huge strengths worth celebrating, even if they're not always executed perfectly in real life. Finnish educators: Keep up the good work! Thank you for everything you do!

Pupils or Students?

Many documents in Finland, when translated to English, use the term "pupil" to refer to learners in lower grades and "student" to refer to learners in upper grades or in higher education. In this report I will use "student" for all learners, at all level of the system, as is common in the U.S.

Teachers or Educators?

In this report I will use the term "educator" to refer broadly to any school personnel involved in educating students, as many of us (school counselors, for example) are not traditional "classroom teachers" but instead work with students in a variety of capacities in our different roles.

1. Fullbright

THE PROGRAM

MY PROJECT

THE FULBRIGHT PROGRAM

In early 2025, I applied for a **Fulbright Teacher Exchanges** opportunity offered through the U.S. Department of State. A key mission of the program is to help K-12 educators "develop their educational practice and bring global knowledge, skills and perspectives to their school" (IREX, n.d.). These educator programs are part of the broader Fulbright Program, which, for the past 80 years, has given thousands of students, scholars, artists, educators, and other professionals the chance to learn and collaborate with others in diverse settings around the world.

The Fulbright Program was born in the aftermath of World War II, when fostering international cooperation and promoting lasting peace was an obvious and urgent priority (The Fulbright Program, n.d.). President Truman's signature on the Fulbright Act in 1946 laid the groundwork for an organization with a mission to "increase mutual understanding and support friendly and peaceful relations between the people of the United States and the people of other countries" (The Fulbright Program, n.d.). Since then, it has grown into a network of 160 partner countries, and alumni of The Fulbright Program's educational and cultural exchanges have won Nobel Prizes, walked on the moon, served in the U.S. Congress, been awarded Pulitzer Prizes, led national governments, and summited Mt. Everest, just to name a few of their wide-ranging accomplishments.

2025-2026 FULBRIGHT DISTINGUISHED AWARDS IN TEACHING RESEARCH PROGRAM

The Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Research Program (Fulbright DA) provides funding for educators to spend three to six months in one of the program's partner countries. For the 2025-2026 grant cycle, 14 U.S. educators' project proposals were accepted in 12 different host countries. Helsinki, Finland, would become my temporary home for winter and spring 2026.

MY PROJECT

Educators in the Fulbright DA program use the grant funding to conduct a research project of their own design. Goals of these projects often include strengthening educational practices or exploring innovative schooling structures. I chose to propose a project in Finland specifically because of the connections I saw between Finland's educational priorities and my work as a school counselor. School counselors are tasked with fostering students' academic growth, social-emotional development, and career readiness. Promoting student well-being is the core mission of a school counselor, so I was intrigued by the emphasis on well-being that I saw described in the country's national curriculum and established as a fundamental right in Finnish legislation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do Finnish schools promote well-being?
- Which aspects of Finnish schools, such as classroom structure and the schedule of the school day, lend themselves well to promoting well-being and providing student support?
- What strategies do educators in Finland use to foster social and emotional development?
- How do student services personnel collaborate with classroom teachers on supporting student needs?
- How do educators support students who are struggling academically, socially, or emotionally?

I also was curious to learn how student supports are provided to students in the Finnish system, as school counselors in the U.S. often serve in key roles on student services teams identifying needs and planning appropriately-matched supports for each child. Finland's education system has a global reputation of excellence, so exploring how it operates in terms of promoting well-being and providing student support became the core of my project proposal.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

I was thrilled to be invited to Finland to pursue this project, and the report that follows is a summary of information that I gathered while investigating my project's research questions. I accessed a variety of sources throughout the process:

- Professional reading, including official documents such as national curricula as well as publications by education experts
- Conference presentations and exhibitor booths

- University presentations and collaboration with University of Helsinki researchers and lecturers
- University coursework on Finnish education

- Meetings with mental health and youth development organizations
- Reviews of materials such as mental health resources and school instructional products like workbooks and assessment tools

- Visits to 21 different schools, which included classroom observations, tours, and events
- Conversations with teachers in primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools
- Interviews with pupil welfare team members
- Conversations with school administrators
- Interactions with students at all grade levels

2. The Finnish System

BACKGROUND

EDUCATION STRUCTURE

PERSONNEL

BACKGROUND

Every nation's approach to education is inherently influenced by its culture, societal values, and history. Many of Finland's features today can be best understood by exploring how they came to be. Finland's journey to independence was not a simple one. It spent hundreds of years under Swedish and then Russian rule before gaining independence just over a century ago amid the turmoil of World War I and the Russian Revolution. Independence did not bring about a united country, however, and the Finnish Civil War soon broke out as the nation struggled to navigate the political and economic fallout between and within world powers. At that time, while most children did attend elementary school, access to quality education was very unequal, particularly between rural and urban areas (Niemi, 2023a). It was not until 1968 that legislation was passed to establish equal access to nine years of basic education. All citizens could then attend a free, publicly-funded school, regardless of factors such as gender, financial status, or native language. Learning materials, a hot lunch, health services, and social services were all included.

"The whole idea of education is to prepare students to be active participants in civil society, so teachers should really set up their classroom like a little society. There should be diversity in the strengths and needs in the classroom, just like in society."

- University of Helsinki student

There have been numerous reforms since then, including ones that increased the number of years of compulsory education, but those basic principles still form the foundation of the education system today. Equality (i.e. everyone has the right to education) and equity (i.e. everyone must be supported in accessing education) persist as core values of the system. Preparing students for the future and for being active citizens in society are key purposes of Finnish education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016).

EDUCATION STRUCTURE

Education in Finland is organized into multiple levels, as described by the Ministry of Education and Culture and Finnish National Agency for Education (2022). Each municipality is responsible for organizing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs for children up to age six. Families may access these programs at no or low cost, depending on the family. At age six, children attend one year of compulsory pre-primary education (somewhat like kindergarten in the U.S.) which may be provided at an ECEC center or at a school. In August of the calendar year when a child turns seven, he or she starts comprehensive school, or basic education, which includes six years of primary school (similar to U.S. grades 1-6) and three years of lower secondary school (like grades 7-9).

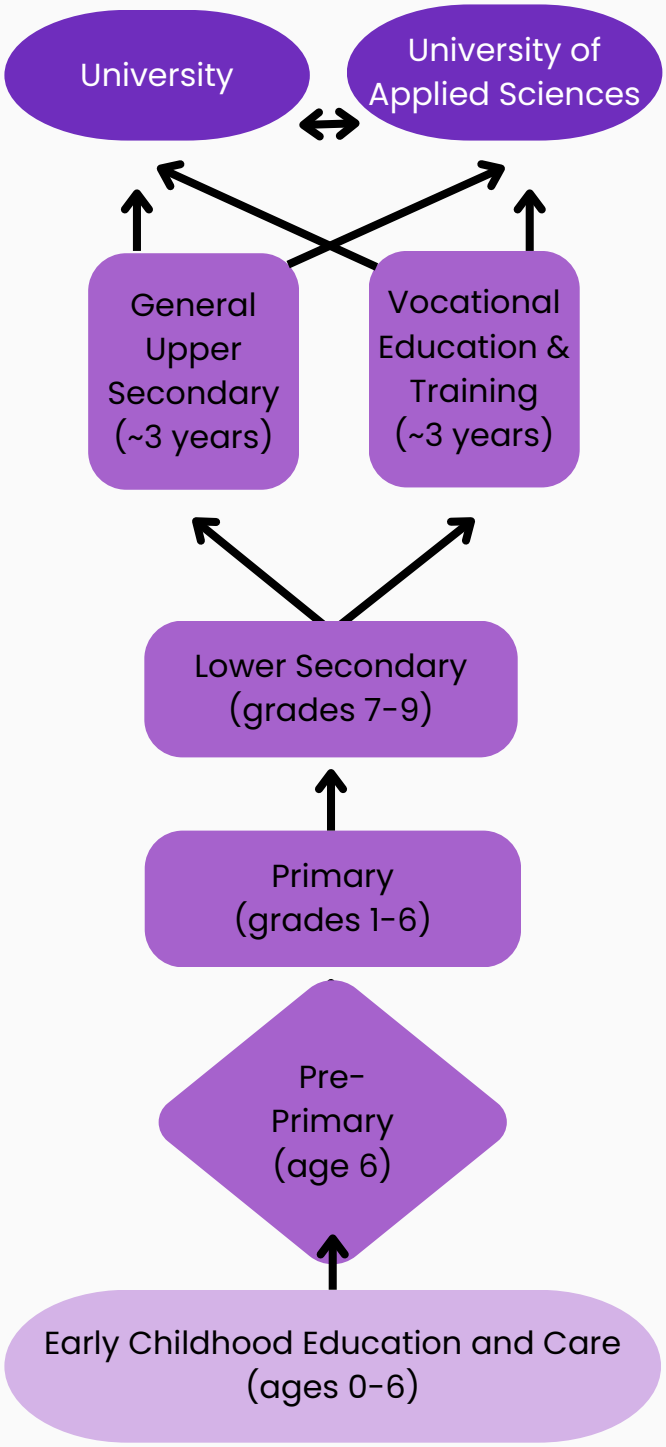
In Ohio, children must be 6 years old by the time school starts in August in order to be eligible for 1st grade. Most turn 7 sometime during their 1st grade school year. In contrast, many children in Finland are already 7 by August, or they will be 7 shortly after. This means that Finnish students are generally a bit older for each grade compared to Ohio students.

Students then choose one of two types of upper secondary education: general or vocational (Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). General upper secondary school is designed to be completed in three years, but it is organized flexibly into modules which allow students to complete it at different paces, typically in two to four years. Some subjects are mandatory for all students, while others are optional.

Students may opt to study particular subjects more than others in order to prepare for the matriculation exams taken at the end of their upper secondary school experience. The scores from the exams as well as the grades from the courses are taken into account when students apply to higher education programs.

Students who opt for vocational education rather than general upper secondary school also complete a program lasting approximately three years. In either case, the path to higher education is meant to have no dead ends: as long as they've met the admission criteria, students may next pursue a bachelor's degree regardless of which upper secondary path they completed.

Higher education in Finland is offered at two different types of institutions: universities and universities of applied sciences (Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). Universities tend to be highly focused on science and research. It is common for students to spend five or more years at a university working toward their bachelor's and master's degree together. Universities of applied sciences offer degrees focused on practical applications within a particular discipline. At both types of universities, admission is competitive, as there are more applicants than available places. Unlike in the United States, even higher education in Finland is provided tuition-free. Students from anywhere in the European Union (EU) or European Economic Area (EEA) may study for free in Finland.



PERSONNEL

Teachers

Teaching is a desirable profession in Finland and one that is not easy to get into. There are a limited number of spots in teacher training programs at universities, and admission is highly competitive. Teacher education is very research-focused, compared to teacher programs in other countries. The focus is not necessarily on helping teachers become experts in the subjects that they plan to teach. Instead, teachers are meant to be experts in pedagogy and the science of teaching and learning. A master's degree is required to teach in Finland, and the profession as a whole has a great deal of respect in society, compared to how it is in many other nations.

> *"What works is what's right. If what I'm doing is working, I should have the freedom to do it."*
> *- 5th grade teacher*

One reason why teaching continues to be an appealing occupation in Finland is the degree of professional freedom and autonomy that it allows. Schools make many decisions locally about how to operate, as opposed to having mandates dictated to them at a regional or national level, and teachers have considerable voice in those decisions. Teachers are often included in the process of making the school's annual schedule and can have a say in how many classes they teach and when. During times when one isn't teaching a class or otherwise required to be at school, teachers can leave or do their lesson planning at home. When they are ill and need to stay home, they can get a substitute, or colleagues can teach their classes, or another teacher can absorb their classes for the day.

Teachers typically dress very casually for work and use first names with each other and with the students. Breaks between classes are built into the schedule, and teachers often use this time to visit the staff room to have a cup of coffee, prepare materials, grade papers, etc. They share duties throughout the week with the rest of the staff, taking turns supervising recesses. To an American observer, the pace of a typical school day is much more relaxed than what is typically found in U.S. schools. I spoke with a group of Finnish teachers who had participated in Fulbright exchange experiences in the U.S., and all of them agreed that the concept of having 3-5 minute transition times between bells in U.S. schools is appalling. One teacher commented, "I spent many days observing in American classrooms and following the American school schedule. I could never be a teacher there. It's not sustainable." While the Finnish teachers whom I met at schools were also stressed and very busy managing the many demands that come with being an educator and working with children, the structure of the school day and the general pace of the schedule seemed to be good examples of factors that schools can control to mitigate threats to adult and student well-being.

Student Support

Students in Finnish schools, like in U.S. schools, also have access to members of a multidisciplinary team that can work together to provide supports or make referrals to providers outside of the school context for families to access. (see "Student Support" chapter for more details).

Student Support Personnel

- School psychologists
- School social workers
- Guidance counselors (typically for academic or career advising in lower and upper secondary school)
- School nurse
- School doctor
- Special education teachers
- Administrators

Administrators

Finnish schools typically have one or more administrators responsible for school leadership. As in many U.S. schools, administrative tasks, scheduling, discipline, and parent communication occupy a great deal of principals' time. Finnish administrators also often have teaching as part of their schedule. I met one principal of a school who also taught one class of Finnish literature to some students each week. I met another whose job was divided between teaching upper secondary English and serving as vice principal. Each school has its own way of dividing up responsibilities among the staff, and some administrators acknowledged enjoying the fact that they still had a student-facing instructional component in their roles.

