



Arleta Suwalska

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0713-8451>

University of Lodz, Poland

e-mail: arleta.suwalska@now.uni.lodz.pl

Values in Ethics Teaching in Grades 3 to 6 of Finnish Basic Education

*'Look beneath the surface; let not the several qualities of a thing
nor its worth escape thee.'*
– Marcus Aurelius

'Only loss teaches us about the value of things.'
– Arthur Schopenhauer

*'In the twenty-first century, our personal data is probably the most
valuable resource most humans still have to offer, and we are giving it to
the tech giants in exchange for email services and funny cat videos.'*
– Yuval Harari

Abstract

The article begins with a review and analysis of the literature on educational reform in Finland, with particular reference to values education and secular ethics. The analysis of the curriculum began with a review of the literature on secular ethics in Finnish basic education. The next stage was to analyse the curriculum along with the curricular guidelines and support for primary schools in grades 3–6, especially with regard to what is applicable to all schools in Finland; this involved a review of the literature on educational reform in Finland,

values in teaching and secular ethics. The article addresses a key issue in curriculum policy: ethics education in grades 3–6. The article explores what is embodied in this policy, especially the objectives of the subject of ethics.

The problem method and critical discourse analysis were applied to the study of documents concerning educational reform and the study of discourses in political rhetoric. The problem method is based on an educational phenomenon related to time and society, so it was necessary to contrast the different views presented in contemporary Finnish education and to examine various consistent factors. Education here is thus an interaction between the various sets of teachers' values and the ongoing construction of students' values. This method of primary education encourages appropriate conditions for lifelong learning for each student. Suggested lessons may include discussions with students about values so that students perceive the variance in values and are able to think about them in a constructive and critical manner.

Keywords: ethical education, ethics, values, values in education, curriculum in primary education

Educational reform in Finland: An introduction

The article begins with a review and analysis of the literature on educational reform in Finland, with particular reference to values education and secular ethics. The following section then examines the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 – which currently defines the Finnish curriculum – in order to identify how issues of secular ethics are addressed, especially with regard to the material that applies to all schools in Finland. The analysis of the curriculum thus begins with a review of the literature on educational reform in Finland, values in teaching and secular ethics – with the addition of curricular guidelines and the support offered to primary schools covering the content areas for grades 3 to 6.

The citizens of Finland are proud of their lifelong learning, which supports the rapidly changing knowledge and skills required of employees in the 21st century. 'Finland's successful performance in the [Organisation

for Economic Co-operation and Development] OECD's [Programme for International Student Assessment] PISA has contributed to its iconic status and position of an educational leader in the world' (Suwalska, 2017, p. 69). This has been accomplished thanks to a series of educational reforms initiated in 1963 and supported by the renewed Government Decree of 2012, which set the main goals for pre-primary and primary education and adjusted the allocation of teaching hours in primary education. Consequently, the Finnish National Agency of Education (FNAE) prepared and launched a reform of the national core curriculum in the autumn of 2012. Headmasters, teachers and representatives from various ministries, Finnish teachers' unions, labour unions, parent groups, various ethnic groups, local education authorities and researchers throughout the country thus worked together to design a process of reform that would develop the core curriculum. As part of this, values from Western classical and new humanism were incorporated into each subject and activity in schools (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004, p. 12).

The process used in this reform was open and transparent throughout, involving many individuals yet asking them to work collaboratively. The process affected all three main tiers of education administration – the national, municipal and individual school levels – and groups from each thus participated in and influenced the planning and direction of the process, contributing to the achievement of the goals. Students, parents, researchers, teachers, educators and various civil and social organisations also participated, which generated a high level of 'commitment to the local and school-based curriculum work by the municipal authorities, principals and teachers [...] and] their sincere striving to reach the goals of the reform is evident' (Halinen et al., 2013, p. 77).

During the reform process, the municipal authorities and the other groups mentioned above discussed and elaborated on the central issues of the reform, deliberating about the basic values of education in the light of school culture while taking into account the need to ensure participation and improvement among the students. Some schools even encouraged their students to read drafts of the core curriculum in order to assess the text and offer feedback. This feedback was sent to the FNAE, while

some municipalities also coordinated helpful discussions with students. For instance, the Helsinki City Education Department encouraged 550 students representing all of the schools in Helsinki to participate in an exercise and 'define what the most important factors were in helping them to learn and to enjoy themselves at school' (Niemi, 2014a, p. 77). The results were potentially surprising, yet they helped the working group to achieve a better perception of the importance of school culture: One key outcome was that students attached the greatest value to factors such as 'friendship, respect, friendliness, trust, equality and a peaceful working atmosphere' (Niemi, 2014a, p. 77).

