

EXPLORING FINLAND'S EARLY LITERACY PRACTICES

Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Finland is known for its high literacy rates. To study the factors that impact a child's literacy development, four schools were visited in the Helsinki metropolitan area through VisitEDUfinn, a program that schedules school visits for education professionals interested in learning about the Finnish education system. Three professionals were interviewed, including one 2nd grade teacher, one pre-primary teacher, and one educational psychologist. Data were analyzed and categorized based on themes from the observations and interviews. Findings were framed using Bronfenbrenner's Biological Systems Theory (1979). Emerging themes included (1) a holistic view of child development consistent across family, school, government, and society, and (2) a professionalized view of teachers. Questions arose about whether these themes would continue to be consistent with a changing Finnish population. This study contributed to a more cohesive understanding of the Finnish education system and may benefit United States educators who can learn from the Finnish system.

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Exploring Finland's Early Literacy Practices

Why This Study Matters

Finland is known for its high literacy rates. As a preservice teacher in the United States, I wonder what are the best practices for teaching literacy to young children.

Research to better understand how the Finnish education supports each student and the factors that affect a child's educational experience in Finland will benefit my future teaching career.

Literacy Review

Research has shown that children's literacy development has many influences. Bronfenbrenner, a developmental psychologist, focused on interactions that influence a child's development and described five systems to explain the different levels of interaction that enhance or interfere with the child's learning and growing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The systems include: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. His systems are presented as concentric circles with the child in the center and each system creating another layer of influence as pictured below.

The microsystem is the internal system in Bronfenbrenner's Biological Systems Theory. This system consists of the "relations between the child and the immediate environment" (Schickendanz, Schickendanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 2001, p. 27), specifically the aspects of a child's life that have direct impact such as relationships between peers and family, their school or childcare, and neighborhood. Encompassing this system is the mesosystem which consists of the "network of interrelations of settings in the child's immediate environment" (Schickendanz, Schickendanz, Forsyth, &

Forsyth, 2001, p. 27). This system includes the interaction between the child's school and home. In order for this system to be successful, there needs to be frequent, positive interactions between the microsystems. Without these, conflicts may arise in the child's day-to-day life (Schickendanz, Schickendanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 2001). The exosystem refers to a setting that the child is not an active participant in, although the larger still has an effect on him or her, e.g., the parent or guardian's workplace or the teacher's family (Schickendanz, Schickendanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 2001). If the parent is positively or negatively affected by an element in the exosystem, then it could connect to the child based on the parent's increased stress levels impacting their caregiving or reactions to the child.

The macrosystem and chronosystem are the most external of the five systems. The macrosystem refers to the subculture and culture surrounding the child such as racism, sexism, or violence (Schickendanz, Schickendanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 2001). These elements have more obvious effects on the child especially those children who are at risk because of other issues that have arisen in their microsystem or mesosystem (Schickendanz, Schickendanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 2001). The chronosystem suggests that the child's system interactions become more complex over time. This outer system acknowledges the complexities and changes within each system and consists of elements such as important life events, changing relationships, and changes of cultural norms, which ultimately affect patterns of stability within the child's life (Schickendanz, Schickendanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 2001).

Supporting the conclusions developed through aspects of Bronfenbrenner's Biological Systems Theory, the United Nations developed the Convention on the Rights

of the Child (CRC) in 1989 for all children under the age of 18. Its purpose is to recognize education “as a legal right to every child on the basis of equal opportunity” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, p. 1). This document encompasses rights for all children, regardless of “the child’s or his or her parents’ or guardian’s race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth, or other status” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, p. 2). Presented in three parts, part one of the Rights of the Child describes rights that directly affect the child, such as their right to education, standard of living, and protection. Part two and three are more specific to the Convention and Committee themselves; therefore, they are less tailored to the individual child and less relevant to this study. Each part is followed by article numbers regarding the information agreed upon by the United Nations.

Two kinds of rights are described in the CRC: provision rights and protection rights. Provision rights are not limited to the child but extend to the parents and or guardian providing for the child. Some articles detail the child or parental/guardian rights, e.g., the need for the government to provide appropriate support for parents to ensure development and child-care services (Article 18, CRC, 1989). Provisions also include the child’s right to play and rest (Article 31, CRC, 1989) as well as their guarantee of free compulsory primary education (Article 28, CRC, 1989), and accessible education for all students including those with disabilities (Article 23, CRC, 1989)

Many articles in the CRC are also concerned about the protection of the child and their rights. For example, the protection and care of the child is “necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties...of parents” (Article 3, CRC, 1989

p. 2). Other protection rights discuss the child's rights of expression including in cases where a child or family is involved in any judicial or administrative proceedings that affect the child (Article 12, CRC, 1989). Freedoms the child has, such as freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and freedom of association, are also explained (Articles 13-15, CRC, 1989). Children are also protected, against any and all forms of "physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation" (Article 19, CRC, 1989, p. 5). Protection of the child also highlights the child's right of identity and their right to practice their own language and culture (Article 8, CRC, 1989). Child labor protection is regulated by the CRC creating minimum age requirements for a child to work and regulations regarding work hours and conditions (Article 32, CRC, 1989). According to UNICEF (2018), 195 countries have ratified the CRC, although the United States has not.