> *"Staff members show by their own example that we all work together in raising the kids. It's not a matter of "my students" or "your students." They are all of our students. How we talk to each other makes a difference."*
> *- School principal*

Administrators have a huge role in shaping the culture of a school for both the students and the adults. One principal emphasized to me how important it is for administrators to build a positive workplace culture if they want to have a strong sense of community among the staff. Clear communication through weekly in-person staff meetings, written memos, electronic guides to procedures and curricula, etc. was important to her as a way of respecting teachers' right to be informed and included.

Staff room where teachers collaborate over coffee

"Principals who are organized and competent communicators ultimately make things easier on teachers. It reduces teachers' mental load and gives them space to actually think."

- Principal

One administrator also emphasized the importance of creating an atmosphere where the adults want to work together:

"It takes time. Adults are like students, and we need time to learn. Improvement doesn't happen overnight. It takes years of cleaning up ineffective workplace habits to build a culture of respect for others' time, expertise, and opinions."

As in all education systems, the efficacy of the school leaders varied greatly from school to school. Many principals do not have much training beyond their teaching degree, so not all administrators are necessarily skilled leaders. I was fortunate to spend time in schools with some particularly capable, passionate, and respected administrators.

3. Foundations

BASIC EDUCATION: VALUES, MISSION, AND GOALS

WELL-BEING AND OPERATIONAL CULTURE

COURSES AND SCHEDULES

SCHOOL SUBJECTS

UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL

BASIC EDUCATION: VALUES, MISSION, AND GOALS

The Finnish National Agency for Education determines the national curriculum for each level of education and then each municipality adapts that framework to fit its local needs (Niemi, 2023b). These curricula are revised using the input of many different stakeholders approximately every ten years.

Each of the curricula include three main components: subject matter and objectives, interdisciplinary modules, and transversal competencies. Transversal competencies refer to the competencies that are not necessarily tied to a specific subject but are needed for success in a global, changing future. The curricula do not specify particular teaching methods that must be used; rather, schools and teachers have the autonomy to make those determinations themselves. Finnish educators whom I talked to often spoke quite positively about this system of having an overarching national framework while also having a great deal of local autonomy for how to implement it. As I read through the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, for example, it was fascinating to see the ways that the national values shined through as well as the freedom granted to each municipality for determining exactly how to organize its local education system.

Rights of the Child posters in a school hallway. For more info, reference a UNICEF infographic here.

In Finland, grades 1-9 are referred to as the "basic education" years, or comprehensive school, or *peruskoulu*, in Finnish. Basic education includes six years of primary school followed by three years of lower secondary school. As an elementary school counselor, I was especially interested in learning about these early years and turned to the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (NCC), most recently revised in 2014, to understand the foundations and structure for basic education. The NCC begins by establishing the legal basis for providing education in the first place, specifically referencing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 15). According to the Convention's agreement, countries are obligated to act in children's best interests and to safeguard children's right to be protected, to express their opinions and be heard, to have their views respected, and to have their personalities, talents, and abilities developed through education that is accessible to all (UNICEF, n.d.). Not only were some of these rights called out in the NCC document, but schools seemed to take their responsibility regarding these rights very seriously. In one comprehensive school that I visited, UNICEF posters related to the Rights of the Child were hanging prominently in the hallway.

The NCC then goes on to articulate the core values for basic education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, pp. 15-17):

1. THE UNIQUENESS OF EACH PUPIL AND THE RIGHT TO A GOOD EDUCATION

Lifelong learning is a key component of a good life, and the basic education years establish the preconditions for it.

2. HUMANITY, GENERAL KNOWLEDGE AND ABILITY, EQUALITY, AND DEMOCRACY

Students must learn to make decisions using knowledge, ethical reflection, and perspective-taking. They must stand up for what is right and manage conflicts ethically. This also includes being able to regulate oneself and take responsibility for one's own development and well-being.

3. CULTURAL DIVERSITY AS A RICHNESS

Along with building their own cultural identities, students should develop sincere interest in the cultures of others. "Basic education lays the foundation for global citizenship that respects human rights and encourages the pupils to act for positive change" (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 16).

4. NECESSITY OF A SUSTAINABLE WAY OF LIVING:

Students must have a sense of how dependent humans are on healthy ecosystems, as we, too, are part of nature. They need to appreciate the seriousness of climate change and work to safeguard the future for the environment and the humans who live in it. Their responsibility to the globe is cross-generational. What they do affects humans of the future.

5. THE CONCEPTION OF LEARNING

Schools must help students become aware of how they personally learn best so that they can apply that awareness to their own growth and development. Learning to learn is a skill in itself and critical for attaining goals and learning across the lifespan.

> *"Basic education is built on respect for life and human rights. It directs pupils to defend these values and to appreciate the inviolability of human dignity. Basic education promotes well-being, democracy, and active agency in civil society" (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 16).*

The **mission** of basic education includes four types of tasks: education, social, cultural, and future-related (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 19). The *education task* involves supporting students in their learning, development, and well-being. Students build their individual competence and form positive identities as leaders, members of their communities, and defenders of human rights. The *social task* of the school is to build trust and interaction among people and prevent exclusion. Equity, equality, and justice are paramount. The *cultural task* of education is to help students build their own cultural identities and appreciate heritage and diversity, not only viewing culture in the present but as a concept that has a past and a future. The *future-related task* of education is to instill a desire to work across countries to bring about positive change globally. Schools must instill a deep sense of responsibility for making decisions that will contribute to the common good and move society forward.

Basic education in Finland also has several national **goals.** The first involves fostering students' growth as ethically responsible human beings and members of society (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 20). This means developing respect for life, other people, nature, human rights, and human dignity. The second goal is to build students' general knowledge, abilities, and skills while also teaching how to link the different fields of knowledge together. Finally, the third goal states that everything that schools do should reinforce educational equity and equality. Students must learn how to learn and appreciate the value of learning throughout life, not just during the school years.

Transversal competence is also emphasized in the curriculum. The idea is that in order to study, work, learn, and contribute now or in the future, each person has to be competent in linking different fields of learning together. These skills transcend specific school subject areas and are infused in a variety of ways in the day-to-day learning at school. There are severn areas of transversal competence (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, pp. 21-26).

1

THINKING AND LEARNING TO LEARN

Students can evaluate information and exchange ideas. They consider different views, are receptive to different ideas and solutions, and can self-reflect on their own thinking.

2

CULTURAL COMPETENCE, INTERACTION, AND SELF-EXPRESSION:

Students can interact and express themselves in socially helpful ways and communicate in a range of languages, including the languages of math symbols, images, drama, music, etc. They can use creativity and imagination and express emotions, perspectives, and thoughts. Students have an appreciation of their own background and an understanding of their place in history. They respect human rights and can identify unacceptable human rights violations. They hold up culture and traditions as important for well-being and recognize the importance of international cooperation.

3

TAKING CARE OF ONESELF AND MANAGING DAILY LIFE

Students identify the many factors that can promote or undermine their well-being, health, or safety, including human relationships, technology use, personal consumption, and personal finance. Life skills such as time management, self-regulation, maintenance of personal privacy, and setting personal boundaries are all part of taking care of oneself. Students recognize that every person impacts their own and others' well-being, health, and safety, and human relationships and caring for others is important for maintaining a hopeful view of the future.

4

MULTILITERACY

Students use different tools to obtain information from a variety of different situations and sources and then must be able to use the information, produce new information, and make value judgements about it responsibly.

5

ICT COMPETENCE

ICT stands for Information and Communication Technology. Students learn to appreciate how ICT impacts interaction with others and what a powerful influence it has. They must understand both its potential and its risks on a global scale.

6

WORKING LIFE COMPETENCE AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Students must develop a positive attitude toward the world of work at a young age. They practice teamwork and doing shared tasks to get a sense of how their own work is part of the larger whole. They explore vocational interests, even in the early years.

7

PARTICIPATION, INVOLVEMENT, AND BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

The school setting is an ideal place to practice using democratic rights and freedoms. Students build their confidence in participating and being involved in school life. Schools instill a sense of responsibility for the future. Students practice decision-making and the ability to assess their own learning. Teachers provide opportunities for students to practice expressing their viewpoints, work in teams, resolve conflicts, and explore how their own actions impact other people, society, and nature. Students also learn how societies and the structures within them operate so that they have a practical sense of the channels for influencing and changing those systems.

Finnish workbooks often provide checkpoints where students self-assess their mastery of the lesson's content. Here, students rate their subtraction skills on a scale from paw print (low confidence) to cloud (high confidence). The following pages have leveled exercises marked with each symbol guiding them toward what they should practice!

WELL-BEING & OPERATIONAL CULTURE

One of the challenges to identifying practices that support well-being is that often those practices are not standalone programs or initiatives but aspects of a system that are inherently embedded in how things are done. This is not a problem, and in fact, it makes good sense: well-being at school transcends subjects and settings, so the ways we support it should be infused everywhere as well. Another challenge to analyzing supports for well-being is that well-being can include such a broad range of topics. Joyful Schools, a joint project between several European universities and foundations, defines well-being in the school context as "the overall health, happiness, and flourishing of students and teachers in various aspects of their lives" (Joyful Schools, 2026). They suggest that well-being has at least six different dimensions:

- **Physical** (e.g. health, nutrition, activity, safety)
- **Psychological** (e.g. mindset, resilience, purpose, motivation)
- **Social** (e.g. empathy, relationships, participation)
- **Creative** (e.g. play, creativity)
- **Socioeconomic** (e.g. work skills, equity, resources)
- **Planetary** (e.g. environment, nature, peace)

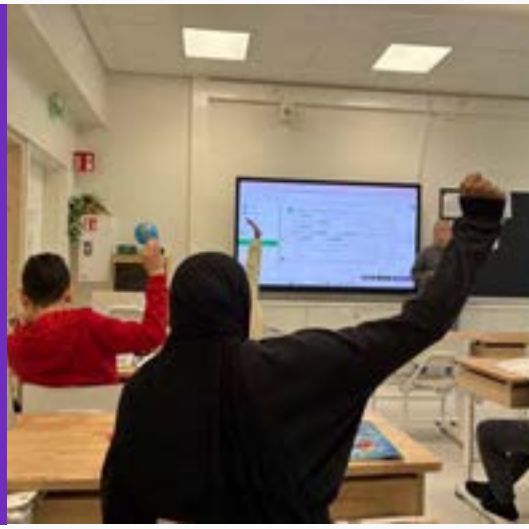
Joy and happiness combine with these dimensions to form a comprehensive conceptualization of well-being. Many of these themes show up in the national curriculum as well as in practice in the schools that I visited. I found the framework to be a helpful way for conceptualizing the many facets of well-being.

Note: The Joyful Schools project has developed a free, open, self-paced course for educators online that explores this framework and how to apply it to make education more well-being and resilience-focused. For more info, visit www.joyfulschools.eu/en

Operational Culture

One huge influence on well-being, according to the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, is the operational culture of the school (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 27). The culture determines how school is experienced by the students. Each school's internal norms, goals, leadership, teaching, professionalism, day-to-day interactions and routines, atmosphere, and learning environments all influence how members of the school community, not just the students, experience school.

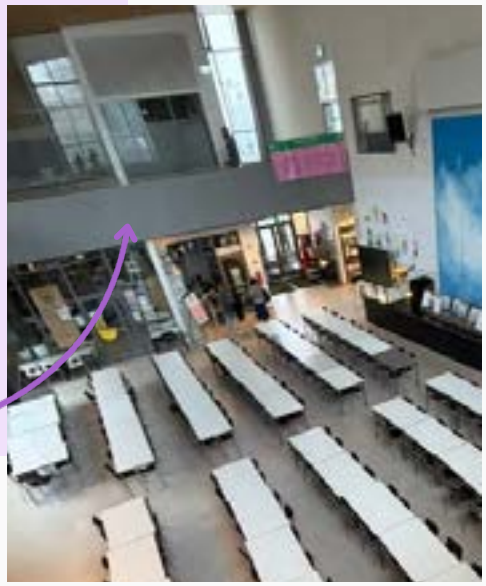
"The goal is to create a school culture that promotes learning, participation, well-being, and a sustainable way of living"
(Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 28)



The school culture lays the groundwork for students to grow up to be active citizens when it offers authentic ways for students to participate in their education in democratic ways. Cooperation between the school and the surrounding community or broader global community models what positive action in society can look like. A positive school culture also provides students opportunities to have a say and to be valued as community members. In its everyday operations, schools must promote gender equality, equity, and environmental responsibility. By eliminating things that waste resources and modeling sustainable decision-making, schools help students see the connection to well-being and the hope for a positive future (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 28).

AESTHETICS & ACOUSTICS

Finnish classrooms kept signage to a minimum, other than student art. Many walls (including those where art was hung) had sound-absorbing panels on them.



LIGHTING & ORGANIZATION

Classrooms utilized as much natural light as possible. Each student stored materials in a desk or designated drawer.

Learning Environment Considerations

- ergonomics
- aesthetics
- acoustics
- lighting
- organization
- accessibility

When a school promotes well-being and safety, it is establishing some of the preconditions required for learning (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 28). There are many, many preconditions for learning that schools can intentionally establish, ideally while including students in the development process, by giving consideration to learning environments and materials.

Materials, Tools, and Technology

RECESS & PLAYGROUNDS

Recess equipment is designed for use in all weather.

OUTDOOR PLAY

This drying rack helps dry students' gear after a snowy or rainy recess.

FLEXIBLE SPACES

Flexible seating options, stored here on a wall, give students a variety of ways to work.

Home economics spaces with adjustable-height work surfaces make cooking accessible to wheelchair users.