Educational reform in Finland

The main pillar of the third period of change in Finland was 'enhancing the efficiency of structures and administration' (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 58), based on Finland's success in the PISA comparison from 2001, where the country was identified as the highest-performing nation among all OECD countries in the domains of literacy (546), mathematics (536) and science (548) (Clausnitzer, 2019, p. 1).

Many researchers and official foreign delegations at that time were thus interested in identifying the causes of the 'Finnish miracle' in education. The structural reforms that have changed the length of compulsory education and the administration of higher education and have contributed to more flexible systems of education are certainly part of this, and since 2000 the contemporary system has also improved special education, encouraged multiculturalism and smoothed the administrative path between primary and lower-secondary schools. Finnish students thus present the least variation in educational performance between schools among comparable countries (Väliljärvi, 2007, p. 6); also, they are not overloaded with excessive homework or forced to spend time with private teachers or in extra classes. The PISA tests thus suggest that the main pillars of student success are the provision of equal educational opportunities and equity in education. In addition, subsequent analyses of PISA data in Finland have

indicated that factors such as place of residence are significant in terms of both learning and future career paths (Väljijärvi, 2007, p. 6).

The FNAE presented the new national core curriculum in autumn 2012, based on the work of the advisory group, which allowed the agency to design the reforms efficiently. That group involved workers from various ministries, teachers, teacher union representatives and parents, and the full reform lasted from 2012 to the end of 2014. In 2014, Finland established the FINEEC, an independent government agency that is responsible for the evaluation of education in Finland. The FINEEC also assesses and conducts quality assurance in Finnish schools at all levels, based on Finland's resistance to the Global Education Reform Movement. As a result, the key principles of the reform are inclusive education and the promotion of extensive cross-subject learning. The questions asked in Finland during this reform therefore included 'What knowledge, skills, attitudes and values will today's students need to thrive and shape their world?' and 'How can instructional systems develop these knowledge, skills, attitudes and values effectively?' [sic] (OECD, 2019, p. 23).

As implemented, the reform was also closely related to the New Skills Agenda for Europe, introduced by the European Commission, which incorporated priorities drawn from the Commission's work programme from 2016. The Agenda for Europe suggested several areas for improvement: 'basic competences, visibility and comparability of competences [and] labour market and skills intelligence to facilitate effective career decisions in the fields of education, training and employment' (New Skills Agenda for Europe, p. 1).

Research questions and methodology

In order to examine ethics education from a Finnish perspective, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) What values are included in the ethics curriculum in Finland in grades 3 to 6?

-
- 2) What role, if any, does the national curriculum play in the global success of Finnish education in the 21st century?

The main body of the related study thus needed to include an analysis of the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 in Finland, especially those parts of the curriculum that are applicable to all schools in Finland. The analysis of the curriculum therefore began with a review of the literature on educational reform in Finland, with a focus on the presentation of values in teaching and the impact of secular ethics. The next part examined the curriculum more specifically, identifying how issues of secular ethics are addressed. The curricular guidelines and documents outlining support for primary schools from grades 3 to 6 were thus consulted at this stage. Primary sources were given preference over secondary sources in this research, as needed in different situations at different times. The validity and reliability of the selected documents were thus taken into consideration, along with their credibility and accuracy. Attempts were made to select representative documents based on their intended and perceived contexts. This necessary winnowing was applied to a range of materials accessed at the library of the University of Helsinki in order to make selections for the final analysis, which thus emphasised in each case 'the constructive mechanisms contained in the arguments, ideas or concepts' (Rapley, 2007, p. 194).

The problem method, along with critical discourse analysis, was applied to the study of documents concerning educational reform and the study of discourses in political rhetoric. This included the collection of data for specific areas of political activities and 'macro-themes of discourse' (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2008, p. 156). The problem method is based on an educational phenomenon related to time and society, so it was necessary to contrast the different views presented in the contemporary Finnish education and to examine various consistent factors. Discourse analysis was then applied; as this methodology uses contextual meaning, the analysis can both deal with overt linguistic meaning and examine relevant conventions and codes that are significant in the society under investigation, and are thus embodied in its culture and history (Hammersley, 2013).

