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**Author(s):** Pulkkinen, Lea; Berden, Iina

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## A new child-centered approach to the organization of extra-curricular activities in Finnish schools

Lea Pulkkinen<sup>1</sup> and Iina Berden<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Jyväskylä, Finland

<sup>2</sup>Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland

### Abstract

Extracurricular activities are currently included in Finnish school legislation, but their organization is fragmented.

*History:* Club activities at school led by teachers have been arranged since 1947 on extra pay, but their amount and content have depended on available funding and often on teachers' willingness to lead club activities. Schools have also had a possibility to use cultural or sport operators. However, system has preferred teacher-led club activities. A dramatic change occurred in the early 1990s when economic recession reduced extra funding for schools and day care. Consequently, club activities after school hours were reduced to less than half, and afternoon care services with the day care system for first-graders were totally cut. Students (from the age of seven years onwards) were often left unsupervised for several hours in mornings and afternoons due to their shorter school days compared to their parents' work days.

*Development:* The amendment of school legislation in 2004 mandated municipalities to organize (with private enterprises, church, associations, or schools) state-supported morning and afternoon activities for first- and second-graders and for children with special needs at any grade. For club activities, funding was improved in 2008-2014 so that 60% of students participated in some kind of extra-curricular activities at school.

*Present time:* Funding of club activities dropped, when the Government of Finland for 2015-2018 changed the strategy from supporting teacher-led club activities towards more child-centered and multi-professional way of organizing them. The Government started key programs in which children's access to arts and culture is facilitated in schools by hearing students' wishes, and physical activity during school days is arranged for one hour per day for each child. Artists and other experts are invited to participate in the arrangement of club activities. The organization of morning and afternoon activities is separate and based on the 2004 legislation, which meant a great improvement in children's situation. Nevertheless, offering does not meet children's needs, because municipalities are not obliged to organize morning and afternoon activities, and the quality control of activities is not sufficient.

*Legislation.* A reform of school legislation is needed for integrating club activities, morning and afternoon activities, and school work into a wholeness which supports school work, encourages participation in extra-curricular activities, and increases well-being and satisfaction with school. Successful results have been received in a three-year experiment on the reform of the integrated school day structure and its activities, but transforming research findings into policy is still pending.

### Keywords

arts and culture, club activities, child-centered, extracurricular activities, Finnish education system, government program, integrated school day, legislation, morning and afternoon activities, school day structure

## 1. Finnish education system

Finland is located in Northern Europe with the Swedes as neighbors on the west side, the Russians to the east, the Norwegians to the north, and the Estonians to the south (Figure 1). Finland is a sparsely populated country with 5.5 million inhabitants; the average density of population is 17 persons per sq.km. About 90 percent of people living in Finland speak Finnish. Until recently, there has not been much immigration. Finland became an independent republic 100 years ago, in 1917. Thus, Finland celebrates this year its 100th years of independence.

Finnish people have their own language which is not related to Swedish or Russian, and it has its own culture as found in its national epic and arts. Finland has been a member of the European Union since 1995. The country is technologically advanced. Its global competitiveness is remarkable considering its small population. Finland has invested in its children's education and citizen's well-being.

Compulsory education was established in 1921. Children start their nine-year basic education in the autumn of the year in which they turn seven years of age. Compulsory education lasts until age 16. Grades 1 – 6 form the primary school and grades 7 – 9 the lower secondary school. After basic education, students may enter a general upper secondary school or a vocational institution. Tertiary education is available in universities and universities of applied sciences. Students can flexibly move between academic and vocational education.

*Strengths* in the Finnish education system include following characteristics. First, the school starting age is highest in the OECD countries. From the point of view of brain development, age seven is considered to be the proper age to start teacher-directed learning. Second, mandatory pre-primary education was established recently for four hours per day in the context of a day care place or a primary school, when children are six years of age. Early education and care is organized by municipalities for children until school age in day care places if parents want to use this service. It approaches children's development holistically. It is not a school. Finnish children have more time for free play indoors and outdoors, and generally for child-directed activities than children in countries where they begin school at an earlier age. It is believed that children get important learning experiences for their future development from play, physical activities, nature, music, arts and crafts, fairy tales, and human interaction.

