Sustainability competences in education: lessons from Finland

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“Sustainability means different things to different groups of people at different times”
-Bianchi, G., 2020
The SDGs wedding cake

Credit: Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University CC BY-ND 3.0.
What we know about sustainability and child development?
What we know about sustainability and child development? - There are many perspectives on the matter.

- Child development and learning theories
- Environmental education and nature relationship theory
- Sustainable lifestyle theories and behavior change theories
- Systemicity and connectivity of sustainability - resilience

- Health and wellbeing
What we know about sustainability competences?
Competence areas - GreenComp: the European sustainability competence framework

- Acting for sustainability
- Embodying sustainability values
- Envisioning sustainable futures
- Embracing complexity in sustainability
How is sustainability in Finnish education system?
Finnish education system - compulsory education starts with comprehensive school and ends at the age of 18.

Matriculation examination
General upper secondary schools

Vocational qualifications*
Vocational institutes
Specialist vocational qualifications
Further vocational qualifications
Initial vocational qualifications

Preparatory education for programmes leading to an upper secondary qualification

Primary and lower secondary education
Comprehensive schools

Pre-primary education

Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

*Also available as apprenticeship training or by training agreement.

Finnish education system - OKM - Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland
Finnish education system – famous?

- Over recent decades, the Finnish education system has become regarded by many as the best in the world.
- Generating international fascination.
- An obvious manifestation of this has been the rise of 'PISA tourism.'
- Finland also just acts as the exotic 'other'
  - The Finnish education system has remained largely organised according to the equality idea.
Finnish education system – high autonomy

- The relationship between the state and its 309 municipalities (in 2022) forms the basic frame for the education system in Finland. According to legislation Finnish municipalities provide the comprehensive schooling from age 7–15.

- The legal frameworks for setting the educational aims and managing the outcomes are uniform, but due to the municipal autonomy the state cannot interfere with municipal autonomy through decrees and thus its statutory power is limited in relation to implementation. Also, teachers have considerable autonomy.

- The main means of national steering take place via the core curriculum, division of lesson hours by subjects, quality evaluation and funding.

- The state frames the core curriculum with the help of professional teachers, a professional culture is emphasised given the fact that there are no mandatory standardized tests or inspections.

- Quality evaluation draws on soft tools: education providers are required to evaluate their education and they are also subjected to national evaluations with a development purpose. Funding is the strongest steering mechanism in the state’s toolbox.

- In 2020, there were 2130 comprehensive schools in Finland.
Finnish education system – National Core Curriculum and good teachers.

• In the primary phase children generally study with the **same class teacher throughout their school week** whereas in lower secondary there are **subject-specific teachers** in all disciplines.

• Teachers are **highly educated** and strongly committed to their work.

• **Most recent National Core Curriculum** for basic education in **2014**, and it was required in municipalities and schools in 2016.
Happiest country

- …but “overconsumption day” happens usually in the end of March.
- Need for change.
- Education is inherently contradictory: their role is to both socialise children and renew society.

“Learning to live in equilibrium with other-than-human and learning to renew the present unsustainable way of life”
Sustainability education in Finland

- The main international document related to sustainable development is Agenda 2030.
  - It is at the heart of in Finnish environmental policy as well.
- The most important goal for sustainability education is subgoal 4.7:
  “By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles (…)”
Finnish education has long been renowned for its innovative approach to teaching and learning, and sustainability is an important part of the Finnish education system. Here are some things that can be said about Finnish education regarding sustainability:

1. Sustainable development is included in the national core curriculum for basic education in Finland. This means that sustainability is an integral part of teaching and learning across all subject areas.
2. Environmental education is an important part of Finnish education, and schools are encouraged to incorporate sustainability into their daily practices. For example, many schools in Finland have implemented recycling programs, energy-efficient lighting systems, and sustainable food choices.
3. The Finnish education system emphasizes the importance of experiential learning, which includes hands-on learning experiences related to sustainability. For example, students may participate in outdoor education programs, environmental projects, and field trips that focus on sustainability.
4. Finnish schools also prioritize student well-being, and this includes a focus on physical and mental health. This is important for sustainability because healthy students are more likely to be engaged in their learning and motivated to make positive changes in their communities.
5. Finally, Finnish education places a strong emphasis on collaboration and teamwork. This is important for sustainability because solving complex environmental problems requires cooperation across different sectors and disciplines. Finnish students are encouraged to work together to find creative solutions to challenges.
National curriculum and sustainability.

