

A Phase between Two National Core Curricula in Finland – What Are the Implications to Information Literacy Instruction and Library Collaboration?

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Abstract:

The Finnish educational system has been a significant subject of discussions in educational forums over the last few years. Finnish schools have received visits from all over the world. Finland has been comfortably basking in the radiance of PISA results for too long, and now Finland has seen the drawbacks of leaving things to rest. The latest PISA result showed a downward trend in several results (Sulkunen et al, 2010) some of which were also statistically significant.

At the moment, Finland is on the verge of massive changes in education. The digitalization of schools has started on a large scale; and most importantly, a reform of the core curriculum is on its way. The new national 2016 core curriculum has been accepted, and now it is up to the local municipal governments to plan its implementation. This phase is going to last for one and a half years and the new curriculum will take effect at the beginning of the fall term in 2016.

This conference paper briefly introduces the first two of total three empirical parts of my dissertation, studying the occurrences and conceptions of information literacy in two consecutive core curricula and a combined comparison of the preliminary findings. The meaning of this to school libraries and public libraries is also discussed.

The implementation of the new core curriculum is of great importance to public libraries and school libraries. Municipalities have been urged to take action in the form of planning committees that also include representation from libraries. This educational change in the educational system is making public libraries and the existing school libraries re-think their programs and products and also think of new ways to better serve the municipalities' students and teaching staff better in accordance with the new 2016 core curriculum.

Keywords: *information literacy, Finland, schools, curriculum, school libraries*

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Introduction

This conference paper is based on a doctoral dissertation the writer is working on at the moment. The purpose of the dissertation is to study Finland's two consecutive core curricula from an information literacy perspective using Christine Bruce's 'seven faces of information literacy' as a framework for the analysis (Bruce, 1997).

Christine Bruce studied the information literacy conceptions of academic staff. In her 1997 dissertation, Bruce came to the conclusion that there are seven possible conceptions of information literacy, and the seventh is the most developed, so to speak. The conceptions are:

- 1) Information technology conception
 - 2) Information source conception
 - 3) Information process conception
 - 4) Information control conception
 - 5) Knowledge construction conception
 - 6) Knowledge extension conception
 - 7) Wisdom conception
- (Bruce, 1997)

The first empirical part of Ojaranta's dissertation was completed in 2014. As a short summary of the discourse analysis of the 2004 core curriculum, it can be said that there are elements that clearly testify to the presence of information literacy. According to the discourse analysis, there are two strong discourses that can be found: information seeking discourse (Bruce's first two conceptions) and learning discourse (the three last conceptions). The middle part was less present.

As the new core curriculum was accepted in December 2014, the second empirical part of Ojaranta's research was launched. The discourse analysis is done similarly as it was done in the first empirical part with the 2004 core curriculum. The core curriculum is analysed word by word and concept by concept seeking issues related to information literacy. This way the comparison is giving more trustworthy results. This analysis is not yet fully completed but some preliminary findings can already be presented.

As mentioned earlier, a huge discussion is going on in Finland about education at all levels. The general governmental election took place in April 2015, and education will also be a theme in the government negotiations. Finnish educational policy has also been a subject of debate in international media (Klein, 2015; Strauss, 2015). Finland has made international news already because of the new core curriculum. R. Garner wrote in *The Independent* in March that Finland would be replacing single subjects with topics during this current core curriculum renewal (Garner, 2015). Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish researcher in pedagogy and at the moment a visiting professor at Harvard University, rushed to correct the journalist in the article published five days later (Sahlberg, 2015) because of misunderstandings in Garner's article. This written conversation garnered a lot of attention. The reasons for this will be tackled later on in this article.

How things have been?

The first national curriculum came into effect in 1970 when the educational system in the late 1960's changed into a comprehensive school and it became compulsory 9-year education (Kauppinen, 2010). Comprehensive school is divided into primary school (grades 1 to 6) and secondary school (grades 7 to 9). After comprehensive school, the students move on to either upper-secondary school or vocational training (tertiary level). Both routes are a gateway to academic studies, which in Finland consists of universities and universities of applied sciences (giving both bachelor and master level degrees). All education in Finland is free of charge, including doctoral studies.

Since the first curriculum Finland has renewed the curriculum approximately every 10 years. The core curriculum establishes the guidelines for education, and the municipalities have an obligation to adjust the core curriculum to local use. Individual schools can place special emphasis on particular subjects (e.g. natural sciences, drama and arts).

In the 1994 curriculum the learning philosophy went from being cognitive to constructivist, placing the student in the middle of learning. At the same time, the curriculum gave more freedom to the municipalities to make their own emphasis of choice and instead of closely defining contents, the learning goals were more closely specified than before (Kauppinen, 2010).