Just as many countries have adopted particular rights for children, many countries have adopted an international assessment of literacy, math, and science skills. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a standardized assessment from the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) that was created jointly by participating international countries and schools (OECD, 2015b). Its purpose is to assess "how far students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society" (OECD, 2015b) This assessment has been administered six times over the last 15 years, in three-year cycles starting in 2000. The latest published results are from 2015. More countries across the globe are joining each cycle. The test assesses content knowledge and the knowledge and skills needed in life. Only the reading and well-being

results will be discussed in this thesis. Finland's official PISA results from the OECD website provide data on their literacy performance (OECD, 2015a).

According to the 2015 PISA results, Finland's performance in reading is better than the OECD average, although all countries' scores have declined since 2006 (Figure 1, OECD, 2015a).



Figure 1: Finland's Average Reading Performance on PISA Compared to OECD Average (OECD, 2015a)

In the 2015 PISA (OECD, 2015b), a new element was added analyzing the student's well-being, their sense of belonging at school, their relationships with peers and teachers, and their home life. In comparison to the OECD average, scores for life satisfaction and sense of belonging are higher in Finland, and the score for anxiety is lower (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Measures of Finland's Student Well-being Performance on PISA Compared to OECD Average (OECD, 2015a)

Another interesting statistic presented in the PISA data is information regarding the immigrant population in the participating countries. PISA assesses how immigrant students perform compared to other countries' immigrant population (Figure 3) as well as the proportion of immigrant students among all students (Figure 4).

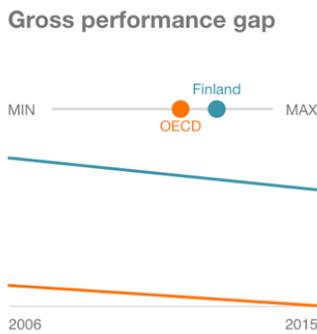


Figure 3: Finland's Immigrant Performance on PISA Compared to OECD Average (OECD, 2015a)



Figure 4: Finland's Share of Immigrant Students as Compared to OECD Average (OECD, 2015a)

Research Question

What factors affect a child's early literacy experiences in Finland?

Methodology

Setting and Program Sponsor

VisitEDUfinn is a program based in Helsinki, Finland that coordinates visits for educational professionals interested in learning about the practices of the Finnish education system. They organize school visits for interested visitors and connect the visitor to schools, teachers, and educational experts that support the visitor's interests. The program can be tailored and customized. For my visit, VisitEDUfinn customized my trip to a week with school visits and interviews.

Four schools were visited in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Three of the schools were primary schools, although they ranged in the grades taught. Table 1 provides information about the four schools. School A taught students from 1st-9th grades, School B included grades 1-6, and School C taught students in 1st-3rd grades. The fourth school, School D, was a pre-primary school, or preschool, with students ages 5-6 years old.

Table 1: *Overview of Schools*

School	Grades Served	Staff/ Student Ratio	Nature of the Visit
A	1-9	1:15 (grades 1-2) 1:21 (grades 3-9)	Two first grade classrooms, special education school assembly, 4 th grade classroom
B	1-6	Unknown	School walk through, school assembly, 5 th grade classroom
C	1-3	1:20	2 nd and 3 rd grade morning meeting, 1 st grade walk through
D	Pre-primary, ages 5-6	1:13	Two pre-primary classrooms, playtime, lunch

Participants

Teachers, educational personnel, classrooms, and schools were chosen by VisitEDUfinn. I had no ability to select or unselect participants. Every classroom and school that was visited were aware of my study and purpose through VisitEDUfinn. No contact was made with the teachers before the observations or after the interviews.

Participating teachers signed an informed consent form prior to interviews which stated that they understood the nature of the research and agreed to participate and to have photographs taken of their classroom (Appendix A).

VisitEDUfinn arranged for teachers and/or principals to participate in semi-structured interviews, responding to informal questions to provide greater insight on the school structure and academics. Informal observations of the environment, classroom and school set up, teaching styles, and student behavior were also noted. Table 2 provides an overview of Interview Participants. At School A, one teacher was formally interviewed and had support from a school administrator for any translation difficulties. Teacher 1 was a 2nd grade teacher who taught a class of 21 students. At School D, Teacher 2 was an early childhood education teacher and assistant director of the daycare center. The final participant, an Educational Psychologist, participated in an hour semi-structured interview.