Third, there are no streams in basic education from the first to the ninth grade (age 7 to 16); students are in same classes without selection. The comprehensive school

reform was made in the 1970s; before it there were two streams after the fourth grade, one for academic and the other for vocational studies. Comprehensive education is characterized by inclusion. For instance, children with special needs receive teaching in small groups which are flexibly integrated with normal classes. Teachers are trained to work with heterogeneous groups, and assistant teachers are available for children with special needs.

Fourth, repeating a grade is possible but rare due to its socio-emotional disadvantages to children; extra support is given to children with learning difficulties. Fifth, Finnish school day includes a free warm lunch supervised by teachers. Finland was the first country in the world to start serving free school meals in 1948. Students' health is also supported with free maternity care and child welfare clinics which were organized more than 60 years ago. In schools, the school nurses offer check-ups and health care plans. Sixth, physical punishment at school was forbidden by law more than 100 years ago (1914). Teachers cannot base their authority on the fear of punishments. Physical punishment at home was forbidden by law in 1984. Seventh, no tuition fees are charged at any level of the education system from the pre-primary education up to the doctoral degree. Parents pay for part of day care subsidized by the state.

The excellent results in the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) achieved by Finnish students evoked world-wide surprise ten years ago. Delegates from different countries came to visit Finland to see the Finnish school system. A good teacher education has been considered to be a major reason for students' success. Less attention has been paid to the impact of the quality of their entire childhood on students' success. The PISA results confirm that the late school starting age is not a disadvantage; it gives space for holistic development during the early childhood.

There are also *weaknesses* in the Finnish education system. First, around 10 percent of the relevant age group does not start post-comprehensive education immediately after the compulsory education, at age 16 (OKM, 2016; Sahlberg, 2011). These students are at a high risk for unemployment and problem behaviors as shown by many studies, among others, the longitudinal study from middle childhood to middle adulthood (Pulkkinen, 2017).

Second, in spite of students' good academic achievements Finnish students are less satisfied with school community than in the OECD countries on average (Väljjarvi, 2015). Reasons for it most likely are in school atmosphere where students' emotional needs are not sufficiently met in the secondary school. Third, extracurricular activities are organized in a fragmented way.

## 2. Extracurricular activities

### 2.1 History

Club activities at school led by teachers have been arranged since 1947 on extra pay, when the Trade Union of Education established the Center for School Clubs with some other organizations. The Center actively participated in the development of school and youth policy and legislation. The Center produced materials for club activities and promoted music and other arts in youth activities, as well as positive social behavior and friendship.

In 1954, the Center started to deliver a statute of a smiling boy and a smiling girl (by sculptor Heikki Nieminen) that schools award at the end of a school year, on the basis of classmates' votes, to one girl and one boy of the class, mostly on the grades 2 and 6. Around 300 000 students have received the smile statute by now.

The amount and content of club activities have depended on available funding and often on teachers' willingness to lead club activities. Schools have also had a possibility to use cultural or sport operators. However, the system has preferred teacher-led club activities. Funding of club activities has come via the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The Finnish school system was built in the late nineteen hundreds upon the model of the German half-day school structure. This model applied well to the agrarian culture, when family members worked at home and were available when children returned to home, but short school days leave children of an industrialized and post-industrialized economy without supervision when parents are working outside home.

Finnish children have shorter school days than in most other countries. They receive teaching in basic education from 16 to 24 hours per week depending on students' grade and have a short lunch break during which they eat at school. Some 85% of the mothers of school-aged children are employed, and typically, both Finnish parents work full time (38 - 40 hours per week). Finnish parents also often work in inconvenient hours, in the evening or in shifts. Since parents' daily work and transportation take more hours than the hours that children are at school, children's supervision demands special arrangements, and extracurricular activities are needed, or children have to stay alone at home without adults' presence.

A dramatic change in children's situation occurred in the early 1990s when *economic recession* in the society reduced extra funding for schools and day care. It had consequences for students who, from the age of seven years onwards, were often left unsupervised for several hours in mornings and afternoons due to their shorter school days compared to their parents' work days. The child protection law does not prevent it, as it does

in some other countries. The following history shows how complicated it was to improve children's situation.