The 2004 curriculum deepened the constructivist ideology and included ideas of problem-based learning, shared knowledge construction, and open digital learning environments. Both the 1994 and 2004 curricula have been criticized for having outlines for each subject that were too large and heavy, concepts that were hard to grasp, subject content that was unevenly considered, goals that were too demanding and grading guidelines that were unclear (Kauppinen, 2010).

One of the shortcomings of the 2004 curriculum has been the lack of definitions. What is media literacy? What is information literacy? Williams and Wavell (2007) concluded in their studies that people approach learning situations by relating it to their prior knowledge; this is also the case concerning information literacy teaching. If the teacher has no clear understanding of the issue, the various aspects of information literacy are difficult to teach to students.

One issue that has been a considerable subject of questions is that the current curriculum is entirely based on what will be taught. This has led to teachers having trouble fitting different things into the daily schedules and lesson plans. The curriculum is too full to make it flexible in practise.

Now after 10 years, another renewal of the core curriculum is on its way. The reason for this renewal is that things need to be revised and Finland clearly needs some new methods. For example, Finland needs to keep up with the technological developments in the educational setting. A EU study recognized that even if Finland has enough equipment, it is not been used in schools very often (European Commission, 2013).

Public libraries and school libraries in Finland

Finland is one of the strongest library nations in the world and has a well-established and well-used public library network. Libraries as well as many other public services, have been

suffering because of the current recession. In the last year, Finns visited public libraries last year 9.29 times/inhabitant and the number of loans was 16.76 items/inhabitant (Libraries.fi, 2015). Libraries are legislated by law and have often been rated as the single best municipal service. In 2013, libraries nationwide were selected as the best customer service in the country, ahead of many big companies (Taloustutkimus, 2013).

Finns have a tradition of visiting libraries and reading, but no tradition of school libraries. Finland has never been a strong school library country, even though several centuries ago the local village libraries were often situated in school buildings. Because of the good public library infrastructure, it has been argued that there has been no need for strong school libraries in Finland.

Public libraries offer a number of activities to comprehensive schools, mostly book-talks and library instruction in various formats. The few existing and functioning school libraries are mostly lending depots. There are some exceptions, but a professional, full time school librarian in Finland is very rare. Teaching of information skills combined with lessons and school subjects is uncommon. The cooperation activities have stayed quite mainstream in style. Reasons for this have not been studied and are only open to speculation.

National library strategies over the last 15 years have taken a stand to collaborate with comprehensive schools. In the current strategy, it is said that the public library cannot take full responsibility for organizing the library and information services to pupils in the comprehensive school and tertiary schools without proper agreements and planning (Ministry of Education, 2009).

In Sweden, a law for school libraries was passed in 2011 (Hell, 2014). There is nothing similar in sight for Finland. The economic recession has put a lot of pressure on public services, including schools and libraries. At this time, it is most crucial to consider what can be accomplished with the current resources to best serve the educational community at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

The 2004 and 2016 core curricula and their differences

The new core curriculum was accepted in December 2014, and it will take effect in August 2016. Hence, it is called the 2016 core curriculum. There are a lot of changes from the current curriculum. The text has not yet been translated into English, and therefore the quoted translations are writer's own.

There are four significant things that affect the information literacy elements in the new curriculum: 1) transversal competences, 2) multiliteracy as one of them, 3) multidisciplinary learning modules (phenomenon-based learning), and 4) the use of out-of-school literacies, i.e. the 3rd space.

1. The new core curriculum is introducing a new way of implementing cross-curricular issues: transversal competences. There are seven different areas ranging from entrepreneurship to every day life skills:
 1. Thinking skills and learning to learn
 2. Cultural competence, interaction and expression
 3. Managing daily life, taking care of oneself and others

4. Multiliteracy
 5. Information and communication technology competence
 - a. Technical understanding
 - b. Responsible use skills and safety
 - c. Information seeking and research
 - d. Communication skills, collaboration and networking skills
 6. Working life and entrepreneurial competence
 7. Participation, influence and building a sustainable future.
- (*Opetushallitus, 2014*)

Three of these (numbers one, four and five) are especially interesting from an information literacy perspective. All of these seven transversal competences are present throughout the curriculum in three different stages. First, these seven competences are explained thoroughly in the general part of the core curriculum. Second, they are present in the beginning of all three grade level parts. Third, transversal competences are taken up separately in all subjects. This is where the competences are minimized. This means that the competencies are taken up more scarcely, and at that level, the importance of transversal competences is losing a little of its effect. It is also mentioned that at this point the transversal competences are taken under 'local emphases'. This means that as the municipality, and even a single school, has the freedom of emphasising certain competences and therefore this is also subject to local decision-making.