Table 2: *Overview of Interview Participants*

Participants	Grade Level	School Location	Length of Interview
Teacher 1	2	School A	30 minutes
Teacher 2	Pre-primary	School D	Conversations over 7 hours throughout two days
Educational Psychologist	N/A	N/A	1 hour

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted formally for Teacher 1 and the Educational Psychologist (Appendix B). These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Teacher 1's interview was conducted at School A while the Educational Psychologist interview was conducted at a coffee shop in Helsinki. Teacher 2 was interviewed informally over the course of two days observing in her classroom. This interview was not transcribed, rather, interview notes were taken during the conversations and immediately following the end of the school day. At the other schools, there were no formal interviews of any individuals; instead, data were collected through personal observations and additional informal conversations with teachers and principals walking to and from classrooms.

Data Analysis

Prior to beginning my research in Finland, I anticipated that I would analyze the data through the lens of effective classroom practices. Allington described these practices in his article "What I've Learned About Effective Reading Instruction" (Allington, 2002). Allington's article provided the initial lens, including *texts*, *time*, *teaching*, *talk*, *tasks*, and *testing*. Only *texts*, *time*, *tasks*, and *testing* were relevant to this study (Allington, 2002).

Texts refers to the books that are available to the students within the classroom, including appropriate level books that student can read independently and some they can read with help based on the child's abilities. *Time* refers to the amount of time that students are spending actively reading or writing within the school day. *Tasks* refers to what the students are asked to do, such as the work that is assigned and the amount of

choice the child has within those assignments. *Testing* refers to how students are evaluated and awarded grades “based more on effort and improvement than simply on achievement” (Allington, 2002, p. 745).

As I began my observations, I realized that the data included many findings outside the classroom practice lens described by Allington and that this lens did not capture the nuances or implications of what I was seeing. Looking through an additional lens was necessary. (As a reminder, I could not control what I was seeing in my observations nor the schools and settings that I was visiting.) More information was found that was important to answer my question, namely the factors influencing the child’s education in Finland. Therefore, I began to look through my notes and findings to find similarities and broad themes to categorize, analyze, and make sense of the data.

In an initial reading of my data, I realized that my focus was not only at a classroom and school level, but rather that the Finnish education system was influenced by greater outside factors. I saw that there was a large societal and cultural impact on the child’s education including not only the child, school, and parents, but also the government and culture framing what happens and influencing the student’s education experience. To analyze these findings with a larger frame of reference, I reread the data and open coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding was guided by what stood out most, what was most frequently mentioned throughout the different educational settings, what was different from my experience and training in the United States education system, and what were the overarching themes in my observations. With the quantity of codes, additional analyses were conducted grouping codes into overarching categories.

The resulting overarching categories included: home and school, testing, school and classroom structure, support and role/expectations of the student and teacher.

To frame the overarching codes, I applied an additional lens to my findings. I began using Bronfenbrenner's Biological Systems Theory to categorize my findings (1979). I looked toward Bronfenbrenner's theory to conceptualize the categorizes from my initial data analysis into the different interactions that connect to the child.

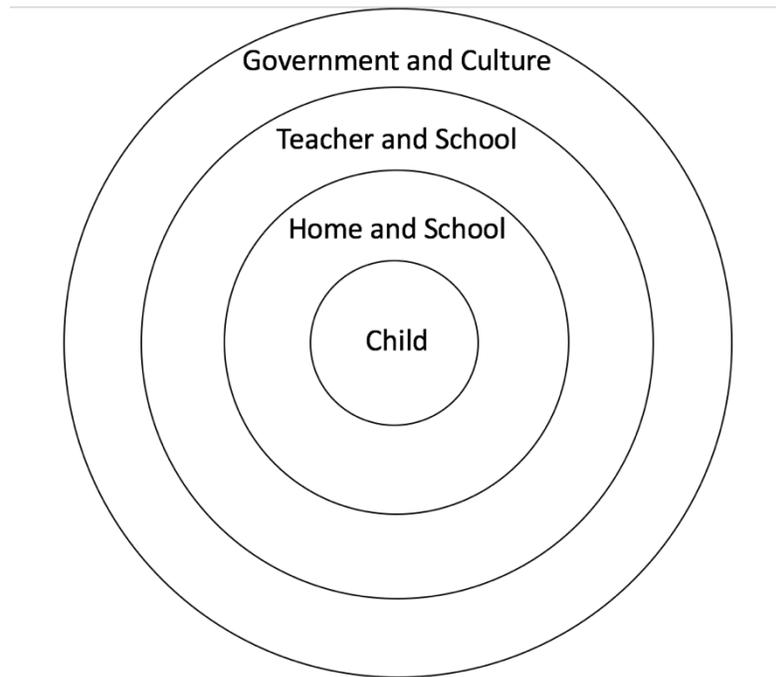


Figure 5: Systems of Influence (adapted from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, 1979)

Findings

To answer my research question about the factors impacting young children's early literacy experiences in Finland, I analyzed data from interviews and observations collected on a weeklong education trip to Finland. As described, the data were categorized into Systems of Influence, namely *Child*, *Home and School*, *Teacher and School*, and *Government and Culture* (see Figure 5). The data will be presented by

System of Influence, beginning with the inner circle or system and moving toward the outer systems that less directly impact the child.