As a researcher, Pulkkinen made *observations* on children's loneliness in the morning and afternoon, before and after the school hours and its consequences for children's well-being and development. She raised this problem in public in 1996, and proposed a change in the structure of a school day to include supervised free time activities (see Pulkkinen, 2002, 2004, 2012). *Public awareness* of the problems increased when Mrs. Eeva Ahtisaari, the First Lady of Finland at that time, started to work on this issue in 1997-1999. Panel discussions were arranged in schools with invited speakers from administrators, bishops, business leaders, trade unions, and the media. The media reported on these events.

The next step was the *analysis* of the situation by the Ministry of Education and Culture that requested the National Agency for Education to analyze the status of club activities in schools. In its report (OKM, 1998), the working group acknowledged many problems. Club activities after school hours had been reduced and afternoon care services with the day care system for first-graders had been totally cut. International comparisons had shown that public services were available for 64% of children under 10 years old in Sweden and 62% in Denmark, but only 10% in Finland (Youthful Finland, 1998).

## 2.2 Development of morning and afternoon activities

The *Government of Finland* reacted to the lack of extra-curricular activities in 1999 by including in its 4-year *Government Program* the extension and development of supervised activities for school-aged children. An improvement to children's situation was promoted by the *OECD Country Note* (2001) which made a remark about the length of unsupervised time spent by Finnish school children.

Consequently, the Ministry of Education and Culture established a committee to make a *proposal* for organizing activities before and after school. The committee report (OKM, 2002) acknowledged that about 70% of all first- and second-graders needed supervision before or after school hours, but only 30% received it. The committee proposed that the school should serve as an activity center and that shortened working hours should be established for parents. In response to public concerns, the arrangement of afternoon activities had been started by church, sports organizations, parents' associations, and municipalities. After-school activities often took place outside school.

An important push to a change was also given by *research* findings in the Integrated School Day program initiated by Pulkkinen in 2002 as described later. The project received much public attention.

Finally, an *amendment to the school legislation* was made. Beginning in the autumn 2004, it was mandated by law (Article 48 of the Basic Education Act 1998, amended in 2003) that morning and afternoon activities, financially supported by the government can be organized for specific groups:

*Municipalities can organize morning and afternoon activities for all first- and second-grade children and for special needs children at any grade.*

*The purpose of morning and afternoon activities is to support the school's and the home's educational work and the development of the child's emotional life and ethical growth. In addition, before- and after-school activities shall promote children's welfare and equality in society and prevent exclusion and promote inclusion.*

*The morning and afternoon activities shall offer children varied opportunities to participate in guided and refreshing activities and to enable them to rest in calm surroundings under the supervision of a competent person suitable for the task.*

*The National Agency for Education shall determine the aims and central content of before- and after-school activities (guidelines for before- and after-school activities). The National Agency shall prepare the guidelines in cooperation with the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health.*

It was furthermore stated in details how before- and after-school activities should be organized so that all eligible children (first and second graders, and students with special needs) have an equal access to these activities. The organizer of these activities may be the municipality or private service providers. Each child has an access to before- or after-school activities for 570 hours or 760 hours per academic year at specified costs, including snacks for children. The costs may be lower or the activities may be free if living conditions warrant it. The activities have to be evaluated and the results of the evaluation must be made public.

In addition, parallel legislation to shorten the workday of parents with young children was passed in the Finnish Parliament. This law mandates that one of the parents can shorten his or her work day during the child's first and second grade with the support of social security. This right has been available for the parents until the end of the child's third year. Even after this reform, parents do not have the right to shorten their work day with the support of social security, while their child is four to six years old. In the other Scandinavian

countries parents more commonly have shortened (less than 100%) work days than in Finland.

### 2.3 Development of club activities

Club activities are included in the school curriculum, and they are free for students, whereas morning and afternoon activities are not; parents have to pay around 60% of the costs. According to Basic Education Act (1998/47§):

*Schools can organize library, club and other activities closely relating to education as part of basic education.*

The organization of club activities has, however, depended on extra funding for schools. Funding was very low from the early 1990s until the year 2008, when the number of clubs was estimated to be circa 2000 in the whole country for a half of million students. As a result of extra funding from the government (around 8 million euros per year), the number of clubs more than tripled in one year (7 000 in 2009), and a few years later (in 2014-2015) their number was 27 500. Most of the support (73%) was used for salaries. It was reported that 60% of all students in basic school (circa 330 000 out of 550 000) participated in club activities in 2014: 70% of the primary school students and 30% of the lower secondary school students (OPH, 2014). Club activities might take different forms: some of them lasted for the entire academic year, whereas some of them were short-time clubs for a certain season, a theme, or an event.