• The main concepts used in the curriculum are
  • sustainable development, sustainable future, and sustainable way of living.
• The curriculum uses also the concepts environment, environmental awareness, and relationship with nature.
• One impressive section about underlying values points to the necessity of a sustainable way of living:

  “Humans are part of nature and completely dependent on the vitality of ecosystems. Understanding this plays a key role in growth as a human being”
National curriculum and sustainability.

• One of the **seven transversal competencies** in the curriculum is “Participation, involvement and **building a sustainable future**.”

• **Working methods** include methods familiar from environmental education:
  • outdoor learning, experiential pedagogy, exploration and multidisciplinary learning.

• The curriculum takes into account **central competencies for sustainability**, like responsibility, critical thinking, participation and cooperation.

• Environmental studies in elementary school and biology and geography in middle school are the subjects where sustainability is taught the most.

• Phenomenon learning enables a systemic approach.
Sustainability in schools?
Sustainability in schools in Finland

• Everyday activity in Finnish school has many faces.

• Teachers **considerable autonomy affects**
  
  • Some teachers **are afraid that talking about environmental matters** would bring negative emotions to the fore, and sensitive matters of this kind are better left undiscussed.

• Every day small acts -> **fundamental transformation and transformative learning is needed.**

• Some municipalities have **natureschools!**

• **Administrative steering is needed.**
Sustainability and child development?

- **Spending time in nature** (and the built environment) and exploring the environment are an important part of early childhood development.

- Through the experiences of admiration, adventure, the joy of discovery and play, the child learns to enjoy nature and the surrounding environment.

- Local nature and the built environment are both learning targets and learning environments.

- Many sustainability acts are easy to learn in early childhood. But they are difficult to retain.
Through personal nature experiences and our relationship with nature, we learn to understand the importance of natural diversity and human responsibility for the preservation of diversity.
Sustainability and child development?

One of the most significant roles of upbringing and education is the promotion of well-being and health. This entity is very broad and includes aspects of mental, social and physical well-being and health. The goal of a sustainable future is to ensure well-being and health for everyone. According to research, doing sustainable development actions increases well-being. In addition, many activities that promote sustainability increase health. These include, for example, a diet in accordance with nutritional recommendations, a change in the mode of transportation to sustainable and active modes of transportation, and a focus on e.g. increasing intangible well-being instead of overconsumption.

Well-being and health can be viewed from the perspective of sustainability in education and training from, for example, the following perspectives:

- Planetary well-being.
- National welfare.
- The well-being of the learning community.
- Learner's well-being.

Health and well-being, which is related to outdoor learning and time spent in the natural environment, often receive less attention from the perspective of sustainability. The health effects of nature have been proven beyond doubt in several studies.
How does nature affect?

• 5 minutes: The mood improves.

• 15–20 minutes: Vitality increases and blood pressure decreases.

• Using the city's green areas for at least 5 hours a month, or 2-3 visits a month to nature sites outside the city: the mental well-being of the city's residents improves significantly.

• It has been researched that gardening can lift the spirits of those who are depressed. Taking care of the garden strengthens balance, muscle condition and coordination.
“Sustainable future is an important goal, but in the middle of numerous everyday demands that future seems far away, and you can think about it later— but the suitable time for sustainability issues never comes”

“According to research, doing sustainable development actions increases well-being. Children should have opportunity to act for sustainability in schools”

“Need for commitment can come from nature relationship, that also affects to sustainability acts”

“Sustainability is strongly related to health and wellbeing”
My top 5 from Finland related to sustainability education.

- The curriculum obliges and enables the teaching of sustainable development.
- Nature is close.
- Playtime / recess outside every 45 / 75 minutes.
- Teachers high education.
- The autonomy of teachers and the autonomy of municipalities makes it possible if so desired.

My lowe’s 5 from Finland related to sustainability education.

- Sustainability is seen by many as value not as competence.
- Sustainability is not just every day tasks.
- Teachers education and additional training.
- The autonomy of teachers and the autonomy of municipalities makes it possible to ignore if so desired.
- National steering is weak. Need for national coordination/ management.
Future views

• Climate law.
• New national curriculum.
• Need for sustainability competences in different sectors.
• Demographic change.
• Adaptation to climate change.
• Remote-learning?

Inequality often reflects many dimensions and varies across different urban and rural geographic settings within Finland.
What should sustainability be then?

• A healthy cake we all know, hopefully like and at least share with each others.
• Sustainability and digital learning hand in hand.
• Competence and value, not just otherone.
• Science based, but also experiments.
• Ekological sustainability as a top priority.
• Strong nature connection.
• Part of health and wellbeing planning.
• “Practical hope” related.
• Sustainable development actions but also systemic approach.
• Adaptation, in constant move.
• Everyone is environmental educator, but at work places we have roles.
• Dialogue not debate.
Thank you!

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