The findings are presented in the following tables. Each table includes the themes organized by system and the data sources where that theme was coded. The term *Observation Notes* designates data recorded after the informal conversations and *Observation* designates what I actually saw during a visit. All formal codes are indicated in italics in the accompanying descriptions.

Systems of Influence: Child

The data included in Table 3, *Systems of Influence: Child*, demonstrate that Finnish educators value the role of the child in their own education. Codes in this system include *student independence*, which was mentioned by several sources. The data show the student is given independence in their learning, allowing them to support their own engagement and motivation in activities. One teacher noted that the students are typically very independent making the role of the teacher more focused on helping the child feel a sense of belonging within the school and classroom as well as managing students in their learning tasks. The Educational Psychologist stated, “The more independent the students become on reading and writing, the more independent they can be on other tasks so then the time they can work without the teacher increases” (Educational Psychologist, Interview, 12/12/18). This statement echoed the overarching theme of independence mentioned in many interactions with teachers and administrators.

Table 3: *System of Influence: Child*

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Source(s)</i>
<i>Student independence</i>	Teacher 2, School A observation, School C observation, School D observation, Educational Psychologist
<i>Student engagement</i>	Teacher 2, School A observation, School B observation, School C observation, School D observation
<i>Student choice</i>	Teacher 2, School A observation, School C observation, School D observation
<i>Importance of play</i>	Teacher 2, Educational Psychologist, School A observation, School D observation
<i>School starting age</i>	Educational Psychologist

In the preschool setting, children have the option to engage in tasks such as writing and reading, but it is not required that they perform these tasks or perform at any level of achievement. As an example, in the preschool setting seen in School D, children can *choose* to play the majority of the day or to participate in guided literacy activities. A child is trusted to make their own choices without a lot of formal supervised learning. The focus of the child’s early learning is largely on play rather than on academics. Creating a pre-primary setting where children are involved in one or two guided activities and then spend the rest of the morning—upwards of two to three hours—playing with

their peers in various rooms throughout the preschool was a core value and encouraged in the teacher and student interactions. Frequently noted in many interviews and conversations, through this independence, the child is motivated and *engaged* as they have made their own decisions as to what they want to accomplish. *Choice* impacts engagement and is another direct influence on the child.

Another aspect of influences on the *Child* is that preschool is optional in Finland, and the *starting age of school* is seven years old. The Educational Psychologist indicated that this policy allows children to have more opportunities to play before starting formal schooling. As mentioned before, in the preschool setting, there are lots of *opportunities for choice and play*. These data were supported throughout interviews and school observations.

Systems of Influence: Home and School

The data in Table 4 show the *Home and School* influences on Finnish children's education. This system of influence, like Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem, closely impacts the child and the child's learning experiences. Throughout the interviews and observations, *parent involvement* was frequently mentioned, specifically parents' desire to see their child progress and support their child's endeavors. It is customary for *parents to read* to their children nightly with conversations about the text as well. These conversations are not aimed at facilitating academic discussion but rather provide the opportunity for the child to spend time with their parents. Parents are aware of the importance of reading and literacy; therefore, they act as *role models* by showing

themselves reading in their own lives, showing their engagement in varying texts such as a book or the newspaper. The *parents act as a role* for reading.

Table 4: *Systems of Influence: Home and School*

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Source(s)</i>
<i>Parent involvement in reading at home</i>	School A notes, School B notes, Teacher 1, Educational Psychologist
<i>Parents as reading role models</i>	School A notes, School B, Teacher 1
<i>Communication with the parents</i>	School A notes
<i>Children going to school knowing how to read</i>	School A, Teacher 1, Teacher 2
<i>Learning about the library at a young age</i>	Educational Psychologist, School A notes, School D notes, Teacher 2

Throughout the interviews, another common theme regarding the *Home and School* influence was that families provide an environment where the child enters school prepared for—and with a great appreciation of—reading. Additionally, it is common for children to *go to school knowing how to read* or with some basic understanding of reading. Across the interviews and conversations, parents are considered the child’s first literacy teacher.

Within Finland, libraries are also extremely valued; children *learn about the library at a young age*. Children go to the library with their families. As children grow, they regularly check out books with their family and this literacy support continues

throughout their school education. According to Teacher 1, the children also “know how to act [at the library]” through their experiences at an early age, allowing it to become familiar (Teacher 1, Interview, 12/11/18). These *Home and School* influences directly impact the child and the child’s developing love of literacy.