A network for regional development work was established and its coordinator was appointed by the National Agency for Education in 2012. Finland has no school inspector system, and therefore, it is up to municipalities and schools to take care of the recommendations given by the Ministry concerning education. The Ministry of Education and Culture set quality criteria for club activities (OKM, 2012). They concerned the administration and schools. It was expected that the administrators are committed to the development of club activities, and that activities are arranged with other administrative sectors and with a so called third sector (church, civil organizations, entrepreneurs). Furthermore, it was expected that the quality of activities is high and that the activities are regularly evaluated.

For schools, it was expected that activities are versatile and meet students' different needs; instructors share common action principles and cooperate with each other; activities are part of a school day, feedback from students is considered, instructors are

competent in content and work with student groups, and information on club activities is effective and reaches students, their parents, and other actors.

The PISA study (OECD, 2013) gives information about the content of extra-curricular activities in comparison with other countries. Finnish school principals indicated that their schools offered music clubs for students more than in the OECD countries in average (80% in Finland, 69% in average). Fewer Finnish schools offered clubs for voluntary activities, arts, drama, physical exercise, and the preparation of a yearbook or newsletter.

A drop in the number of clubs in 2015-2016 was due to reduced funding. National budget for club activities in year 2017 is 2.9 million euros that is one-third of the level in 2014-15. The reason for this was that the Government of Finland for 2015-2018 changed the strategy of funding club activities.

### 3. Present time

#### 3.1 Club activities

The current Government of Finland, Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's Government, implements its strategic Government Program which involves a large number of operational changes designed to reform Finnish society and underpin the efforts to create favorable conditions for economic growth. This Program has 26 key projects – one of them dedicated for art and culture and focusing on new club activities for children and young people. This key project is called: *Access to art and culture will be facilitated*.

The Program has also a key project for new learning environments which includes physical activity measures: to *expand the 'Schools on the Move' project* across the country to ensure one hour of physical activity each day. Here, physical activity is increased mainly by introducing physical exercise elements into various lessons (like lessons of mathematics and languages) and breaks.

The key project for club activities offers students better opportunities to take an active part in art and culture pursuits, improve their creative skills, cultural competence and capacity for learning. It is based on numerous research findings on the positive effects of cultural activities on children. The project finances weekly arranged and school-year –long activities run by art and cultural professionals in schools in the whole country.

The key project has a strong emphasis on students' involvement in implementation. The subjects of club activities are determined by the results of hearing. The Ministry of Education and Culture decided to ask all students at the age of 7 to 16, what

forms of art and culture and fields of sport they have an interest in to participate during school day.

The nation-wide enquiry was launched in 2016 and 2017. The Ministry has gathered views and comments from 200 000 students representing more than a third of the students in basic education. All club activities are designed on the basis of students' interests. If the students of a school are interested in architecture, photography, and handicraft – those are the only club activities that can get support from the Ministry.

The hearing showed that the most interesting fields in art and culture were parkour, street and show dance, music, and photography. Most students are interested in many forms of art and culture which put pressure on improving the access to art and culture. All the results of hearing were published and every school, city and region can utilize the results in its own policy.

The Government's key project emphasizes the quality of the club activities. Every club needs to consist of 30 hours in minimum and these should be planned and executed by art and cultural professionals from cultural centers, art schools, art university, and other cultural operators.

The most important findings of the project are the involvement of students, making the funding dependent on students' interests and the collaboration of cultural professionals with schools. Without knowing children's wishes, the actions would have been very different and not so successful. At present, the Government's key project provides funding for 40 000 students' arts and culture clubs in 1100 schools. It covers around 8 % of students in basic education.

The program has shown that it is possible to find students who have a high interest in, for example, cultural heritage, architecture and dancing, and to bring those activities to them, also in very tiny villages and high up north in Finland. This has been a challenge to our cultural sector which one cannot say no.