MATERIALS EXAMPLE: WORKBOOKS

One practice that was especially visible and common in all of the Finnish schools that I visited was the use of workbooks, sometimes matched with textbooks, as a primary tool for teaching and learning. A typical class might involve the teacher displaying the digital version of the book on the screen at the front of the room, presenting the content, and facilitating a selection of the interactive activities that were included. For a 3rd grade English class, for example, those activities might include a song with that lesson's vocabulary in it, a matching game, and fill-in-the-blank exercises. The students would either complete them as a group while interacting with the screen or complete them on the corresponding pages of their workbook. Some pages also would have exercises marked as homework for the teacher to assign as a review of the lesson. In the upper grades, the students would sometimes have their own digital versions of the workbook, and they would complete exercises on their laptops.

The workbooks that I saw covered many different subject areas and also contained remarkably current content. This workbook was being used in an upper secondary school English class where students learned vocabulary through examples from pop culture.

I asked a variety of teachers for their opinions toward these texts driving their instruction and found teacher attitudes to be overwhelmingly positive. In addition to helping with instruction, the workbooks also helped teachers with assessment. The teacher edition often contained customizable assessments where the teachers could create printable tests for different groups of students that included varying levels of questions that the teacher selected. Using these books consistently across classrooms also meant that students' experiences with different teachers were less varied and all students had the chance of being exposed to the same content. It also made co-planning with neighboring teachers much easier, since every teacher was drawing from the same instructional sources.

TEACHER FEEDBACK:

"I appreciate having a say in which materials our school purchases, and I also like that I have the freedom to not use it if I really don't want to. But when the content is so good, I don't know why a teacher wouldn't want to use it. Each book has more than enough material and I have the freedom to use the elements that make the most sense for my students."

TEACHER FEEDBACK:

"I would much rather have these books as a base that I can add to and modify than have nothing at all and need to come up with it all on my own. It helps make lesson planning much more manageable."

FIRSTHAND EXPERIENCE

I had the chance to teach from one of these books one day when a 2nd grade teacher asked if I'd like to put my native English skills to use and deliver that day's English lesson myself. She showed me how the interactive book had the lesson vocabulary clearly articulated, followed by a collection of easy-to-facilitate songs, recordings, exercises, and games to draw from. I can see why teachers like having such a range of included activities because it allows them to skip ahead or keep practicing certain skills, based on the level of understanding that they're seeing in real time while teaching.

Working Methods

Enabling students to demonstrate their competence in a variety of ways is important for making learning possible for all students. Movement, the senses, creativity, drama, music, and artistic expression are all tools educators can employ to establish conditions conducive to learning. When methods like these also support self-regulation and boost feelings of belonging to a group, they additionally strengthen student motivation for learning (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 31). Choosing a variety of working methods allows teachers to differentiate students' work based on their needs, and in the process, teachers can also help students plan their approach to the work and then reflect on the methods they chose. This enables students to evaluate what worked and what didn't, which is part of the learning-to-learn process and also helps them progressively take on more responsibility for their own personal learning (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 32). Another opportunity for taking responsibility for learning exists in each school's multidisciplinary learning modules. Ideally schools give students a voice by allowing them to help plan the modules, cooperate with the community beyond the school walls, and help students broaden their worldview as they make connections between the different topics they learn at school (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 33-34).

Responsibility for Learning

Students take responsibility for their own learning by reflecting on their skills and choosing a matching action step. In this 2nd grade class, the teacher asked the students, "Who would like extra practice with telling time?" Students then chose for themselves whether to a) stay in the classroom and continue with independent practice, or B) join a small group to work with a special education teacher on it. Instead of the teacher directing them, the students self-referred for what they felt they needed, based on their own confidence level in the task.

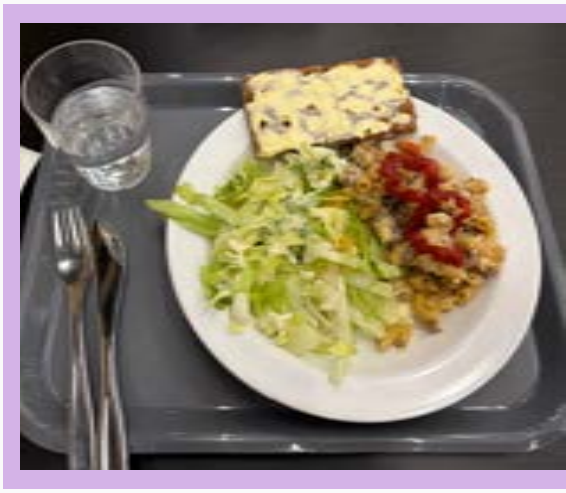
Communal Responsibility for the Preconditions of Learning

Everyone, regardless of position or title, shares in the responsibility of promoting well-being. This includes ensuring that students have positive, safe experiences at school (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 36). Schools partner with community providers to offer clubs that appeal to students' interests and supply opportunities for the children to experience what it's like to do things joyfully together. Partnerships with local libraries encourage reading for pleasure and reinforce students' capacity and desire for seeking out new information, which contributes to a positive attitude toward lifelong learning and active citizenship.

It was common to see groups of children boarding a public bus or traveling by foot to local libraries, museums, ice rinks, and more!

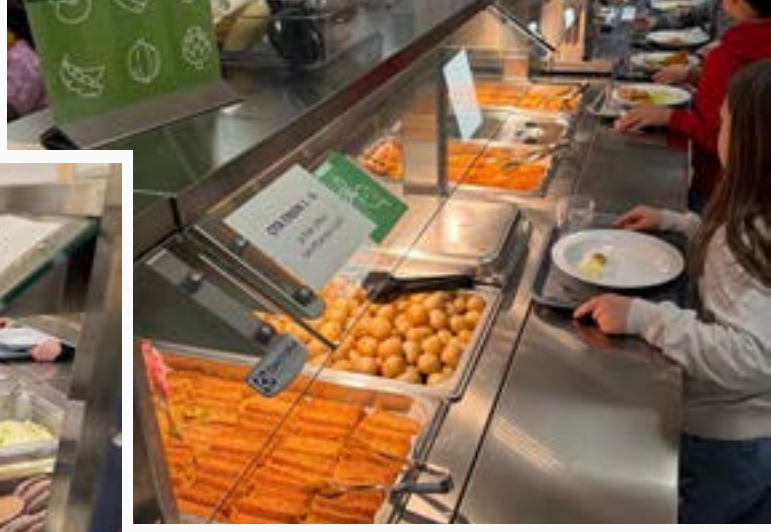
School meals have an important recreational role, and when done thoughtfully, can promote a sustainable way of living, food-related education, and manners instruction (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 45). In primary school, teachers typically eat the no-cost, school-prepared meal alongside their students, socializing with them and guiding them in mealtime etiquette. Per the national curriculum, meals should be "well-timed and unhurried" because "an inviting meal break improves the well-being of the entire school community" (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 45).

A typical school lunch included bread and butter, salad, and a hot entree.



LUNCH LINE

Students used real dishes and cutlery and served themselves the food, making sure to only take as much as they planned to eat..



CLEANUP ROUTINE

Students sorted their own dishes to prepare them for washing. They tracked how much food they were wasting when scraping it into the biowaste bin.

Students serve themselves in the lunch line, taking responsibility for their own portion sizes and returning for more if they want a second helping. In the lunchrooms where I observed and participated, students spent the lunch period actively socializing with each other and then returned their dishes and trays to the designated area, scraping their biowaste into the labeled bin. Some schools' biowaste containers incorporated a scale which raised students' awareness of how much food was being wasted each day. Students also independently separated their utensils, dishes, and trays and placed them in racks for washing. The entire lunchroom routine was organized and emphasized students' personal responsibility, awareness of resources and the planet, and communal efforts to keep the lunch area tidy and well-functioning.

Facets of Well-Being

Another way to conceptualize the interaction between well-being and the operational culture of a school is to think of learning environments as having three facets (Joyful Schools, 2026):

PHYSICAL | PSYCHOSOCIAL | DIGITAL

The physical side includes many of the features described previously, such as lighting and classroom furniture. The psychosocial side includes aspects that are difficult to quantify but which dramatically impact one's experience in the school setting. For example, in Finnish schools, it is typical for students and educators to refer to each other using first names. Educators also dress more casually than might be typical in the U.S., and it is normal for students to remove their shoes and spend the day learning in their socks. All of these behaviors contribute to a noticeably casual, comfortable vibe in the classroom.

One 1st grade teacher I met did an especially great job of establishing a calm but fun classroom environment. As students worked independently on an assignment, she turned on catchy music and moved around the room with body language that showed that she also was happy to be there, enjoying the music and time with the students. She set a pace for the lesson that felt comfortable and not rushed, which meant she did not need to nag students when they sometimes needed a break. She incorporated student voices throughout the day by asking for their opinions and establishing options for how to show their thinking.

During my observations, teachers certainly were the leaders and facilitators in the rooms, but I did not find many examples of authoritarian teaching styles or clear power dynamics that put the teachers above the students. Instead, the students seemed to speak very comfortably and casually with their teachers, displaying a more familial or friendly relationship. Teachers confirmed this in conversations with me, noting that cultivating a comfortable, casual classroom culture is not only important for learning but also for developing a trusting student-teacher dynamic that allows for good classroom management, tough love when it's needed, and positive behavior support.

One teacher had a special routine similar to one that I have seen used in the U.S., but with a twist: On her door she had a sign with images of different types of greetings that students could choose from, such as a high five, fist bump, or hug. Instead of using this to greet the students as they came *in* the room each morning, she chose to use it as they *exited* each afternoon. She explained her thinking on this to me, saying,

"I want every child to know that I notice them, and while I hope that they each got individualized attention from me sometime during the school day, I feel better when I know that every child's last memory of the day is a special positive moment of connection with me. That's important to me and our classroom culture."

Another connection-supporting method that many Finnish teachers were adamant about was looping with students during grades 1-6. They emphasized that so much of the first year with a new group of students is spent building a positive classroom culture, teaching expectations, building trust with families, and getting to know each student, so they want more years with that same group in order to really maximize the effectiveness of their teaching. It is very common for Finnish students to have the same teacher and be with the same class of students for at least 2 years (and usually more!) in primary school, up through grade 6.

"It is not as important to be a great teacher of math, for example, as it is to create stable relationships with kids. We are with them more than any other person in their lives."
- 4th grade teacher

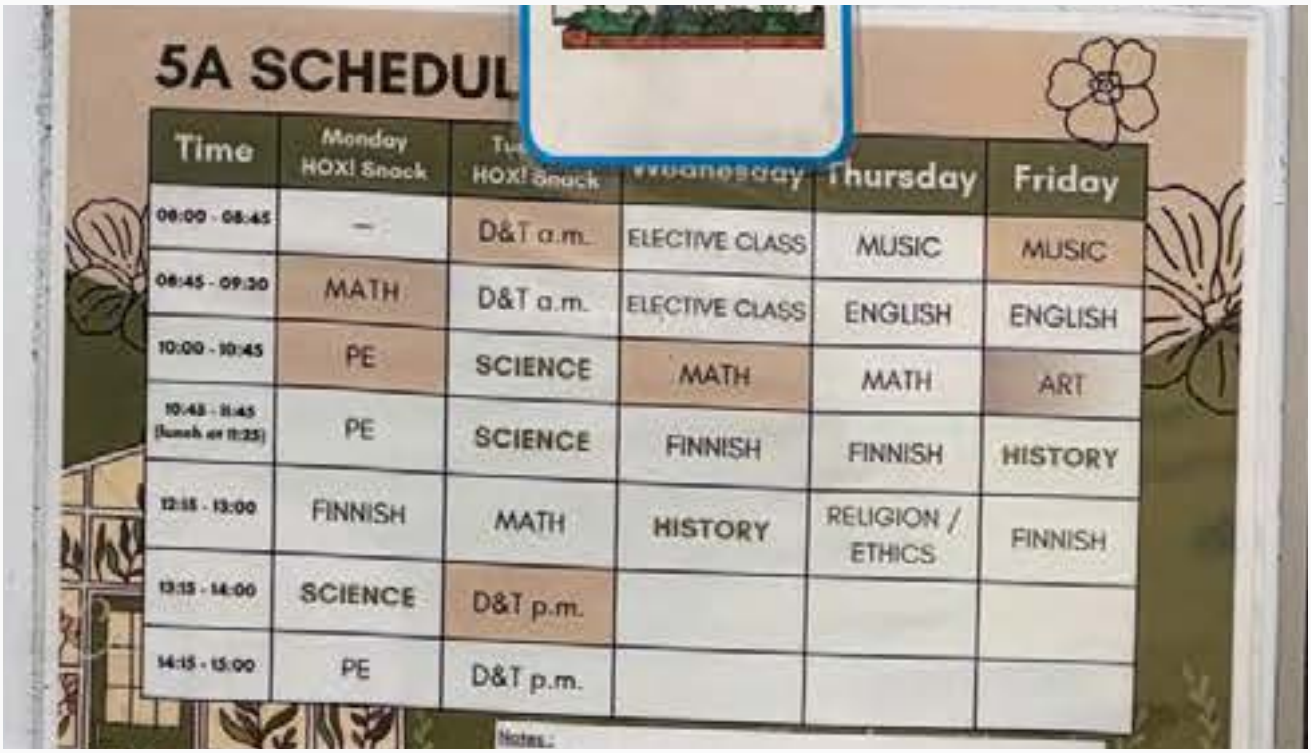
In many of the schools that I visited, teachers in grades 1-6 had been with their same group of students for multiple years but they also often partnered up with a neighboring teacher for many aspects of the day. Students comfortably moved between the two rooms as needed, based on what was happening. Some classrooms had single or double doors that could be opened to connect the two rooms, while other classrooms had an entire moveable wall that could be closed or opened. In one school, all of the 2nd graders from the neighboring classrooms came to one 2nd grade room for their weekly music lesson together. In another school, one teacher taught a crafts lesson in her room while the teacher next door taught an arts lesson and the students of both rooms moved between them as they completed each task.