Systems of Influence: Teacher and School

The *Teacher and School* system, is similar to Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem, a system that connects the child’s life to their school or childcare and teachers. The data in Table 5 demonstrate how the Finnish education system is structured and the supports the teacher is given to assist the child. Codes in this system include *breaks* implemented in the Finnish school schedule. Though the breaks have different lengths, based on the grade level of the child and the school itself, teachers and school administrators encourage students in younger grades to go outside during this time for fresh air, to promote play, and to encourage socialization between peers. Although the schedules differ by school, most schools have either 90-minute working sessions with 30-minute breaks (School B and School C), or 45-minute working sessions with 15-minute breaks (School A). Due to the flexible structure of the school schedule, children are given the opportunity, regardless of their age, to have mental breaks in between lessons where they can play and socialize with peers. This schedule supports the child’s academic development as well as their physical and social development because they are given time to rest rather than being overwhelmed with academics (Educational Psychologist, Interview, 12/12/18).

Table 5: *Systems of Influence: Teacher and School*

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Source(s)</i>
<i>Schedule-having “breaks”</i>	School A observation, School B observation, School C observation, School A notes, School C notes, Educational Psychologist, Teacher 1
<i>School structure-students come at different times depending on the day of the week at some schools</i>	Educational Psychologist
<i>Teacher seen as a professional-has flexibility for lessons and can provide additional supports to students</i>	School A notes, School B notes, Teacher 1
<i>Teacher/student relationship-eating with each other at lunch, trust, independence, support, extra lessons</i>	School A observation, School B observation, School C observation, School D observation, School B notes, Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Educational Psychologist
<i>Time spent with the students-teachers typically stay with the same group of students for 2-6 years</i>	School A notes, School B notes, School B observation, Educational Psychologist
<i>Testing is virtually non-existent</i>	School A notes, Teacher 1, Educational Psychologist

<p><i>Childcare settings-not explicitly teaching, children go at their own pace, students control engagement</i></p>	<p>Teacher 2, School D observation, School D notes</p>
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The participants also spoke about the varying *school structures* across the Helsinki metropolitan area and that not all schools have a consistent weekly schedule or have similar starting and ending times. In addition, school academic schedules can vary based on the day of the week. For example, some days can be as short as three hours long. The maximum school day length is six hours for younger grades and eight hours for students in 6th grade and above. When there is an eight-hour day during the week, schools will schedule some shorter days in that same week, such as a three-hour day as noted above. Schools can start as late as 10 a.m. and finish as early as 12 p.m. No school day ever extends beyond 4 p.m. This scheduling demonstrates ways the Finnish school system and teachers value the child in terms of the time for academics, play, and socialization.

Within the *Teacher and School* system, teachers are seen as *professionals* and have *flexibility* regarding the structure of their lessons. Within their respective schools, teachers are responsible for adhering to the National Curriculum Standards, but have autonomy to plan their instruction to meet those standards. A teacher at School B noted that the lesson and curriculum schedules were “very flexible” for the teacher (Personal Communication, 12/12/18). Based on the student’s needs and what the teacher identifies as necessary to learn the standards, teachers can develop their day accordingly (Personal Communication, 12/12/18). According to another teacher at School B, “Teachers can do

math all day if they want,” based on their class’s needs (Personal Communication, 12/12/18). As another example, if the teacher begins the day with a writing unit and notices that the children still need more support grasping the concept, they can adjust the day to continue working with writing until they feel like the students have comprehended what they were being taught. Teachers can also plan ahead to spend a whole day investigating a science topic or learning math, if it is appropriate for the needs of the students. A teacher at School A echoed this statement, “Teachers are flexible to the needs of the students” (Personal Communication, 12/11/18).

Finnish teachers have a lot of autonomy and pedagogical freedom. They have choice in what they want to do, which is “typical of the Finnish education system” (Educational Psychologist, Interview, 12/12/18). The Educational Psychologist stated that the National Curriculum has “skills and goals that kids need to learn” but the teachers are “free to choose” what they teach (Interview, 12/12/18). The teachers tend to utilize what they have learned through their “teacher education or their colleagues,” but with the influx of technology and the government putting a lot of money toward supporting digitalization, teachers are able to adapt their lessons and use “different digitalization” (Educational Psychologist, Interview, 12/12/18).

Teacher/student relationship was described and observed in many ways throughout the *Teacher and School* influences on the child. Teachers are able to increase the *time spent with students* as many teachers “follow” their students, often teaching the same group for consecutive years and develop a deeper understanding as to what instructional methods best aid particular students. An administrator at School B stated that teachers “usually have students for two to four years” (Personal Communication,

12/12/18). This extended time allows the teacher to develop and maintain strong relationships with the students and their families and to be able to provide better, more tailored instruction. In fact, one teacher noted that it is “very minimal that teachers have one class for one year” (Personal Communication, 12/12/18).

Within this *Teacher and School* influences on the child, the teacher also has the opportunity to provide “extra lessons” after school if students are struggling in a particular area or with a particular topic. These lessons are free to the student, though the teacher is compensated by the school for their time. Students are able to work one-on-one or in small groups with teachers for extra guidance and support. Since children are recognized as being independent and capable of making choices, they can control if they want to seek support.