Values education and values in education

The term 'values education' encompasses and is often perceived 'as having a particular emphasis on education in civic and moral values' (Halstead & Taylor, 2000 p. 169). The term is thus linked with several others in contemporary use, including multiple concepts related to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, character education (Lickona, 1991), virtue in education (Carr & Steutel, 1999) and the development of personal attitudes and skills (Halstead & Taylor, 2000).

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2016, p. 15) affirms that each child is unique and valuable. In this light, this uniqueness is emphasised, along with the child's right to improve their skills as a human being and as a part of a democratic society. In terms of education, values such as solidarity, justice and regulative values related to order, behaviour, work design, development of self-discipline, autonomy and empathy at work may therefore be employed. Defining a value requires a judgement based on what is good and what is bad; this must not be simply a personal preference based on taste, but rather a common-sense maxim based on additional ordered ideas about a person's relationship to the environment. Teachers and students will have their own sets of values, which must be viewed collaboratively in education. Teachers who work in schools should thus strive to determine the values of their students as part of the efficient functioning of the school as a learning organisation. Teachers thus require open-mindedness and a respectful attitude towards various religions and worldviews so that constructive school cooperation and interaction can flourish. In terms of Finnish basic education, values have deep dimensions that can help design a school's mission (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2016, p. 19). Values, as seen from this perspective, thus include the constructs that form them: In the process of acquiring them, people distinguish between that which is good and that which is bad, and teachers and students must be aware of the basis of their sets of values so that they can collaborate with each other in an individual school context.

According to Lickona (1991), values education contributes to the reinforcement of values in education; Lickona thus mentions the transfer of values in education, which results from the development of the curriculum and the moral climate in school. Berkowitz (1996) further states that people do not need many values to develop morality within their judgments and actions, requiring only certain central values such as the primacy of justice and human well-being. Such central values, however, according to McLaren (1994a) and Purpel (1989), may also be defined in terms of equality and the right to diversity and self-determination.

McLaren (1994a) and Purpel (1989) both seek links between values, which further stimulates the study of values. McLaren (1994b) thus not only analyses the 'critical thinking' movement from a critical pedagogical perspective, but also differentiates three main tendencies within it: Logical analysis is the first, while the ideological position of the thinker – based on critical thinking's aim of profoundly analysing the relevant context – is the second.

McLaren's (1994a) third tendency within 'critical thinking', one that reveals reasoning as a socio-political practice, references the politics of social justice. It is thus possible to conduct a similar analysis when examining 'value-forming education', in which values can be analysed within their context whenever skills are used in the course of values-based communication. Moreover, 'value-forming education' itself can be accorded the status of a socio-political practice, as the duty of teachers is to introduce values into their teaching practice.

Kennedy et al. (1991) distinguish many skills that students need in order to master critical thinking, such as 'identifying assumptions, clarifying, focusing, maintaining relevance to the topic, understanding logic [and] judging sources'. This suggests that moral development contributes to the development of various skills related to thinking and reflection, which are thus based on the development of values. Seen in this light, values can act as constructs, as when people use them they make choices, exercise reason and consider how to solve problems related to what to believe.

Values in ethics teaching in grades 3 to 6 based on content areas C1 to C4

So far, the analysis suggests that the main task of values education at this level of primary education is to promote students’ ability to live a good life.

Table 1. Values in ethics teaching in 2004 and 2014

2004
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The values of basic education are human rights, equality, democracy, the preservation of biodiversity, the viability of the environment and the acceptance of multiculturalism. • Basic education promotes community, responsibility and respect for individual rights and freedoms. • Basic education increases regional and personal equality. • Education takes into account different learners’ needs and promotes gender equality, empowering girls and boys to claim equal rights and responsibilities in society and in their work and family lives.
2014
<p>The preparation of the national core curriculum is based on the following underlying values across each school as a learning community, in addition to its individual values:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the uniqueness of every pupil and their right to a good education • an acknowledgement of common humanity, individual knowledge and ability and the importance of equality and democracy • cultural diversity, recognised as a source of richness • the need to develop sustainable ways of living.