2. Multiliteracy is one of the newly-introduced transversal competences. The major difference between these two consecutive core curricula is that the term multiliteracy and other transversal competences are now piercing through the whole 2016 core curriculum. As the 2006 core curriculum had the information literacy related issues defined differently in all subjects and age groups, in 2016 curriculum these issues are mostly the same, ranging only in three grade levels to accommodate it to the different developmental stages of learners.
3. The board of education has taken a big step in giving students a voice of their own and enhancing the so called 3rd space: to bring the out-of-school learning to school to support and to motivate the students. Lankshear and Knoble (2003) have studied this phenomenon as a part of new literacies, and Maniotes (2005) has studied the literary third space. Many students are active in their free time and possess various skills from their hobbies; information and communications technology in the forefront along with blogging, video blogging and gaming skills. Coding will also be included in the new curriculum, not as an individual subject but combined with other subjects.
4. Phenomenon-based learning has an important role in the new curriculum. The multidisciplinary learning modules (based on phenomenon-based learning), or to be precise, the issue of topics roused the attention in education circles after the flawed article in *The Independent* (Garner, 2015). These multidisciplinary learning modules are named as one of the leading ideas of the 2016 core curriculum. The document says that students should have a chance each year to take part in at least one phenomenon-based project where the students are studying one topic from the perspective of several school subjects.

These have been the most significant changes in the 2016 core curriculum from information literacy point of view. The new curriculum is now concentrating on how to do things instead of telling what to teach, as did the 2004 curriculum. The new curriculum will give more flexibility to planning and using the transversal competences in teaching. The 2016 core curriculum is still setting goals for contents and for individual learning goals.

There is also a change in text and the tone. The text is mostly enhancing support for students and guiding them in their learning. The ‘pupils will learn’, ‘pupils will know how to’ styled definitions of learning goals of 2004 curriculum are gone. Instead, the new core curriculum states that ‘the student is supported’, ‘the student is guided into developing his skills’ and ‘the student is encouraged’.

Also the structure is different compared to the 2004 curriculum. The 2016 curriculum is built differently. It still consists of the general part and the subject-related part. Now the division is done according to grades (formerly by subjects), and the school subjects are explained and specified in three different grade levels. In the new core curriculum the subject related part is divided to three grade levels: grades 1 to 2, 3 to 6, and 7 to 9. Subjects are explained separately inside every grade level. This way, the general goals of the curriculum for the each grade level are more tangible than before. The 2004 curriculum was divided into grade groups 1 to 2, 3 to 5 and 6 to 9 and it created confusion since the secondary school consists of grades 7 to 9. The division in 2016 core curriculum is clearer considering in the structure of the comprehensive school.

When comparing the new curriculum with the 21st century skills it can be suggested that the transversal competences are at the core of the issue. Most of the issues mentioned in the assessment and teaching of 21st century skills web page are seen in the new Finnish core curriculum: knowledge, skills, attitude, values and ethics. (Rotherham & Willingham, 2009)

What does all this mean to information literacy, public libraries and school libraries?

The implementation of the 2016 curriculum is of great importance to public libraries and school libraries. The municipalities have been urged to take action in the form of planning local committees that will also include the representation from libraries. This change in Finland’s educational system will make public libraries and the existing school libraries re-think their programs and come up with new ways of serving the municipalities’ students and teaching staff better in accordance with the 2016 core curriculum.

Transversal competences, multiliteracy, and multidisciplinary learning modules are all placing more demand on information skills as a whole. It is placing demands on teachers to understand the meaning of wider and deeper information skills in this situation. This change is also placing requirements on library staff to get acquainted with the new curriculum and create an understanding of it.

Still, the new curriculum does not erase the other issues there are in information skills as a whole: for example the problem of students often trying to find correct answers in their search for information to complete the assignments instead of doing real research (Limberg, Alexandersson & Lantz-Andersson, 2008; Limberg & Folkesson, 2006; Limberg & Sundin, 2006). And another problem is the fact that the difference in reading skills between the two genders is the biggest in Finland (Sulkunen et al, 2010). Finnish boys are in trouble.

How the actual implementation will go after the 2016 curriculum comes into effect is yet to be seen. Numerous courses have been organized already since the beginning of 2014. It is clear that the majority of these events have been organized for teachers. For the last two years, there has been a large-scale national project going on called 'Joy of Reading'. The whole project, with 30 pilot projects nationwide, was based on the collaborative projects with library/school pairs. All the methods used have been collected in an 'idea bank'. Multiliteracy played a significant part in that project.

Big things are happening at the moment. And a change is dearly needed in Finland. Library collaboration with schools has still much more to give.

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