Another code within the *Teacher and Student* system is the level of *trust* the teacher gives their students about how they are spending their academic time. Children are given significant independence and trusted and expected to spend their time well. This phenomenon also existed in the younger, pre-primary setting. Children’s independence was valued as students had choice in their academic tasks and the pace of those academic tasks. Importantly, academic tasks were not required at this young age, although they were supported if children showed interest.

Another interesting contributor to the *Teacher and Student* relationship is the role of testing. Specifically, *testing* is virtually non-existent (Educational Psychologist, Interview, 12/12/18). Because the teachers spend so much time with the students, they know—and are trusted to know—where the child needs more support. The teacher’s expertise and observations of students’ growth supersede information that the

assessments could provide; therefore, standardized testing is not deemed important or necessary to demonstrate student knowledge (Educational Psychologist, Interview, 12/12/18). This level of trust of the teachers' expertise was noteworthy and frequently mentioned in formal interviews and informal conversations across all of the schools.

Systems of Influence: Government and Culture

The *Government and Culture* system, like Bronfenbrenner's exosystem, references to an aspect of the child's life where the child is not an active participant, but the system still has an indirect impact on him or her (Table 6; Schickendanz, Schickendanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 2001, p. 27). The system also connects to Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem, referring to the child's culture and subculture. Throughout the interviews and observations, the *value of reading* was frequently repeated and demonstrates the Finnish government's indirect and direct support, specifically in the creation of new libraries and the funding required to build and maintain them. This system of influence supports a *culture of reading* that families adopt as they regularly and consistently bring their children to the libraries. The interviewees often remarked that the importance and central role of libraries were frequent conversation topics, not only in the education world, but also between locals in informal gatherings. Teachers in School A noted that locals tend to give recommendations to tourists to visit the libraries as something they are proud to "show off" (Personal Communication, 12/11/18).

Table 6: *Systems of Influence: Government and Culture*

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Source(s)</i>
<i>Culture of reading, value reading</i>	School A notes, School B notes, Teacher 1, Educational Psychologist
<i>Value of play</i>	Educational Psychologist, Teacher 2, School D observation
<i>Value of learning other languages</i>	School A notes, Educational Psychologist
<i>Teacher autonomy, pedagogical freedom, accountability of students</i>	Educational Psychologist
<i>Government provides basics</i>	Educational Psychologist
<i>Societal pressures on students are non-existent because of government funding</i>	Educational Psychologist
<i>Homogeneous population</i>	School A notes, Educational Psychologist

In the *Child* system of influence discussed earlier, the *value of play* was noted, but the policy that children do not begin formal education until seven years of age reflects a *Government and Culture* influence. This policy reflects an overall commitment to the value of play and the role of family as the child’s first teachers.

An additional *Government and Culture* influence is the important of multilingualism. The Finnish people recognize that Finnish is spoken only in Finland; therefore, the schools support learning Finnish, Swedish, and English. The general population of Finland is trilingual and literate in all three languages. They *value learning*

languages and implement rigorous language studies within their curriculum. In addition to these three languages, students have the opportunity to learn other languages in school, such as Spanish or French.

The earlier finding described in the *Teacher and School* system that teachers have professional freedom to plan their lessons and how they structure learning in their classrooms also reflects a value within this *Government and Culture* system. The teacher is trusted and given *autonomy* to provide what the child needs in order to make and achieve academic growth and progress. The overwhelming trust from both the government and the schools allows the teacher to be more involved in their curriculum, deciding what is most influential and necessary to the needs of the school and student population.

The *Government and Culture* influence was also evident in the socialist economy, where the government provides essential *basics* for its people. These fundamental *basics* include, and were not limited to, free education, free healthcare, a strong pension system, and paid, extended time for maternity and paternity leave. With these supports, *societal pressure* related to careers encourages students and adults to consider what career will make them happy rather than what career will make the most money (Educational Psychologist, Interview, 12/12/18).

Lastly, the code of a *homogeneous population*, was noted as a *Government and Culture* influence. Throughout the data, the historically static, homogeneous population in Finland was noted several times in interviews and conversations. Finland has not had many immigrant or refugee populations in its history. In one interview, the Educational Psychologist specifically noted the changing demographics and the unknown effects that

a more heterogeneous population may have on cultural and societal norms around literacy and the demands of teaching literacy to a more diverse population (Interview, 12/12/18).

Limitations of Study

As in all research studies, limitations exist. This study used a small data set. Admittedly, the data may not represent all of Finland's education. The findings are narrow, but confirm what the literature has said regarding Finland's education system. The generalizability is limited but will still help me as a future teacher and may help other teachers as well.

Summary of Findings

In summary, many factors impact the child's early literacy experience in Finland. The systems of influence used to make sense of the data in this study reveal two overarching patterns. First, Finland values the centrality of the role of the child in their own development. To Finnish educators, parents, and community members, development is broadly defined and supported, including play and academic learning. Across the different systems, the community values children as a central piece in their own development. Children are given time, space, and support to grow at their own pace and in their own way *within* the school structure and *because of* the community and societal values. Children are encouraged to self-monitor their own engagement, choose their tasks, and engage in play. Parents and family are role models of literacy and influence young children's love of learning through teaching children to read at home and frequent visits to the library.