Two 4th grade teachers at a different school decided to permanently combine their classes and always co-teach. They opened the divider wall between their two rooms and had a class of 52 students shared between the two of them. Everywhere I went I observed how teachers had the freedom to partner with their colleagues, or not, and divide their work between them, especially related to which subjects each person preferred to teach. One teacher might feel more confident in crafts education and offer to teach those lessons to multiple classes, while her colleague might feel more confident in PE and agree to teach those lessons to several classes. Since teachers in grades 1-6 are responsible for covering all of the required subject areas, teachers enjoyed having the autonomy to decide how to best accomplish that, given each of their unique strengths and preferences. In this way, students who looped with a single teacher for many years in a row were not necessarily only with that teacher for all of that time, but rather encountered many other teachers as well. Because many of the schools' schedules had class periods that started and ended at the same times across grades, teachers were not limited to collaborating only with their own grade level and could instead also work with teachers and subjects in other grades to divide up teaching responsibilities.

Two 4th grade classrooms combined by opening the middle divider wall.

COURSES & SCHEDULES

While each municipality has some control over how hours of instruction should be scheduled throughout the school day, Finland's Basic Education Act, as described in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, articulates that 45 minutes of every school hour should be used for instruction (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 45). The rest of the time may include activities that promote things like community spirit, students' healthy development, and building social relationships. Recess, assemblies, special events, and field trips are all examples of activities that might be planned during this non-instructional time. A daily schedule that includes enough variety helps support student alertness, and those non-instructional activities help students cope with and manage the demands of their studies (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 44). School schedules can either enhance or impede student and teacher well-being and so should be constructed with that in mind.



Weekly schedule for a 5th grade bilingual (English/Finnish) class.
Recess happens 9:30-10:00, 11:45-12:15, 13:00-13:15, and 14:00-14:15.

Recess

Exact daily schedules vary by school, but in primary school (grades 1-6), for example, it is not unusual for a student to have at least 3 opportunities during each school day to play outside. Recesses are typically 15-30 minutes long and often occur at the same time for many grade levels at once. Being outside, not just taking a break indoors, was a clear, consistent priority that I observed in Finland that extended beyond schools and into general society. Spending time in nature, no matter the weather, was seen as important for all.

Finnish students go outside for recess in nearly any weather. One teacher told me, “In my entire career so far, I cannot remember a single day when we had indoor recess.” Teachers weren’t sure how cold it would truly have to be for them to consider canceling it, but they suggested that it would have to be around -20° or -15° C (-4° to 5° F), if not colder. The Finnish students I spoke with had never heard of a “snow day” before, and the idea of canceling school due to inclement weather was entirely foreign to them. Instead, they are very used to coming to school in many layers and putting their gear on and off to go outside. I also noticed that much of the play equipment for recess use was equipment that can be used in all types of weather rather than structures that might hold rain or snow. Recess areas often included wooded or grassy areas of property as well where students could play freely in nature.

In lower secondary schools (grades 7-9) and upper secondary schools (grades 10+), it was more common for students to have the choice to spend their breaks between classes inside. Students typically socialized with their friends in the hallways and gathering spaces of the school. Teachers also often took this time (typically 15 minutes) to connect with colleagues, prepare lesson materials, or have a cup of coffee in the teachers' room. In many of the schools that I visited, there were pingpong tables in common spaces that students would play on between classes. The short passing times that are typical in American schools (e.g. 3-5 minutes between classes) appall Finnish students and teachers alike. They saw the relaxed, social atmosphere created between classes as important to the culture and pace of a manageable school day. In fact, since students were in less of a rush, I often would see a few students linger in the room as each class wrapped up, using those moments to connect socially with their teacher and have casual conversations.

Distribution of Lesson Hours

In Finland, the number of hours dedicated to instruction at each grade level is determined at the national level but customizable at the local level. In this sense, all students in Finland receive similar amounts of instruction in each of the required subjects but it may be distributed differently across the grade levels, and they could have access to different optional subjects, depending where they go to school. The required number of lesson hours (1 lesson hour = 45 minutes of instruction) increases by grade. In the city of Espoo, just west of Helsinki, a typical student in 1st grade has 21 lesson hours per week, where a typical 9th grader has 30 lesson hours per week (City of Espoo, 2025). The Finnish National Agency for Education publishes a table of the required lesson hours that schools use to plan their timetables.

Somewhat similar to many U.S. schools, the Finnish school year typically includes about 190 days and runs mid-August through early-June (Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). Different areas may have slightly different holiday break schedules. Each school determines its own day-to-day operating schedule that includes the required lesson hours.

SECOND GRADE: A DAY IN THE LIFE

8:00 - I walk to school and put my snow boots and snow gear on the racks in the hallway.
8:15 - School starts! I say hi to my teacher and join 16 other students in my classroom. We go over the schedule of the day, the weather, and the lunch menu. Then we correct our **math** homework, have a math lesson, and do practice problems in our workbook.
9:00 - Next is **environmental studies**. We watch a video about bike safety and then glue pictures of safety rules into our notebooks.
9:45 - **Recess!** I put my snowsuit on and run outside to roll snowballs with my friends!
10:15 - It's time for **crafts** class. We are learning how to crochet a cute tiny octopus!
11:00 - I wash my hands, get my **lunch**, and eat with my teacher and classmates.
11:30 - In **Finnish** class we practice reading and writing. I am keeping a reading log and the whole school is working on a book-reading challenge this month!
12:15 - I run outside for 15 more minutes of **recess**!
12:30 - Today we have **English** class. We practice vocabulary and sing songs.
13:15 - School's over for today! I go to an after-school club for a bit until it's time to go home.

Number of lesson hours, per week, by subject and grade level in Espoo:

Subject / Grade Level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Finnish language & literature	8	7	6	5	4	4	3	4	3
A1 language [English]	1	1	3	2	2	2	2	2	3
B1 language [Swedish]						2	2	2	2
Math	3	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	4
Environmental studies	2	2	3	2	3	2			
Biology							1	1.5	1
Geography							1	1.5	1
Physics							1	1.5	1
Chemistry							1	1.5	1
Health							0.5	1.5	1
Religion/Ethics	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
History				1	1	1	2	2	
Social studies					1	1			3
Music	1	1	1	1	1	1	2		
Visual arts	1	1	1	2	1	1	2		
Crafts	2	2	1	2	1	1	2		
PE	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	3
Home economics							3		
Arts & crafts electives			1	1	2	2		2	3
Guidance							0.5	0.5	1
Misc additional		1	1	1	1	1	1	3	2
Total	21	22	24	24	25	25	30	30	30

Translated from the City of Espoo's basic education timetable (City of Espoo, 2025).

Special Tasks of Each Grade Band

The national curriculum provides schools with a structure for each grade band. It describes how the transversal competencies play a role, what the overall goals are, and which subjects should be taught (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016). For each subject area, there are content areas with objectives nested within them. Each band also has its own set of "special tasks" (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016):

Grades 1-2: "Becoming a pupil"

These are key years for helping students develop a positive image of themselves as students and learners. Educators help them build skills that they'll need for future learning.

Grades 3-6: "Developing as a learner"

Students continue to grow their learning-to-learn skills. They recognize and practice using their own personal study strategies. They become more aware of personal boundaries and rights so that they can advocate for and defend them. They take ownership for aspects of their own safety and better recognize their personal duties and responsibilities. They also explore moral and ethical questions and learn to formulate and express their own opinions.

Grades 7-9: "Growing as a member of a community"

Students take increased responsibility for many aspects of their world, like their studies, friends, and themselves. Teachers provide feedback related to learning and encourage students as they complete the requirements of compulsory basic education. More subjects and options are offered during these grades at school, and students make preparations for their upper secondary studies. Students develop a community-oriented mindset that does not tolerate racism, discrimination, or bullying. They work toward goals as individuals and in groups. They start building their adult identities and make decisions regarding their future possible studies and career paths.

SCHOOL SUBJECTS

Many of the subjects taught in grades 1-9 in Finland, such as math and history, have similarities to those taught in U.S. schools. Some of the subjects, however, are either less common in the U.S. or taught distinctly differently than an American educator might be used to.

Environmental Studies

In grades 1-6, the science subject area in Finland is called "ympäristooppi," or "environmental studies." Students in 7th grade and higher take courses in subjects like biology, chemistry, and physics, but in primary and lower secondary grades, these subjects, along with health, geography, and environment topics, are all included in environmental studies classes. I observed several of these lessons and was impressed by the practicality of the content. In 1st and 2nd grades, students were learning about topics like identifying unsafe items (e.g. substances that might be poisonous), fire safety and smoke alarms, seasons of the year, body parts and systems, calling 112 (Europe's version of 911), plant life cycles, safety rules related to riding a bike, basic first aid, animals, maps, inventions, and weather. The lessons were engaging and interesting to the students, and all of the content was clearly related to understanding how the world works and how to operate successfully within it. It appeared very consistent with the education system's goal of making sure its population is equipped with the necessary skills for navigating life well as independent adults.

Guidance Counseling

Guidance shows up as a distinct subject area for grades 7-9 in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, but it also is embedded in content that is presented in the earlier grades as well. In many American schools, a school counselor is tasked with supporting social, emotional, and academic needs of students. However, in Finland, the American model of school counseling does not exist; rather, a Finnish student may have access to a school social worker (included in the broader pupil welfare team) and a guidance counselor, or opinto-ohjaaja ("opo") in Finnish. Guidance counselors help students along their study paths and facilitate academic and career planning for their future studies. In grades 1-9, the overall task of guidance counseling is to foster student success in their school work, their progress through the educational system, and their personal growth in their study and interaction skills (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016). Guidance counseling helps students assess their own abilities, values, and interests as they relate to decisions about their lives, current studies, later studies, and eventual careers. They help students appreciate the influence they have over their own lives and futures.

In grades 1-2, classroom teachers are primarily responsible for the guidance counseling curriculum objectives (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016):

- goal setting
- boosting learning-to-learn skills
- study skills
- taking responsibility for one's work and belongings
- interaction skills and group work skills
- exposure to working life and professions
- establishing and solidifying partnerships between home and school

In grades 3-6, teachers typically teach the guidance counseling topics within other subjects' content, although they may do standalone lessons as well to cover the objectives:

- determine personal study strategies
- set goals and assess own progress
- employ different strategies for learning, getting information, and working
- practice social skills and group work skills
- build one's self-image as a learner
- recognize others' strengths and skills
- participate in school and the community.
- build understanding of what civic involvement looks like.
- take responsibility for one's actions, studies, and choices and impact on others
- increase awareness of different professions and workplaces

In grades 7-9, the guidance counseling curriculum is taught as a subject of its own and is primarily delivered by a guidance counselor. In these years, guidance counselors help students navigate many objectives:

- transition to the lower secondary environment and expectations
- continue developing learning-to-learn skills and study abilities
- further appreciate the effects of one's choices on school and one's future
- build coping skills for navigating life situations and transitions
- explore the options for education after grade 9 (i.e. general upper secondary school or vocational school, and later potentially higher education)
- navigate the application process for their next stages of education

Social and Emotional Learning

Courses in subjects like "social-emotional learning" (SEL) or character education do not appear as standalone subjects in the Finnish national curricula. However, these topics show through very clearly in many facets of the Finnish school experience. For example, in one school that I visited, the school had three core values that they reference regularly with the students: community, resilience, and respect. The principal explained to me that these values were chosen very intentionally, given the school's newcomer (i.e. immigrant) population, and they wanted to emphasize being a welcoming space that fosters a sense of belonging. They also purposely plan activities that involve the older and younger students interacting with each other. Other schools had similar initiatives to draw attention to important traits or values, like having monthly character trait themes or challenges. Another primary school that I visited had a schedule of monthly SEL lessons that teachers taught using materials that had been compiled and developed by their colleagues.

A Focus on Strengths

Identifying one's own strengths and recognizing the strengths of others is a positive habit that contributes to well-being. The 5th graders in this photo are working in groups to discuss the strengths that they feel their class displays the most. This groups chose "sense of humor" as a strength that they were especially proud of!

Finnish schools seemed to appreciate opportunities to collaborate with community organizations, and one such organization that I encountered was Luokka loistamaan, a children's "social empowerment project" (Luokka loistamaan, n.d.). This project reaches several thousand 4th and 5th grade students at dozens of schools in Espoo, a city just west of Helsinki. A facilitator from Luokka loistamaan visits each classroom 5-6 times per school year to deliver lessons on social and well-being skills. At the end of the school year, each class has a "camping day" at a local park where they do a collection of fun cooperation activities as a group. The project's goal is to teach useful life skills to students before risky behavior happens rather than to be reactive after it happens.

Students work on a gratitude page in their Luokka loistamaan workbooks

The project organizers shared that they designed the content of the lessons very intentionally to try to cover topics that might not naturally be taught at school already. Students may already learn about emotions at school but they might not learn about ways to get their needs met, so Luokka loistamaan lessons tackle that content specifically. Although it is currently just funded for 3 years, the program hopes it can be expanded into more schools and that the materials could be more widely used. They provide downloadable copies of all of their materials on their website, and although they are in Finnish, the content is absolutely relevant for American populations as well and could certainly be translated and adapted.









Art Class

Art is a beloved class for students of all ages. It is seen as a an important avenue for promoting creativity and self-expression. Teachers tend to display student art rather than teacher- or professionally-made signage in classrooms.