Table 2. Distribution of teaching hours for basic education

1999	Grades 1-2-3-4-5-6: 8 lessons	Grades 7-8-9: 3 lessons	Total: 11 lessons
2005	Grades 1-2-3-4-5: 6 lessons	Grades 6-7-8-9: 5 lessons	Total: 11 lessons
NCC 2014	Grade 1-2: 2 lessons Grades 3-4-5-6: 5 lessons	Grades 7-8-9: 3 lessons	Total: 10 lessons

In the teaching of ethics, students are perceived as actors who shape, reshape and create ‘their culture and experience and produce meanings in shared activities and in interactions with the surrounding world’ (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2016, p. 272). As a result, students acquire the ability to focus on their own thinking and actions in ethics lessons,

which is crucial in order to match the students' ways of thinking, experiences and learning with the methods of teaching. According to the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, the instruction offered in ethics lessons guides students towards independence, open-mindedness, responsibility and participation in a democratic Finnish society. To ensure that these instructions are followed, the National Core Curriculum 2014 suggests reinforcing students' general knowledge and understanding of worldviews and cultures. Moreover, it seems reasonable to develop students' ethical and critical thinking; this is perceived as a self-correcting task that involves a search for the reasons behind particular situations.

Ethics also involves a reflective, open-minded attitude on the part of students and teachers alike. From this perspective, ethics as a subject supports the transversal competences that are acquired at this level of education, i.e. 'cultural competence, thinking and learning, interaction and expression skills, taking care of oneself and others, managing daily life as well as participation, involvement and responsibility' (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2016, p. 272). I believe that, seen in this light, the ability to reflect on values is necessary for maintaining a critical distance to values and involves various approaches and judgments. According to Kennedy (1991) and Paul (1992), 'critical thinking' is aimed at learning logical reasoning and the ability to develop and justify one's own opinion.

Ethics teaching in grades 3–6 includes key content areas related to the objectives of ethics presented above. Thus, content areas are used to form students' learning units at this level of education. The pupils' experiences, 'ideas and thoughts are taken into account in the selection of contents and in their more detailed discussion' (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2016, p. 273). Content area C1 involves reflections on a good life, in which students practise meeting other people and valuing other viewpoints. Students study freedom and responsibility, taking into consideration freedom of religion, worldview and freedom of thought. In this area, students are taught to recognise different concepts of values and social norms as well as ways to reflect on a good life and happiness. Viewed from this perspective, content area C2 – different ways of life – reveals students' own identities in terms of different values and from different points

of view. The main aim is to familiarise students with the Finnish cultural background and minority cultures and to reflect on the process of teaching and the meanings of equality, acceptance, understanding, knowing and believing (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2016, p. 273). In accordance with the previous issue, content area C3 – foundations of communal life – presents the meanings of ‘agreements, promises, rights, duties, equality, peace and democracy, both in different everyday situations and environments in the pupils’ lives and in a wider sense’ (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2016, p. 273). Consequently, pupils become familiarised with the rights of children and wait for the grades for the assessment of tasks related to particular contexts and plans.

Another contribution to values development in ethics lessons is made by content area C4: nature and a sustainable future. During lessons, pupils become acquainted with various conceptions of time and different forms of expression in the contemporary world, as reflected in the pupils’ influence on lives, knowledge and interrelated conceptions. Students become familiar with different conceptions of nature and its future in the context of sustainable development. In order to achieve the objectives of ethics, working methods and learning environments which support a psychological and social learning environment are used in grades 3–6.

As a result of this analysis of values, it seems reasonable to assume that the objectives of ethics in grades 3–6 support pupils’ well-being, school learning and continual development, taking into consideration school opportunities and the construction of pupils’ worldviews and identities. The development of thinking skills, argumentation and the application of knowledge are all assessed. At this level, students still need support for life interactions and thinking skills.

Conclusion

The key element of this study was an analysis of the Finnish National Core Curriculum, principally those parts involving secular ethics, as established by the Ministry of Education, which emphasises the right of each

child to a good education. A variety of conclusions can be drawn from examining the Finnish core curriculum, but it is clear that at this level of education schools must test the way students perceive multiculturalism and equality in the world. In the context of ethical thinking, they must assess whether their students are capable of recognising ethical dimensions and developing ethical thinking.

The implications of these findings are significant in terms of the development of value-forming education, which is seen to be a basic part of the teaching practice of Finnish teachers, who – within the framework of their specialist subjects – offer their own judgments of the values supported by education. Education here is thus an interaction between the various sets of teachers' values and the ongoing construction of students' values. This method of primary education encourages appropriate conditions for lifelong learning for each student. Finnish schools clearly support students in building their own systems of values, and students' holistic well-being in basic education is developed based on a cooperation between the values promoted in schools and in their homes.