The role of the child in their learning is also revealed in other “outer-lying” systems that have less direct, but still have great influence on the student. The Finnish government values the role of the child in their development by providing “the basics” such as free education, free healthcare, and a good pension system, which allows families and children to focus more on what makes them happy. This larger focus on work and career happiness is reflected in the Finnish culture as are the value of play, reading, and learning languages.

The second pattern that emerges is the professionalized view of the Finnish teacher. This pattern appears across many systems. The school and government respect the teacher’s choices and allow the teacher to drive instructional decisions based on knowledge of their students. Additionally, the lack of emphasis on standardized testing and the flexible school schedules reveal an overall valuing of teachers by the local and national government.

Discussion

The research question for this project was: *What factors affect a child’s early literacy experiences in Finland?* The research findings demonstrated two patterns across the data. First, children are central to their own learning. Second, teachers are respected as professionals and given extensive professional autonomy. These patterns have implications for myself as a future educator. Other educators around the world, and in particular within the United States, may also learn from these findings.

First, in the data I collected across observations in three schools and in interviews and conversations with multiple education professionals, the child plays a central role in their own learning. Most people would state that the United States is trying to achieve

this goal with our educational practices. Ten years ago, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published a document titled *Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement* (NAEYC, 2009). This position states the goal to provide a framework for best practices for early childhood education in the United States, including (1) creating a caring community of learners, (2) teaching to enhance development and learning, (3) planning curriculum to achieve important goals, (4) assessing children’s development and learning, and (5) establishing reciprocal relationships with families (NAEYC, 2009). These guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices represent the importance of environment, teaching, assessment, and home connections. Teachers are encouraged to present “children with opportunities to make meaningful choices,” as well as times for extended investigation, play, exploration, and interaction (NAEYC, 2009, p. 18). Although the United States is trying to be child-centered through its developmentally appropriate practices and instruction, the way that it is enacted in Finland appears to be more consistently implemented across schools and supported by government policies.

The Finnish government, community, parents, and teachers advocate for children. They have adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and have government policies and cultural norms implemented at the school level that support these rights. It is noteworthy that the United States has not adopted these rights (UNICEF, 2018). This lack of endorsement reflects my government’s need to better support early education.

The second pattern identified in this study is teacher professionalism in Finland. This pattern confirms findings across the research. Other researchers note that teacher

professionalism is woven into teacher education and supported by the schools (Lavonon, Korhonen, & Juuti, 2015). In their article, *Finnish Teachers Professionalism is Built in Teacher Education and Supported by School Site*, Lavonon, Korhonen, and Juuti (2015), define a professional teacher as one who is “considered to have profound and versatile knowledge base” (p. 2). The Finnish teachers are trusted to “assess, self-regulate, and control their work...therefore heavy, national or district level testing are not needed” (Lavonon, Korhonen, & Juuti, 2015, p. 2). To support this professional identity in teachers, the Finnish educate their teachers well, including ongoing professional development after university.

This conclusion was supported in my findings as well. Since there is an established trust between schools, teachers, and the government, there are no routine school inspections, and there has “never been district or national testing in Finnish comprehensive school” (Lavonon, Korhonen, & Juuti, 2015, p. 2). This trust is shared by parents as well (Lavonon, Korhonen, & Juuti, 2015).

The professional culture in the school also plays a large role in supporting the teachers allowing for collaboration (Lavonon, Korhonen, & Juuti, 2015). The Finnish schools support and facilitate a positive and professional school culture. Teachers “plan, implement and assess his/her own practice and students’ learning, [and] they are able to work collaboratively towards goals,” allowing them to “act as a curriculum specialist” (Lavonon, Korhonen, & Juuti, 2015, p. 5). They emphasize meaningful learning and that “professional teachers are at the heart of the Finnish school” (Lavonon, Korhonen, & Juuti, 2015, p. 5).

The Finnish professionalism of teaching has some interesting contrasts to education in the United States. First, there is a significant focus on testing in the United States (e.g., Buly & Valencia, 2002, Condie, 2014). As Allington (2002) noted in his article about the best practices of literacy instruction, the most effective elementary teachers spend minimal time on test-taking or test preparation, which is also an uncommon practice in Finnish schools. Teachers in the United States report less freedom to adapt their lesson and the structure of their day based on the needs of their students or what they deem important to teach (Allington, 2013; Condie, 2014; Lipson & Wixson, 2003). Although differentiation is considered important by many teachers in the U.S., due to the overwhelming need to “teach to a test” there seems to be less pedagogical freedom for the teacher to meet each student’s individual needs (Allington, 2013; Condie, 2014). Finnish educators have a “culture of trust” from the government and community, which is very evident in the teacher’s autonomy in curricular and assessment decision making. This professionalized view of teachers is an important factor that influences the schools and teachers and, ultimately and importantly, the children as well.