Crafts Education

Crafts education is a unique and extremely popular subject offered throughout basic education. Students build self-efficacy and confidence as they design and make things with their own two hands.

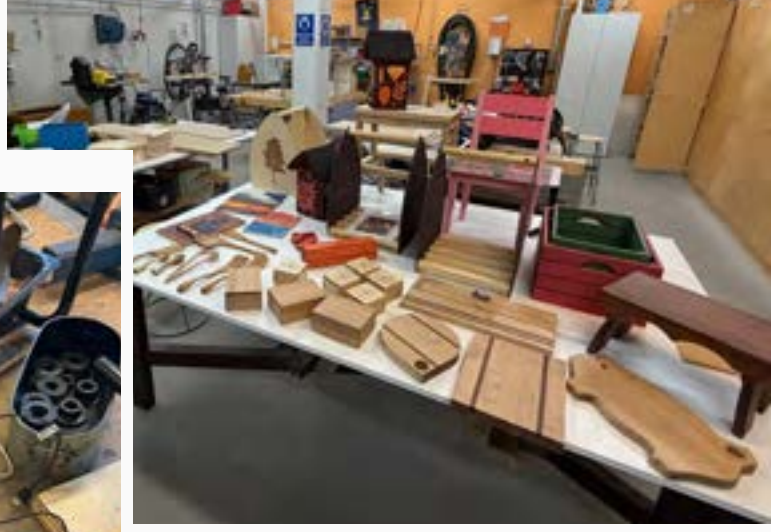
"Soft crafts" involve textiles, yarn, and other soft materials. Students learn basic sewing, knitting, crocheting, and more. Above, students crocheted yarn which they then glued into spirals to add texture to their paper chickens. To the right, students watch a demonstration during a crochet lesson.

"We say we educate 'hand, mind, and heart.' Well, crafts is the hand."
- Crafts teacher

Pictured above is a felt design sewn by a 5th grader with a sewing machine at school. At right are roosters and hens that have been lovingly hand-sewn and hand-stuffed by eager 2nd graders.

In “hard crafts” classes, students work with hard materials, including wood, metal, electronics and 3D printing. Pictured here are crafts classrooms from several lower secondary schools (grades 7-9).

Teachers point out that crafts tasks often inherently include skills like planning, collaboration, persistence, and creative problem-solving.

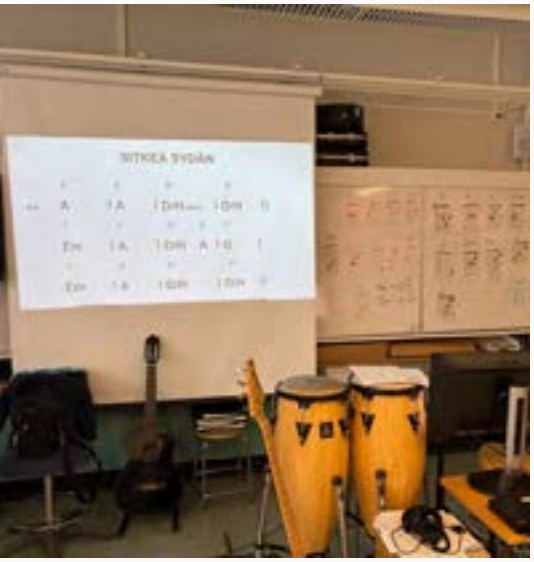


“Crafts was my absolute favorite part of school as a kid. It’s so satisfying making something that you planned yourself.”
- 3rd grade teacher

Lower secondary students learn sewing and home economics skills. Here one 7th grader is drafting a sewing pattern that he designed for a sweatshirt (left) and another is sewing an oven mitt (right).

Music

Students explore singing and playing instruments together over many years of music education.



Physical Education

PE includes playing a variety of sports but also may incorporate trips to the local ice rink or swimming pool!

UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION

After completing 9 years of basic education, students may apply to either a general upper secondary school or a vocational school. These schools have their own curricula but have similar values and goals of basic education as well as similar transversal competencies. Unlike most American high schools where students enroll in 4 years of year-long or semester-long courses, Finnish students enroll in much shorter courses over 3 or more school years. General upper secondary education is able to be completed in 3 years but students may choose to take a lighter course load at different points, especially if they are busy with other obligations, sports, activities, etc.

SAMPLE UPPER SECONDARY DAILY SCHEDULE

8:45-10:00 Subject #1

10:00-10:15 Break

10:15-11:30 Subject #2

11:30-12:15 Lunch & Break

12:15 - 13:30 Subject #3

13:30 - 13:45 Break

13:45 - 15:00 Subject #4

Every 7 weeks or so, students take exams and swap their current classes for new ones. Each school year includes about 5 periods of courses.

The school year is divided into periods, and students take relatively few courses per period. At one school that I visited, the year consisted of five periods, with each period lasting 6-8 weeks, followed by 1 week of exams. Students selected a handful of courses for each period of the school year, and many of those courses could be taken out of sequence. Some courses might also include a mixture of first-, second-, or third-year students. If there was a particular block during the day when a student didn't have a scheduled class, they did not need to report to school for that time.

I observed in an upper secondary school music class where students were learning how to play different instruments together as a group. The guitar students were practicing the song, "Take Me Home, Country Roads" on the day I was there!

Although a certain number of courses are required for all students, there are also a number of electives available and opportunities to emphasize certain subjects, especially if students have certain areas of study in mind for higher education. Each course is worth a particular number of credits. Upon completion of the upper secondary school requirements, students will have earned at least 150 credits.

It was interesting to see the variety of course content available at the upper secondary schools that I visited. Rather than offer a "Sophomore English" year-long course, for example, the English courses available for each period had distinct themes, almost like units that might appear in a U.S. course. I observed one English class where the theme was "technology and science." The students were reading complex texts about current, global issues and practicing vocabulary that would have been fairly advanced even for native English-speaking students.

COURSES AVAILABLE IN UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL

Schools often post the courses that they offer on their websites. Some also offer brief descriptions in English. View an example listing from the city of Tampere here or visit the website of Vihti, a city northwest of Helsinki, and select "Courses in English"

4.
Strengths and Challenges

SOCIETAL SUPPORT

EQUITY & IMPROVEMENT

VIEWS FROM THE INSIDE

SOCIETAL SUPPORT

The Finnish system has many strengths to be proud of and challenges to continue to navigate. Many factors that contribute to Finland's success in educating its children are not actual parts of the education system but parts of the broader national ecosystem (Väyrynen & Nyyssönen, 2023). Finland has a great deal of stability in its society as a whole. It has a very solid, democratic government structure, a reliable economy, and many social safety nets for its citizens. The high-quality, low-cost, public healthcare system, for example, as well as the wide range of social services available to families, provide significant benefits by protecting children from some of the most devastating effects of illness, injury, and poverty that children in other countries without such support may experience.

Countries with strong economies and which place a high cultural value on education also are able to direct more financial resources toward education. Unlike the structure in many U.S. states, where struggling schools compete for funding and may lose funding to higher-performing schools, Finland routes more resources to areas that demonstrate more need. Disagreements exist over how to most fairly implement this type of unequal treatment in an effort to achieve equity, but there is consistent effort to honor the idea that fair doesn't mean that everyone gets the same thing, it's that everyone gets what they need. As one teacher put it, competition and pressure do not play a large role in the education system, and that is a positive thing. "We want schools to be equal, not trying to compete against each other." Schools should be good simply because it's important, not because they need to be better than other schools.

EQUITY & IMPROVEMENT

Equity issues related to inclusion and school segregation are challenges that the Finnish system continues to wrestle with. While the inclusion movement channels resources into better supporting learners with special needs, educators note that this sometimes reduces the attention given to the community as a whole and the variety of other challenges that exist in the schools (Väyrynen & Nyyssönen, 2023). One teacher commented that Finland does not do a great job of educating gifted students, for example, because that isn't a priority. However, the comparatively shorter school day and availability of afterschool programs allows students to pursue personal passions and strengths in those settings.

> *"To evaluate a machine accurately, you have to know what it's meant to do. Finland does not do a good job of producing geniuses, but that was never our goal. Our goal is to educate students for life and ensure they have the opportunity to pursue their passions. We're a small country and can't afford to leave anyone behind."*
>
> *- 5th grade teacher*

Another challenge noted by educators is the rise in the school choice or "school shopping" trend that is happening in other parts of the world, like in the U.S. Families seek out homes near the school that they desire for their children, which then leads to particular groups of people concentrating in particular areas, causing neighborhood segregation and thus school segregation, another trend that conflicts with equity efforts (Lehikoinen et al., 2026).

Finland has experienced a boom in immigration which has caused a number of changes to society and the needs in schools. Students are given weekly instruction in their mother tongue, which the system sees as important for honoring students' cultural identities and promoting learning, assuming that students learn best in the language they're most comfortable with (Väyrynen & Nyyssönen, 2023). However, this creates many logistical challenges in how to offer this special language instruction, given the sheer number of languages spoken natively in Finland today. Teachers express a desire for more training on how to support multilingual learners and (Lehikoinen et al., 2026).

"Our education system allows a lot of autonomy in our work, but the lack of accountability has drawbacks too. It's exhausting to see how amazing the Finnish system looks on paper but experience it differently in real life."
- Finnish educator

Teachers also shared conflicting views with me on the benefits and drawbacks of not having formal evaluations. One teacher shared that she certainly appreciates not having the pressure and stress of an administrator coming in to evaluate her on regular intervals. However, she expressed a wish for an avenue to get authentic feedback somehow. One school's region recently added a "mentor teacher" role to the staff. The mentor teacher could spend time in a classroom, observe the teacher's methods and interactions, and give feedback as a peer rather than a supervisor. The principal shared that teachers seemed very receptive to this sort of collaboration model and was eager to see this system continue. Several teachers whom I encountered noted how valuable visiting other classrooms and schools can be, but it is difficult to arrange. While they might be able to find other teachers who would be open to observing each other, finding time on top of one's regular teaching duties to be in others' classrooms is challenging and not always practical.

VIEWS FROM THE INSIDE

As I visited schools, I often asked students what they thought that their school did well. One group of 3rd graders shared answers such as, "lunch and school here is free," "great teachers," "we can wear what we want," "we learn a lot," "it's safe to be here," and "we can be ourselves." Another group specifically mentioned that while they love recess in general, the fact that they have so much outdoor space to play in and so many chances to be outside was something that made school particularly great.

I asked upper secondary students what they think Finnish schools do well, specifically regarding well-being:

"Students can easily get help from their teachers."

"We're taught that it's important to have friends, have time for yourself, and have hobbies that you enjoy."

"Throughout our years of school we have had opportunities to be mentored by students in older grades and then serve as mentors to younger students. It was great to have those connections and interact with different ages."

"In the younger grades we did a lot as a whole class, like having PE together or lunch together. I think it really united us as a group and helped us connect with our teacher."

"I have had strict teachers and relaxed teachers, and the relaxed ones created a much more understanding and approachable atmosphere. If we can tell that you're annoyed, we don't want to be in your class. Teachers who show that they understand and care about students make us not dread going to class!"

“Our school actually talks about well-being a lot, and I like that they care about it.”

“We generally eat healthy food and play lots of sports. Nutrition and physical activity are important and valued.”

“We have people at school, like the counselors and school psychologist, who can help if we’re struggling.”

“We take surveys that ask us questions about our health, mental health, how we feel about school, our friendships, and bullying. I appreciate that the school cares about that.”

“School doesn’t start too early in the morning, so I am able to get enough sleep, and we can choose classes that work for our schedules.”

“Teachers ask our opinions a lot, even about the lessons that they teach, and I like that they care about our feedback.”

“We do lots of group work and group projects, which I like because we get to learn with our friends.”

“Teachers give us the right amount of freedom. They trust us. Teachers who show support and care are the ones who motivate me.”

When asked what schools in Finland do really well, teachers noted that Finnish education emphasizes critical thinking. One 9th grade teacher said, “Compared to other countries where I’ve taught, the kids here really have the freedom to think, ask questions, and disagree. This helps build maturity, independence, and responsibility.”

A school social worker remarked, “Every adult is genuinely interested in every child and in trying to do right by them. There are roadblocks, of course, but everyone tries.”

“School, and the option to go back to school, allow for upward movement in society for everyone. Getting my doctorate was super affordable, since education is free or nearly free at all levels,” offered one primary school teacher

An administrator shared that “Educators here take a holistic approach. Teachers have such solid understandings of their students and a deeply-held belief that their responsibility is bringing up the *whole* child.”

5. Student Support

PUPIL WELFARE PERSONNEL

OTHER SUPPORT ROLES

SPECIAL EDUCATION

METHODS OF SUPPORT

PUPIL WELFARE PERSONNEL

Although it is understood that all school personnel share the responsibility of promoting student well-being, there are specific providers working in Finnish schools that are considered members of the "pupil welfare" team. These professionals include experts such as school psychologists, school social workers, and school healthcare professionals (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 81). Pupil welfare work includes support for learning, mental health, physical health, and social well-being. It is meant to consist of preventative activities and initiatives that support the whole school community, not just individuals. The team works to monitor and improve the welfare of all of its stakeholders and ensure the health, safety, and accessibility of the school environment. They also work to prevent threats to well-being, such as harassment, bullying and violence. An important part of the welfare team's work is promoting participation from the students and their caregivers. "Experiences of being heard promote well-being," and including families helps ensure that problems can be recognized and addressed early on (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 83). Physical, psychological, and social safety, which includes the right to learn in a peaceful atmosphere, are key rights that the pupil welfare team works to protect.