Taking all of the research into consideration, I conclude that teachers need to use a variety of teaching methods in the service of taking an individual approach to each pupil. Finally, the exploration of the sources and features that are essential for learning seems to be the most significant aim of students' feedback on this subject. Different methods are taken into account in the assessment, both written and oral ones, as are the knowledge and skills taught through school activities, which reinforce the teaching process and contribute to superior preparation for life.

However, the teacher is not only a player, but to some extent a referee in the game that is education, and teachers working in schools generally aim to determine the values of the students as part of the functioning of the school as a learning organisation. In order to accomplish this, students need not only individual support but also encouragement to study by themselves. Suggested lessons may thus include discussions with students about values so that students perceive the variance in values and are able to think about them in a constructive and critical manner.

References

- Berkowitz, M. W. (1996). The “plus one” convention revisited and beyond [Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Moral Education].
- Carr, D., & Steutel, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Virtue ethics and moral education*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203978368>
- Clausnitzer, J. (2019, March 16). PISA student performance in Finland from 2000 to 2018, by subject and score. Statista.com. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/986919/pisa-student-performance-by-field-and-score-finland>
- Finnish National Agency of Education. (2016). *National core curriculum for basic education 2014*. Juvenes Print-Suomen Yliopistopaino Oy.
- Finnish National Board of Education. (2019, March 20). *National core curriculum for basic education*. http://www.oph.fi/english/curricula_and_qualifications/basic_education
- Halinen, I., & Holappa, M. S. (2013). Curricular balance based on dialogue, cooperation and trust: The case of Finland. In W. Kuiper & J. Berkvens (Eds.), *Balancing curriculum regulation and freedom across Europe* (pp. 39–62). SLO Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development.
- Halstead, J. M., & Taylor, M. J. (2000). Learning and teaching about values: A review of recent research. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 30(2), 169–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713657146>
- Hammersley, M. (2013). *What is qualitative research?* Sage.
- Kennedy, M., Fisher, M. B., & Ennis, R. H. (1991). Critical thinking: Literature review and needed research. In L. Idol & B. F. Jones (Eds.), *Educational values and cognitive instruction: Implications for reform* (pp. 11–40). Lawrence Erlbaum & Associates.
- Lickona, T. (1991). *Educating for character: How our schools can teach respect and responsibility*. Bantam Books. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019263659207654519>
- McLaren, P. (1994a). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman.
- McLaren, P. (1994b). Foreword: Critical thinking as a political project. In K. S. Walters (Ed.), *Re-thinking reason: New perspectives in critical thinking* (pp. ix–xv). State University of New York Press.

-
- Cavallini, J. Friedl, M. Volpe, C. Zuccaro P.(Fondazione FORMIT). A New Skills Agenda for Europe, <https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/studies/Documents/New-Skills-Agenda-Europe.pdf>
- Niemi, H. (2014a). Teachers as active contributors in quality of education: A special reference to the Finnish context. In D. Hung, K. Y. T. Lim, & S.-S. Lee (Eds.), *Adaptivity as a transformative disposition for learning in the 21st century*. (pp. 179–199). Springer Singapore. DOI: 10.1007/2F978-981-4560-17-7
- Niemi, H. (2014b). Purposeful policy and practice for equity and quality: A Finnish case. In S. K. Lee, W. O. Lee, & E. L. Low (Eds.), *Educational policy innovations. Education innovation series*. Springer Singapore. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-4560-08-5_7
- OECD. (2019, March 20). The future of education and skills 2030. [https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper%20\(05.04.2018\).pdf](https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper%20(05.04.2018).pdf)
- Paul, R. W. (1992). *Critical thinking, what every person needs to survive in a rapidly changing world*. Foundation for Critical Thinking.
- Purpel, D. E. (1989). *The moral and spiritual crisis in education: A curriculum for justice and compassion in education*. Bergin & Harvey.
- Rapley, T. (2007). *Analiza konwersacji, dyskursu i dokumentów* [Doing conversation, discourse and document analysis]. Polskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
- Sahlberg, P. (2015). *Finnish lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* Teachers College Press.
- Suwalska A. (2017). Lifelong guidance in Finnish education in the context of globalisation. *Studia Pedagogiczne*, Vol. L/2017, 69–80.
- Väljjarvi, J., Kupari, P., Linnakylä, P., Reinikainen, P., Sulkunen, S., Törnroos, J., & Arffmanet I. (2007). *The Finnish success in PISA—and some reasons behind it*. Kirjapaino Oma Oy.
- Wodak, R., & Krzyżanowski, M. (Eds.) (2008). *Qualitative discursive analysis in the social sciences*. Palgrave Macmillan.