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# **Cultural education in the national curricula of pre-school education and the two first grades in primary school in Finland**

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## **Introduction**

This paper describes how children's cultural education is considered in the national curricula in Finland. Pre-school is voluntary for Finnish children, but the local council must arrange provision if a child's parents want the facility for their child. It may be arranged and offered within the day-care system or in the primary school. Both the national curricula for the pre-school and primary school are drawn up and published by the National Board of Education. The curriculum for the pre-school education was published on 2000, and a new curriculum for primary schools, including the two first grades, will be compulsory from August 2003.

The theory behind the national pre-school and primary curricula is based on cognitive psychology, constructivism and a contextual learning model. Hujala (2002) has presented the theoretical foundation of learning process in childhood. The whole environment - home, pre-school, primary school and indeed everything in the child's surroundings - are important supports in the learning process. The pedagogy of learning is integrated into this whole environment. This notion of learning and pedagogy offers possibilities for children to learn many different things and to gain experiences of culture and social life (Flanagan 1999). This holistic model is based on an overall picture of the child's learning and development and grounded in notions of care and safety.

All these factors in the learning environment guarantee that child receives appropriate care and that her/his confidence and emotional life can develop without disturbance. The child is also enabled to know her/his own culture and to develop an identity. In their own culture, children learn together social rules and thus collaboratively rebuild their own culture: the responsibility of teachers and parents is to arrange activities and a good learning environment for children.

All nations and ethnic groups rear their children in ways appropriate to their own culture; language, religion, manners, and so on. Children learn these things in their own environment in a very natural way (Alexander 1999).

## **The contents of core subjects in pre-school and primary education**

In the national curriculum for six-year old children there are only integrated subjects, a collection of all those factors usually in the curriculum. The main intention is that there are topics which offer children the opportunity to extend their experiences and different kinds of learning activities. Two principles are very important: the first is that the theme must be adapted by the content, and the second is that learning is continuous and it proceeds from the concrete level to the abstract. One of the most important thematic areas is social connection and development. (National Board of Education 2000).

There are separate subject curriculum areas for the first two grades of primary school, although there are aims to integrate these together. The goals of general education

according to the humanistic philosophy are defined as the education of children for the future, and the development of feeling and empathetic citizens.

### **Core subjects in pre-school education**

The goals of pre-school education as laid down in the national curricula are physical, social, emotional, aesthetic, cognitive and ethical development, and religious education. Core subject fields are language and interaction, mathematics, ethics and philosophy, environmental and natural studies, health, physical and motor development, and art and culture (The National Board of Education 2000). How should these subjects be developed to be suitable for six year old children? They should support and increase children's motivation for learning and support their natural development in language, social skills, thinking etc.

### **Core subjects in primary education**

The nine core subjects in the primary curriculum are: mother tongue and literature (there are nine different variations of mother tongue), mathematics, environmental and nature studies, religion (Lutheran and Orthodox), philosophy, music, art, handwork, sport and foreign language (National Board of Education 2002).

The curricula make few direct references to cultural education: one is that children's cultural education starts at home and it is important that all teachers respects the home's cultural aspects. But what is Finnish culture and tradition? It is commonly said that there are influences from both east and west, and that Finnish people must accept this, but there are degrees of opinion of the comparative influential of each. A more recent view is that international influences are increasing, and that there are now many different cultures in Finland.

When comparing these two curricula more similarities than differences are seen. The contents are almost the same, but there are some notable differences. Both the teaching and the role of the teachers differ somewhat. Teaching is more systematic at primary level and children have different learning goals. Cultural education is very similar, though it is clear that in the primary school there are more values which children have to know and learn by doing and being with the others. What is remarkable is the emphasis placed on the influence of the home in connection with cultural education: it is mentioned (1) in the general goals, (2) in the tasks of education at general level, (3) in the subject areas of ethics and religion, and (4) as a component of mother tongue development.

In both mother tongue and literature teaching in primary education it is stated that the subject has its origin in children's social contacts, tradition and identity. The mother language is an important sign of this, and several mother tongues are mentioned - Finnish, Swedish, Same (Lappish), sign language, Romany and other languages. Members of each of these groups must have lessons provided in their own language, as language is considered to be so important at the cultural level. The term 'culture' is also mentioned in relation to science (the cultural heritage), music (high culture, tradition, music of other counties), visual arts (high culture, tradition), handwork and physical education (traditional play and games) (National Board of Education 2000 and 2002).

Culture is also mentioned in its other meaning as part of the human rights and basic values of society. Behind this meaning are national legislation and international

declarations. The role of pre-school and primary education is to promote children's growth into humane individuals and ethically responsible members of society (National Board of Education 2002, Alexander 2000). The curricula state that cultural education means that children must learn to know their own culture and to respect it, to respect the cultures and opinions of others, to accept their own bodies etc. and to develop the self-confidence to accept the differences in the world. It is also noted that many relevant factors occur in everyday life in ways that are meaningful for children and easy for them to understand, such as children's own activities; plays and games; children's own culture is important. Further, 'it is important that children can get experiences from their own culture tradition', the terms 'culture' and 'tradition' are near in meaning.

Tradition can be understood as past, present and future times. The past can be divided into at least three parts: (1) times which are almost unknown and of which evidence is found in museums; (2) past times which exist passively in people's minds; and (3) aspects of the past which are still a part of people's lives. Tradition in pre-school and primary school education is that which children live in their everyday lives, in which people have special celebration days, learn manners to talk with the others, eat traditional food, etc.

Culture is a large and very complicated area to define. In its largest sense it encompasses all human activities, and in more limited meaning we use terms like subculture, ethnic culture, and the cultures of different age groups ( Alexander 2000).

Curricular references to culture in the Finnish national curricula are rather general, but the situation is different in practice in schools and classes. Teachers have their own ethical rules and principles according to different levels

- teachers and pupil,
- teacher,
- teacher and colleague and
- teacher and society.

The document which lays down teachers' professional ethics lists four areas which teachers should follow:

- human worth,
- honesty,
- justice
- freedom. (The Teacher's Professional Ethics 2002).

## **Conclusions**

Cultural Education is a large and important area in the educational field, but one which is not mentioned in detail in the Finnish national curricula. However, much more is said at local and at school level, both of which have their own curricula. Every school has its own school culture, created by the human beings who are part of the school. Parents and teachers are local inhabitants who offer children, at home and in school, cultural features which are needed and which are in use. Children have the possibility of learning from them in their own living environment and context.

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