Members of pupil welfare teams are employed not by the schools themselves but by the 21 "well-being services counties" in Finland (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, n.d.). This recent change has presented some challenges. It means that sharing confidential information between the welfare team and the school can be more difficult than in the past. Also, pupil welfare personnel are assigned to schools based on enrollment numbers rather than through a hiring process with a particular school. Some personnel have the option to stay with the same school for many years in a row, while others may be split between multiple schools or switch schools from year to year, based on numbers and need. Regardless of their setting, the pupil welfare teams work collaboratively with administrators, teachers, and families to provide support services to students using each of their different areas of expertise.

School Social Worker

A school social worker, or koulukuraattori, is a key member of the pupil welfare team. The Finnish word, "koulukuraattori," comes from the word for "school" ("koulu") and curator ("kuraattori"). If we think of "curator" as a care provider for a precious collection, or someone invested in the care (or "cura") of a group of people, this term is an apt description for the role. Finland does not have school counselors in the same sense that the U.S. does. In fact, when Finnish educators hear the term "school counselor," they typically think of the "opo" role (see "Guidance Counseling," pages 44-45). School social workers' roles and responsibilities within a Finnish school, however, are much more similar to that of an American school counselor, especially in the primary and lower secondary grades.

Since school social workers in Finland aren't employed directly by their school and instead are part of a larger well-being services county, the caseload that they manage (up to 670 students) may be split across multiple schools and their assigned schools may change year to year. Several school social workers expressed frustration with this recent reform because the annual possibility of switching schools makes forming long-standing relationships with school personnel, students, and families not something that they can necessarily guarantee, yet positive rapport is critical to their work.

School social work services in Finland, as described to me, appear more clinical and formal than what is common in U.S. school counseling. School social workers are expected to register and record their work with individual students in a customer management system which is accessible (to varying degrees) to students and parents, for example. The level of detail expected seems to vary, depending on the school or region. It resembles more of a medical documentation system than school counseling notes, for example, and school social workers have to think carefully about which elements of care they make visible for which parties to see in order to preserve confidentiality and privacy.

The social work background that these professionals bring to schools includes a greater emphasis on analyzing the entire set of systems (e.g. family, outside-of-school elements) that is influencing the student's well-being across settings, where U.S. school counseling as a profession is somewhat more focused on how learning and social-emotional well-being are impacted at school specifically. Meetings with students are typically scheduled in advance, with fewer walk-in or impromptu meetings than may be more common in the U.S. School social workers may cancel scheduled meetings in order to help with acute crises, but they are not typically the personnel called to classrooms for behavior support unless they have a particular system or plan in place regarding a specific student and teacher.

U.S. school counselors can relate to a theme that Finnish school social workers shared with me multiple times: the university schooling and training that one gets to prepare for these roles is nowhere near enough for the work required. However, as one school social worker acknowledged, "One thing that my education DID teach me is that I CAN handle not knowing what to do in every situation. The world, and what to do, will continue changing anyway, and we have to instead have the skills to figure it out."

There are several paths to becoming a school social worker, but a common one is to get a bachelor's degree of social services from a university of applied sciences. Another method is to do a longer study track at a university to become a licensed social worker. In either case, the school social workers that I talked to noted that the in-school placements required during university studies were some of the most valuable professional training they received, a view that many U.S. school counselors would find relatable. One way to continue building skills over the course of one's career, and get support from others, is to meet with other school social workers in one's region. In the city of Turku, for example, all of the school social workers meet every two weeks to consult with each other.

Another theme expressed by school social workers was that the job is different depending on the school. Anyone working in the role has to figure out what each school really needs. The role is meant to include a mixture of school-wide work and individual work with students, but different schools prioritize different needs. Common student concerns addressed in the school setting included anxiety, trouble coming to school, worries, school motivation, self-harm, depression, disordered eating, emotional regulation, friendships, and focus/attention.

School social work services might include some basic assessment or evaluating of needs, short-term counseling (approximately six sessions or less), group counseling, caregiver and teacher consultation, and referring out to other providers (e.g. mental health care outside of school). Although counseling is meant to be short-term, realistically, school social workers may have many interactions with a student, perhaps sporadically over many months or years, as they build rapport.

Families and teachers also can consult with the school social worker or refer a child to him or her. Students may also refer themselves for counseling. Some school social workers maintain specific office hours when caregivers and teachers can come to discuss a concern. Before consulting with the school social worker about a student, however, teachers must have spoken with the parent about the concern and obtain parent permission. Teachers can discuss students without using names, though, if they are looking for guidance on general classroom or student situations. Another way a school social worker can provide support indirectly is by being involved in regular “class checkup” meetings with the principal, student welfare team, special education teacher, and classroom teacher. When these happen, the group can discuss any class issues (e.g. bullying, social skill struggles, friendships, health needs) and plan any preventative or responsive measures that may be relevant. There are no formal criteria for who can work with a school social worker and it can be decided on a case-by-case basis.

School social workers in Finland may use a variety of methods in their work with students. Some regions provide training on specific evidence-based protocols using structured cognitive-behavioral or psychoeducational programs for concerns like anxiety, self-esteem, fears, social anxiety, or worries. The school social worker's employer (the well-being services county) may require a particular level of documentation in the student's record regarding the therapeutic methods used before the student is eligible for a referral to more intensive services. One school social worker expressed both understanding and frustration with this system when she shared that the formalized aspect helps ensure that the student gets quality care based on their level of need, but at the same time, sometimes her professional expertise might lead her to conclude that what a child needs on a particular day is not a formal protocol but simply a caring ear and the opportunity to talk with a trusted adult. The pressure to document a formal session with an evidence-based tool sometimes leaves her conflicted as a professional. Ultimately, she tries to give the child what they seem to most need in the moment. Other school social workers described having more freedom in determining what methods to use and expressed appreciating being able to individualize their approach by combining tools and methods.

MIELENTERVEYSTALO RESOURCE

One resource that kept coming up in my conversations with school social workers was the Mielenterveystalo website. This site includes self-help modules on a variety of topics such as depression, sleep, self-harm, disordered eating, anxiety, burnout, parenting, mindfulness, and self-esteem. It also includes symptom scales and additional resources on many common issues. Some school social workers use the modules with their students or encourage caregivers to access them at home. While most of the material in Finnish, a few of the self-help programs and symptom scales are also available in English at https://www.mielenterveystalo.fi/en

Some of the tools used frequently by school social workers on a typical day are very familiar to those used by school counselors in the U.S. Mind maps are one way to facilitate conversations with a student, and one school social worker referenced a Finnish term that translates to "social digging," which entails asking questions conversationally to help get to know a student better. Card decks related to social skills, feelings, and friendship skills were other commonly used tools.

Some offices had signage in the room that could also be used with students, such as an emotions scale that students could manipulate to indicate how they were feeling. Like in American school counseling, the use of games in primary school to build trust and rapport was common. One school social worker described a worry-sort activity as well as activities for perspective-taking and predicting feelings. She also utilized a book from Mieli (see "Mieli" page) that incorporated a drama element: the book included paper dolls with scripts that she and the students could use to act out situations or teach skills.

School social workers may also offer casual or formal groups to provide support related to specific concerns. For example, one school social worker whom I met teamed up with the school coach (see "School Coach," page 74) to offer a group for students struggling with absenteeism. The group happened regularly on certain days and students were motivated to come to school because the group helped them feel like they were a part of something special and that they had adults who cared about them specifically. The group usually included snacks or drinks on top of having a social element.

The school social workers whom I spoke with all emphasized the feeling of being stretched thin, given their high caseloads and wide range of duties. Many explained that while they are meant to be also doing schoolwide work and not just providing individual counseling services, it is challenging to fit it into the day. Some school social workers do deliver classroom-based social and emotional learning content, however. In one school that I visited, the teachers and school social worker teamed up to present about 10 different lessons during the year on social skills, peer relationships, bullying prevention, and conflict resolution. The school social worker explained that while sometimes these lesson topics are planned ahead of time, regardless of demonstrated need, other times she will first consult with teachers who want to address a particular issue in their classroom and she will co-plan a lesson on a topic that might help. Another school social worker suggested that for skills related to social pragmatics, consider working with the whole class rather than just individual students. These skills are good for everyone to learn and practice.

RESOURCE BANKS

Like school counselors in the U.S., Finnish school social workers sometimes turn to resources on the internet when they need materials for their work with students. While both of these collections are in Finnish, they are simple to translate using tools like Google Translate. Plus, many materials are images-only and would work well in settings where a variety of languages are spoken.

- Viitottu Rakkaus: Educator-made printable materials related to emotional skills
- RyhmäRenki: A collection of get-to-know-you activities and group games

"When planning supports, think, 'When is the help most needed, and who is most likely to be there?' Sometimes it's the teacher, sometimes it's the parent, and sometimes the best way to help a child is by coaching that person on how to be helpful."
- School social worker

In describing the differences between different roles in the pupil welfare team, one school social worker shared that school psychologists' work is typically directed toward the student and his or her *learning* needs. School social workers also are student-focused, but their work emphasizes exploring how families and other systems are impacting the student's situation.

One school social worker shared that in grades 1 and 2 she is more likely to work with caregivers and teachers than directly with the students. She often coaches families on supporting their children by going "back to basics" and establishing clear home routines, boundaries, consistent early bedtimes, and screentime limits. As another school social worker put it, "What I do with individual students can only help so much if it's not supported or reinforced at home." Similarly, another school social worker commented, "The work I do individually with students in a short session once a week is important, but more powerful is the support students get in their normal, day-to-day environment from the adults who are already there. Sometimes the best help I can provide is really empowering those adults." In addition, helping teachers feel more comfortable with social-emotional learning (SEL) content and positive education practices is a key way school social workers can indirectly support students.

"School social workers don't have a tool that you can hold in your hand, like treatments that school nurses have, or the assessments and reports that school psychologists have. What we bring to the table is different: We have our thinking, our empathy, our demeanor, and our presence to offer."
-School social worker

School Psychologist

School psychologists are another critical member of the pupil welfare team in Finnish schools. There are some similarities and overlap between the duties of a school psychologist and a school social worker. For example, school psychologists are also assigned to schools based on student numbers and are employed by the well-being services county. School psychologists work with teachers, students, caregivers, and other members of the pupil welfare team to help everyone better understand the barriers a student may be experiencing in their learning or mental health.

School psychologists can do educational and cognitive assessments to determine which types of support a student may benefit from and help craft the student's support plan. These plans typically have to be written or updated annually, and teachers often partner with the school psychologist to work through the template together. School psychologists also conduct student observations, meet with students, and consult with teachers and caregivers.

PROFESSIONAL TOOLS

School psychologists use many of the same tools that school social workers and school counselors might use, including

- feelings cards
- house-person-tree drawings
- get-to-know-you games
- webs and maps for exploring a situation
- workbooks on emotional skills

Similar to American school psychologists, Finnish school psychologists help identify signs of different learning and mental health conditions but refer out to clinical providers, the school nurse, the school doctor, or other professionals for formal diagnoses. In general, the support provided by a school psychologist is focused on preventing or supporting a student through difficulties rather than treating or curing them.

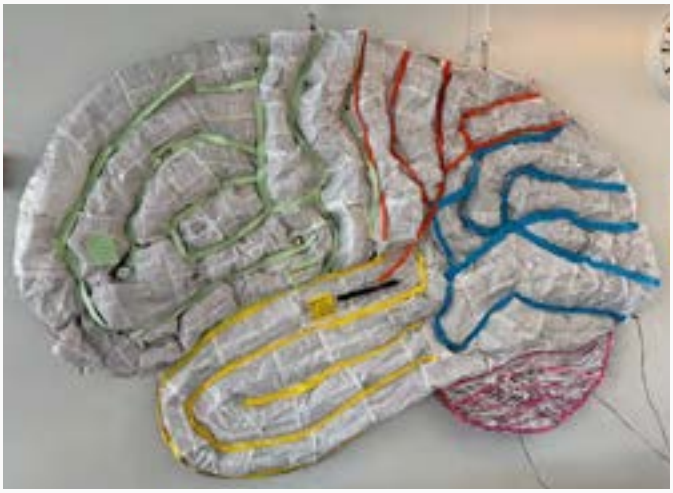
Some examples of concerns that school psychologists might explore are anxiety, depression, learning difficulties, and symptoms of ADHD. In Finland, students do not have to have a formal diagnosis to obtain school support, just a demonstrated need. As in the U.S., many educators report that there are not enough school psychologists available in schools to meet the demand. A positive aspect of the Finnish system, however, is that students can still access many types of support even without assessment by the school psychologist.

Recent reforms to special education services in Finland have changed the rules for how much specialized support each student can receive, and in which settings and group sizes. School psychologists, along with classroom teachers, special education teachers, and administrators, are in the process of revising plans and processes to work with the new reforms. One school psychologist shared that there are conflicting ideas on what works best at each grade level. For example, one school of thought is that young children with some educational needs do not benefit as much from specialized one-on-one support as older students might, and instead they are better served within the regular classroom. Some educators fear that by emphasizing inclusion and enrolling students with a mixture of behavior and learning challenges in mainstream classes means that those students who need support miss out on the small class sizes that would better provide them with that support.

While there is no right answer that fits all students, the school psychologist is ideally very involved in the discussion where needs and options are debated. In one school that I visited, one class in each grade was smaller than the others. It was not officially a "special education class," but students who demonstrated a higher need for support, based on teacher impressions and the school psychologist's assessment, could be part of that class and receive additional support plus benefit from a smaller class size. The goal was then for each student, at some point, to move back to one of the other classes when the need for support had decreased. The flexibility of the Finnish system allows for these adjustments to the ways supports are delivered.