Future Questions and Implications

Important questions arise in looking at the data in this study. First, the demographics of the Finnish population are changing. Finland has not historically experienced diversity, until recently. The Educational Psychologist stated that Finland has “a growing immigrant population, but it is still a smaller scale compared to other countries” (Interview, 12/12/18). This statement was echoed by Teacher 1, “We are a very homogeneous country with homogenous people. We don’t have so many foreigners or people who have moved here. It’s our culture” (Personal Communication, 12/11/18).

The statements from both educational experts imply that their homogenous population has common ideas and values surrounding literacy and education within the country. Teacher 1 suggests that as the population begins to diversify, “[the new immigrants] will have their own ideas about reading and culture,” which may differ from the current Finnish views, and thus change how literacy is perceived within the country and how it must be taught in schools (Personal Communication, 12/11/18).

According to Finland’s 2015 PISA results (OECD, 2015a), noted earlier in Figure 4, Finland is below the OECD average in their the proportion of immigrant students as compared to other nations. Although Finland is diversifying with the influx of refugees and other immigrant populations, Finland’s homogenous population is an important factor in their historically high literacy rates.

The findings of this study have implications for me as a future educator. I hope to model my teaching after the Finland model of child-centered teaching, including an emphasis on child autonomy and building home/school connections. In addition, I will advocate for policies that support the professionalized view of teachers and that support the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). It is important that the United States adopt and implement such important rights and protections. Future research could also be conducted to study how Finland adapts to its growing diverse population culturally and in their education system, which means they may begin to learn from U.S. educators and our historically diverse population.

RISKS: Some of the interview questions ask about how you make your teaching decisions and may be distressing to you as you think about your experiences. In order to mitigate these risks, the research team will provide the semi-structured interview questions prior to the interview and will discontinue the interview at any point if you desire.

BENEFITS: The benefits of your participation in this study are minimal. Although as teachers reflect, you may have insights into your pedagogical decisions. The benefits of this study in general are to understand the effective literacy practices Finnish teachers use to teach young learners.

CHOOSING TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY: Your consent and participation in this study are completely voluntary. You can withdraw from the study for any reason at any time without consequences of any kind, and you can withdraw your consent at any time without consequences of any kind. If you choose not to participate, the student observer will still observe in your classroom, but will not conduct an interview or take photographs. If you do choose to withdraw at any time, your data will be used by researchers. Please contact the principal investigator should you wish for your data not to be used.

ANONYMITY/CONFIDENTIALITY: Any personal data obtained during this study will remain confidential as to your identity. If personal information can be specifically identified with you, your permission will be sought in writing before it will be published. Other data, which cannot be connected to you, will be published or presented at meetings with the aim of benefiting others.

This study has received approval in accordance with current University regulations.

For questions or concerns about this study, please contact Dr. Cami Condie, Faculty Supervisor, Assistant Professor, Salem State University, ccondie@salemstate.edu, 352 Lafayette St. Salem, MA 01970.

Initial if in agreement

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the attached information sheet for the above study. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and that these have been answered satisfactorily.	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without negative consequences without giving any reason	
3. I agree to take part in this study.	
4. I understand that as a result of taking part in this study I will experience no immediate benefits. Although as teachers reflect, I may have insights into my pedagogical decisions.	
5. I understand that the results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings and may be provided to research sponsors or regulatory authorities. I give my permission for my confidential data, which does not identify me, to be disseminated in this way. The information will be kept confidential with the exception of information which must be reported under Massachusetts and Federal law such as cases of child or elder abuse.	
Additional optional consent (You can participate without consenting to photographs.)	
6. I consent for photographs of my classroom to be taken during the study for use in professional presentations and publications (with my identity obscured).	
7. I consent for audio recordings of me to be taken during the study for use by the study team only. (My recording will not be shared with others and will be destroyed after the data has been analyzed.)	
8. I consent for audio recordings of my classroom to be taken during the study for use in professional presentations and publications. (My identity will be obscured.)	

Name of Participant:	Date:	Signature
Name of person taking consent:	Date:	Signature

APPENDIX B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How would you define a student who is proficient at reading at the end of your school year?
2. How would you define a student who is proficient at writing at the end of your school year?
3. What activities or experiences do you want children to have to achieve this level of literacy at the end of the school year?
4. What is important as you design the layout of your classroom?
5. What is important as you select the reading and writing materials for your classroom?
6. What do you want students to experience in a day, in a week, in a month, in terms of literacy?
7. I am learning a lot about differentiation and teaching to the needs of the students, what does that look like in your classroom?
8. What are your thoughts on whole group, small group, and one-on-one instruction?
9. How do you build in times for your students to read? How much time are children given to read during the day? To write?
10. What is the relationship between teaching and test scores in Finland?
11. What would advice would you give to a beginning teacher like me to become a very good literacy teacher?

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