"When I'm working with a student and getting to know them or helping them process a situation, I always make sure that anything I'm writing down is within their view. It's important to be transparent and open with them in order to build trust."

- School psychologist



School Nurse and School Doctor

Medical personnel are also key members of the pupil welfare team and bring medical expertise to the discussions about students. School doctors, who may just be at each school one day per week, for example, can provide basic checkups at school, similar to what American children typically get annually in a private pediatrician's office. Nurses help with day-to-day illnesses and injuries, although they do not necessarily have to visit with a student for the teacher to make a decision on a child's behalf. Teachers can contact parents directly if a child is ill and recommend that they go home early. School nurses provide valuable support to families and helpful consultation to other school personnel when medical or wellness concerns exist.

MIELI MENTAL HEALTH FINLAND

"Mieli," meaning "mind" in Finnish, is the name of the world's oldest non-governmental organization focused on mental health (MIELI Mental Health Finland, 2026). In addition to providing crisis and other mental health services to the broader community, MIELI also produces a great deal of content for use in schools. As I visited schools, I often encountered MIELI materials on display or being used by teachers and support professionals such as school social workers. I had the opportunity to meet with representatives from MIELI, learn about the many resources that they distribute, and even consult on some of the English translations and content. Many of the materials are free and available in multiple languages.

- The "Hand of Mental Health" poster depicts the many daily values and choices that directly impact our mental health. It highlights the power of sleep & rest, food & eating, relationships & emotions, exercise & mindfulness, and creativity & pleasure.
- Come On!: a method bank of ideas for promoting well-being through physical activity
- Coping Skills poster of ways to strengthen resilience
- Emotion, Need, and Friendship Skill cards and ideas for use in classroom lessons & counseling
- Mental Health Power: youth workers' handbook for promoting mental health
- Strengths cards and ideas for how to use them in conversations and activities
- Strength & Vulnerability Discussion cards to help facilitate conversations with caregivers

All of these resources, and many more on the MIELI website, dovetail well with work done by many U.S.-based school counselors and could be wonderful additions to our professional toolboxes.

OTHER SUPPORT ROLES

School Coach

A recent addition at some Finnish schools is the role of a "school coach." School coaches don't do formal, individual meetings with students, but they can provide basic supports and community-focused interventions. One school coach told me that that one of her roles is responding to students who could use coaching or comfort during sporadic moments of high stress or anxiety. She might provide calming breaks for students or help them make a plan for how to handle a panic attack while in class. School coaches may also work on reducing absenteeism. They build rapport with students who have a pattern of missing school and coach them on building helpful habits to support attendance. School coaches may also have training in different restorative practices or conflict mediation and anti-bullying programs.

One school social worker expressed how valuable it has been to have the recent addition of a school coach at her school because the school coach can manage a lot of day-to-day issues like teasing or social conflict, which frees her up to handle more of the formal counseling needs. Having someone out in the school each day, building connections with students, has such positive benefits that are hard to even quantify. However, another school social worker, in contrast, shared her concerns about the addition of school coaches in schools, arguing that all of those coach responsibilities are within the scope of school social work and that by hiring school coaches to fill a hole, the education systems are avoiding employing the necessary number of school social workers who could be doing that work and more. She fears that this trend could eventually push school social workers into a role that looks more like that of a healthcare provider working with individual patients by appointment rather than that of an education professional embedded in school life and supporting the needs of the whole school community on multiple levels. Time will tell how the role of a school coach in Finland evolves and how it intersects with the roles of other support providers.

Teachers and Teacher Assistants

Teacher training programs in Finland are highly competitive, and teaching is generally seen as an attractive and respected profession in Finnish society. Part of teacher training involves earning a master's degree, as that is a requirement for teaching in Finland. One difference between the American and Finnish systems is that Finnish teachers' hours and pay are tied directly to their specific duties and hours, which means that rather than just being "full time" or "part time" like many U.S. educators, Finnish educators each have a unique schedule and workload that allows for many different configurations. For example, I met one teacher who taught a self-contained special education class for a certain number of lesson hours per week but then had several "consultation hours" allotted in her teaching schedule when she could mentor other teachers in her building on best practices for teaching students with special needs. At another school, I met a teacher who only taught a few courses during the week, such as health, but then she also had several paid hours allotted per week dedicated to student well-being work at the school. She operated in a way that was somewhat similar to that of a school coach, building rapport with students and helping out around the school with community initiatives to teach wellness topics. The Finnish system's ability to contract with teachers in different amounts and for different types of work showed a level of flexibility that I have not seen in the United States, and it opened up a wider variety of options for how to provide student supports, directly or indirectly.

Teacher assistants are another valuable element of the Finnish system. In the primary grades especially, it was very common to see teacher assistants coming and going from classrooms throughout the day. Not every classroom had an assistant, but certain assistants would hover between multiple classrooms and go where they appeared to be most needed. The students seemed very comfortable with them and seeking help from them or their classroom teacher.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Special education services have taken many shapes and forms over time, but the concept of inclusion has been a prominent theme of the past 30 years in particular (Malinen & Väyrynen, 2023). The idea is that unless educators recognize each student's unique needs, remove barriers to learning, and provide adequate support, true equity in education isn't being achieved. A school that practices inclusive education provides the needed supports within mainstream classrooms, to the greatest degree possible. For about the past decade, supports were organized into three tiers based on intensity: general, intensified, and special support. However, monitoring and research of the system indicated that this structure has not been as successful as hoped in meeting student needs (Malinen & Väyrynen, 2023) and the 2025-2026 school year was a transition year in Finland as schools attempted to implement some new reforms for delivering special education services.

Multiple educators shared their views on the newest reforms with me, and opinions were mixed about how to best serve students. Some teachers were quite positive about the benefits of special educators coming into their classrooms to work with students or co-teaching lessons together. Other teachers expressed the opinion that some students' needs are more effectively addressed in classrooms with other students who have similar needs, so inclusion in mainstream classes isn't always the best option. Some felt that by including a wider range of needs in the mainstream classroom, the general education students receive less attention and the students with special needs receive less tailored support. One teacher shared that it prevents the more advanced students from accessing instruction at their higher levels, since teachers are trying to teach students with too wide of a range of abilities in one room. Also, like in the U.S., special education services often involve significant paperwork and processes that demand time and energy from the school team, and the educators that I spoke with had mixed impressions about how the latest reforms would improve or complicate the record-keeping and plan-writing procedures.

However, a key strength of the Finnish system, which many educators acknowledged, is the flexibility in how students can access support to begin with. Students in Finnish schools do not require a diagnosis of a medical condition or a learning disability to obtain support at school (Malinen & Väyrynen, 2023). The school team collaborates to determine what sorts of support would benefit the student, and they do not necessarily need a label or definition of a root cause or condition in order to craft a support plan. This philosophy of simply identifying the need and pairing it with a matched intervention or support strategy minimizes delays in accessing supports and allows for flexibility within the system for supports to change as needed over time. It also means that students have a lower barrier to accessing supports, compared to other countries. In 2024, about a third of basic education students in Finland (grades 1-9) received some type of educational support in school. Twenty-six percent of total basic education students received the sort of support classified as "intensified" or "special" (e.g. support provided in a special education class) (Statistics Finland, 2025). The general attitude is to expect that all students will need support at some time or another during their educational career, and the flexibility of the system, as well as relatively minimal red tape for accessing support, is a noteworthy aspect of Finnish education.

EXAMPLE STRATEGIES , ACCOMMODATIONS, & TOOLS

- Flexible seating
- Manipulatives
- Clear daily structures
- Homework tracking
- Formative assessment
- Audiobooks
- Visual schedule
- Goal setting
- Co-teaching
- Small group instruction
- One-on-one support
- Extended time
- Opportunities for movement
- Positive behavior intervention

METHODS OF SUPPORT

In addition to special education services or pupil welfare team-provided supports (counseling, nursing, psychological assessment, etc.), there are many supports that any student may access from classroom teachers, if there is a demonstrated need.

Language Learning

Students who do not speak Finnish when they enroll in a Finnish school may have access to a variety of language-learning supports, one of which could be a place in a "newcomer class." At several Helsinki lower secondary schools that I visited (grades 6-9), these students would be enrolled in a newcomer class with other Finnish language learners and they could remain in this class for up to twelve months. As their Finnish proficiency increased, they could gradually phase into other classes for parts of the school day. Classes like PE or math were naturally more accessible for Finnish learners than language-heavy subjects. Instruction in the newcomer classes that I visited was largely in English and Finnish, as English was a language that the students were most likely to have somewhat in common.

In contrast, for students in the younger primary school grades, students were more likely to be placed directly into a general classroom rather than a newcomer class. The aim was to use Finnish immersion as a main method for helping build language skills. One second grade teacher explained to me that she puts a lot of effort into honoring the first languages of her students, but to ensure that students get the immersion benefits and don't just exclusively interact with others who share their primary language, the "official" language used in her classroom is Finnish. Teachers at all of the grade levels acknowledged that accommodating a wide range of language needs within their classrooms is an especially significant challenge in Finland currently, as immigration has increased dramatically over the past decade.

"I don't contact parents very often, but some teachers do. I want the student to know that if we have a problem at school, we solve the problem at school. When I need a student to take responsibility for their choices and repair the situation, I have the most success working with the student directly. My students come to respect that, actually, and know this about me." - 5th grade teacher

School Behavior

Verbal redirection, like a spoken reminder from the teacher, or nonverbal redirection, like meeting a students' gaze and motioning, were two common strategies for helping students display expected behavior, just like in the U.S. Teachers also had direct conversations with the students as a group or one-on-one to help bring about behavior adjustments. If the teacher felt that the behavior was noteworthy enough to notify the parent, he or she would either call home or log a note via the school's digital records system, which sent a notification to the parent.

Teachers commonly teamed up with nearby colleagues to address behavior or emotional situations that required extra help, for example, by partnering with a nearby teacher assistant who could walk with a dysregulated student in the hall or provide a short break away from the group. Calling an administrator for behavior support was allowed but not typical or always successful (administrators were not always available for non-emergencies), and teachers tended to manage behavior on their own or with assistance from other nearby adults. Some teachers expressed a desire to have more options for getting support when challenging behavior arose, but others noted the advantages of having the autonomy and responsibility to manage it as they deemed appropriate. One educator commented, "I worked in a U.S. school for a few years and there it was much more common to get an administrator involved with behavior. I didn't like that. I didn't like giving up my power in my classroom to someone else who didn't know the kids as well or know my classroom norms and expectations." Every teacher had his or her own opinion on who is best positioned to tackle discipline and behavior concerns.

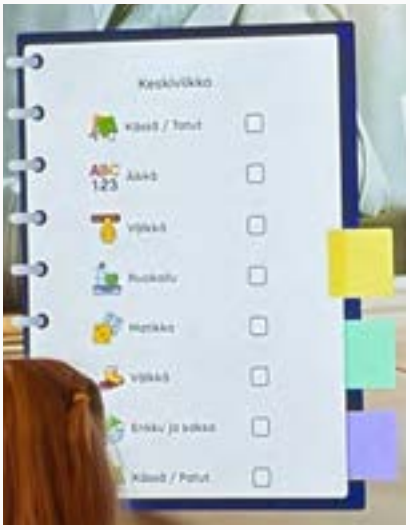
For whole-group settings, I often saw teachers using classroom management systems that included elements of positive reinforcement. One teacher gave her class points for assignment and homework completion. The earned points could be redeemed for special activities periodically. Another teacher had a "gem jar" that students filled with instances of positive behavior, or "gems," which added up to a reward. Still another teacher had a star system where, at the end of each day, the whole class reflected as a group on how well they worked and behaved. They collectively awarded themselves stars, which the teacher would add to if he had seen something especially positive occurring during the day. Important to all of these systems was that students could not lose items that they had earned, as all of these strategies were intentionally positive rather than punitive. One teacher summarized, "Positive feedback is key, and not just for students. We should remember to give our colleagues positive feedback too."

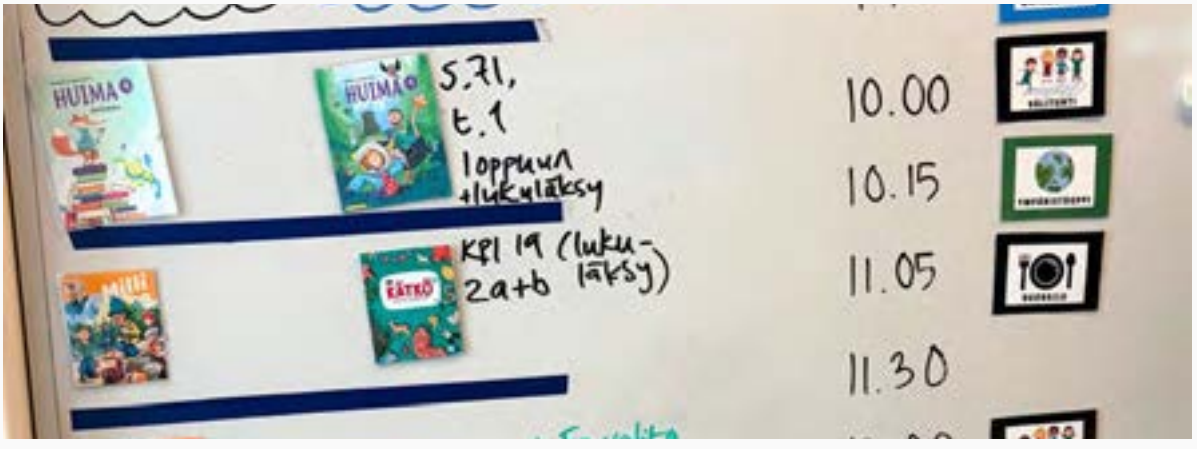
Teaching Tools & Strategies

Physical aspects of the environment:

As I visited primary school classrooms, one tool that I saw teachers often using without even thinking about was a rolling stool. Many classrooms had a regular or ergonomic stool somewhere in the room that the teacher or a teacher assistant might sit on while assisting a student. Rather than standing next to the desk of a student and giving help from above, or having to crouch down to be at eye level, the stools enabled the teacher to be at the student's level and flexibly roll around to students as needed to check in and offer help. This small practice seemed to establish the teacher as a collaborator and helper rather than someone circulating to police or critique. It also made working with students physically more comfortable for the adult than crouching or bending down. The wheels made it simple for the teacher to move easily around the room and slide up next to any student who could benefit from a personalized check-in.

Many teachers also used different types of signage to support the needs of their learners. Most posted the schedule for the day on the board so that students could anticipate each upcoming block of time. Some also used images to depict the schedule, particularly for students just learning to read. Homework was also posted visually as opposed to only spoken orally. For students who did not interact verbally, communication boards could be available. The school schedules included breaks between classes throughout the day, but some teachers provided additional breaks to help students get extra opportunities for movement before asking them to refocus on learning. One teacher, whose classroom overlooked the playground, would tell the students, “You have two minutes!” and that was their signal to sprint outside, get some fresh air, and run back into class, ready to work.





"Split Lessons"

The Finnish school schedule and the school transportation system lend themselves to a novel support strategy that teachers can utilize. In the early grades especially, it is not uncommon for schools to have a modified start and end time to the school day a few times per week that's unique to specific groups of students. For example, in one school that I visited, there were two days per week when half of the 2nd graders came to school at 8:15 and half arrived at 9:00. The students who had arrived at 8:15 then left school 45 minutes early and the ones arriving at 9:00 stayed for the full day. This allowed the teacher to teach a lesson to half the class in the morning and then teach the same lesson to the other half in the afternoon, giving the students the chance to experience it in smaller groups than normal.

In one school, the teacher chose which students were in each group based on what she knew about their work habits and who seemed to learn well first thing in the morning versus those who needed a later arrival time to function best. At a different school, the principal assigned the groups for each grade because at her more rural school she needed to take transportation and bus schedules into account and determine who could feasibly make the different arrival and dismissal times work. At still another school, the 1st grade teachers created the groups randomly and taught things like art and crafts during those smaller group times so that they could give more hands-on support to the students. Because so many students walk or take public transportation to their nearby school, having different start and end times to the day was more manageable than would be possible in most parts of the U.S. Also, even quite young students in Finland are very used to traveling to school without an adult, so caregiver work schedules and availability factor less into the decisions about school schedules. For 1st and 2nd graders especially, community partners also offer programs before and after school that they can be a part of as safe, supervised options outside of school hours.

Teaching methods:

Differentiation is a method where teachers adjust what is taught (and how students show their learning) in a way that fits an individual learner's needs. However, with differentiation as used in the U.S. at least, most students are still expected to meet the same learning goals or master the same standards. In Finland, however, it is more common for a teacher to focus on teaching to each child's potential rather than to specific benchmarks. As one Finnish teacher put it, "You don't have to teach everything to all kids at the same level." Teachers also were comparatively more comfortable with students being ahead or behind other students in the class. They adjusted the workbooks and exercises used with each student accordingly. Because primary school teachers typically stay with their same class the following fall, they could continue teaching where they left off in the spring, regardless of level. The Finnish philosophy of education is less about making sure everyone's achievements are equal and instead about ensuring every person leaves school with the capacity to participate in society.

Some teachers also utilized alternate versions of student workbooks. One Finnish publisher, Sanoma Pro, publishes a similar version of its standard workbooks but designed to provide extra support for students with learning difficulties. The books looked very similar but some of the text was simplified in its vocabulary and its layout on the page (e.g. one sentence per line vs. in paragraph form). Some of the exercises would have the first letter of the answer written in or the first step of a math problem started. This was helpful scaffolding for students who needed extra help, yet it allowed them to work out of a nearly identical book as the rest of the class.

Another method used by a teacher I met involved combining classes for some lessons and co-teaching, not just to share the lesson planning load with a colleague or to have two teachers in the room, but because it allows him to view his students in a different way. By observing how his students respond to a different teacher's style and approaches, he can see more clearly how they are understanding the material and notice areas where they need support.

Classroom Culture + Way of Being:

As I spent time in different schools, I often asked educators what tips they had for best supporting and connecting with students, regardless of their educator role. One special education teacher highlighted the importance of modeling being ok with struggling: "It's important for kids to see that everybody finds things challenging at different points." To help students manage frustration, a primary school teacher shared his advice of identifying a specific spot where students have permission to go when they are upset. He explained that this applies equally, to a degree, with teachers. Teachers struggling to manage a moment of frustration should lean on colleagues to cover their class for a moment so they can take time to regroup.

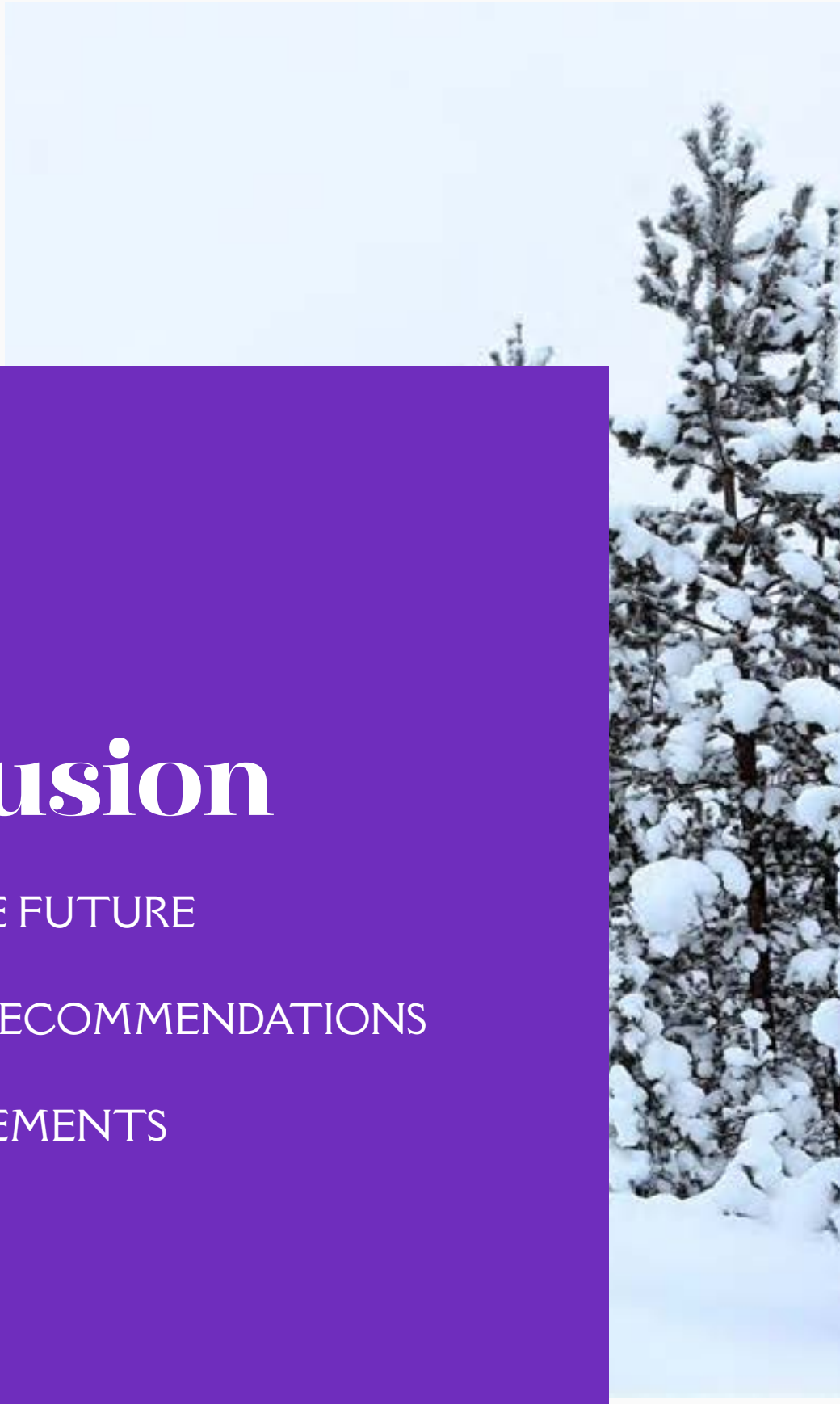
One teacher emphasized how important it is for the students to know that we adults are genuinely interested in them. This isn't something that educators can successfully fake. By getting to know students' personalities, hobbies, families, etc., teachers build the trust that is essential for a strong learning community. When teachers know students incredibly well, they can read them better and support them in moments of challenging behavior, for example.

By cultivating a classroom culture that respects strengths and weaknesses rather than obscuring them, students build empathy for each other's successes and struggles. One special education teacher stated that he actually makes a point to have students openly talk about the academic areas that are hard for them in order to reduce the stigma and draw out students' desire to be helpful and supportive of each other.

Finally, a 5th grade teacher suggested focusing less on the content to be taught and more on building a culture of belonging and community. By forming a positive class identity, the group is better able to handle the challenges of learning. It's important for the teacher to be consistently warm, honest, and reliable to retain the trust that he or she has earned.

Teachers often devote their time to what they know needs to be taught, but my tip is, don't teach anything until your class culture and behavior norms are solidly established. After all, students don't just need to learn academic content. We are teaching them how to be good humans in the world.

— 5th grade teacher



6. Conclusion

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

NEXT STEPS & RECOMMENDATIONS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

In February 2026, the Ministry of Education and Culture published a document called *Basic Education 2045: For Life,* which articulates a vision for how comprehensive schools in Finland could be in the future (2026). The document focuses on three dimensions: a meaningful life, life together, and life on the planet. Humans of the future need to have the *will* to bring about positive change, the *skills* to put towards positive change, and the *belief* that they could be successful in bringing about change if they try to (e.g. hope). The Finnish vision is that not only will today's students have good foundational knowledge and competence, but that they will also be motivated to use it for the common good. Education cannot prepare children for every challenge that the future will bring, but if it can instill the drive, ability, and ethical responsibility in its citizenry to face whatever comes, the future is in good hands. Other countries may benefit from exploring the same themes that Finland has highlighted and reflecting on their importance internationally as we look to the future together.

DIGITAL LITERACY

Finland is very aware of the importance of equipping students with the skills that come with living in a digital environment. Many of the resources produced by Finnish organizations could be valuable for U.S. schools as well:

- Digiteitokalenteri: Calendars for each grade level describing the digital skills to teach (including teaching materials) for each age group (in Finnish but translatable)
- Faktabaari's resources for teachers, including an AI Guide and Digital Literacy Guide, plus general content on fact-checking to promote media literacy and voter literacy around elections
- Generation AI Somekone Unit: Lessons on how social media, data collection, profiling, and content recommendations work, with a simulation to use in class
- Generation AI Tools: A collection of tools and simulations for teaching about AI. Includes "Little Language Machine" tool for exploring how AI models learn.

NEXT STEPS

During my Fulbright grant term, I had the incredible opportunity to speak with a wide variety of different stakeholders about well-being and the Finnish education system. While some elements of well-being are inextricably linked to Finnish culture and society, or built in as part of the educational structure, many comments from Finnish educators emphasized themes that transcend national borders:

- A sense of community and shared goals are essential for making standards as high as possible. The better the vision is communicated, the more resilient the learning community will be.
- The better the educators feel, and the better they cooperate and learn from each other, the better the students learn.
- Well-being has many, many facets. Recognizing them, regularly talking about them, and looking for barriers to them are all part of promoting well-being.

Recommendations

- Movement, music, drama, art, etc. are all elements that can improve learning, when integrated well into the school day and in individual lessons. Include more of these in SEL and other content-area lessons.
- Student engagement and motivation are maximized when the daily schedule feels relaxed and manageable, recreation is valued, and opportunities to contribute and create are abundant. Advocate for schedules that prioritize well-being first and instruction second. Include more aspects of crafts and life-skills education to build students' confidence and sense of self-efficacy.
- The best way to prepare for a productive life in adult society is by practicing contributing in the mini-society created within the school. Identify ways for students to authentically participate in age-appropriate ways, take on responsibility, and increase independence in the day-to-day workings of their school lives.
- School counselors and other support roles appreciate the power of presence and relationships. Kids are learning, whether or not we are "teaching." Model what self-regulation looks and sounds like for colleagues and students alike. Advocate for learning environments that prioritize connection over content.

- What is good for student well-being is often equally good for adult well-being. Pace, cognitive load, communication methods, schedules, expectations, shared goals, mission alignment, and overall culture all contribute to a successful (or unsuccessful) experience for students and staff alike. Identify elements of positive learning environments that are equally important for positive working environments. Be part of the solution in advocating for improvements.

- We can better direct our efforts as a school team when we have shared priorities that are top of mind. The Finnish goal of educating ethically responsible members of society who act for the common good is universally appropriate. Echo that objective everywhere decisions are being made.

Don't lose sight of what you are truly meant to be doing.
It takes guts to neglect the things that are ultimately not important.
We are teaching the subject of LIFE here.

— 5th grade teacher

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