### 3.2 Morning and afternoon activities

The amendment of the school legislation in 2004 meant welcomed opportunities for families to arrange children's day in a safe way. Unfortunately, the situation with regards to the arrangement of morning and afternoon activities varies largely between municipalities, as the evaluation report by Iivonen (2009) indicated. Children do not have an unconditional legal right to morning and afternoon activities, and therefore, municipalities are not forced to arrange these services. In 2009, the number of participating first-year students was 48% of

the age cohort and that of second-year students 27%. Some towns offered morning and afternoon activities only for first-graders, although there was an urgent need for these services among second-graders and also among third-graders (who are not yet covered by the law). Iivonen also remarked that the quality of morning and afternoon activities varied in regard to space, teacher/student ratio, and content of activities. The morning and afternoon activities were offered by several organizations also outside of the school premises.

The evaluation report (Iivonen, 2009) presented 21 proposals for improving the organization of before- and after-school activities.

The proposals and consequent amendments can be summarized as follows:

- The amendment to the school legislation that the municipality has to organize morning and afternoon activities for the first- and second-graders to meet the needs of children, and that the schools would be responsible for arranging them. - These amendments have not been made until now.
- The inclusion of morning and afternoon activities into the national core curriculum. - It was completed (OPH, 2015).
- Recommendations for the content of activities; the number of children per club leader; training of staff; consideration of children's unique needs and capacities; the increase of the use of the school's premises for activities; improvement of the monitoring of the costs and charges from the parents; the increase of the length of contracts with service providers; compensation to secure high quality services; and the development of activities for children who have special needs. - Regulations for the training of staff were given by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2011. The National Agency for Education formulated the principles for morning and afternoon activities (OPH, 2011), and Quality criteria for morning and afternoon activities were given by the Ministry of Education and Culture (OKM, 2012).
- A recommendation to include summer activities in the legislation together with morning and afternoon activities. A big issue in Finland is children's supervision during summer holiday which lasts from the beginning of June to the early August. Children's holiday is longer than the parents' holiday which causes problems with the supervision of children. - The proposal has not been taken up.

Recommendations for municipalities have not affected the increase of the offering of morning and afternoon activities. Around 54% the first-graders and around 29% of the second-graders attend morning- and afternoon activities at present, and only 6% of children with special needs in grades 3-9. Morning and afternoon activities were arranged by school staff in 58% of cases. The rest (around 40%) was organized by a so called third sector covering church and various associations.

In 2017, the National Agency for Education will report the current status of morning and afternoon activities, needs for development, and best practices within the new principles of the national curriculum.

### 3.3 The Integrated/flexible School Day program

In school legislation, club activities and morning and afternoon activities are separately formulated, and they are organized and funded in different ways. Before the amendment of the school legislation concerning morning and afternoon activities in 2004, a three-year Integrated School Day program was directed by Pulkkinen in 2002-2005 with the purpose of integrating club activities and morning and afternoon activities with school work. The project was initiated with the encouragement of some members of the Finnish Parliament and with the financial support from the Finnish Innovation Fund (SITRA) (Pulkkinen, 2004, 2012; Pulkkinen & Launonen, 2005). The Patron of the project was the Speaker of the Parliament, and the Chair of the Board for the project was the Minister of Education. Some Members of the Parliament served as members of the Board and the Executive Committee.

As explained above, in the Finnish system teachers are paid for the class hours they teach. Children go to school for those hours, and the younger the child is the fewer hours he or she spends at lessons and thus at school. The school day may start at different hours in the morning, and also end at different hours, after which children are expected to go home, commonly on their own.

In the Integrated School Day (ISD) program, two types of activities were available for each student: First, morning and afternoon activities were arranged. This meant adult-supervised, mostly self-organized recreation indoors and outdoors, and some structured group activities before and after school hours, and sometimes also during a lengthened lunch break. Students were provided with snacks in the afternoon, and with the care they needed. Students from any grade in the primary school could be assigned to these activities. Second, hobby clubs were made available for children to attend a few times per week for all students, for also those who attended morning and afternoon activities to enrich the recreation offered in these groups. The hobby-clubs involved goal-oriented activities and skill-building (e.g., team sports, cooking, arts, and music).

Participation in both types of activities out of class hours was free and voluntary but demanded assignment. The schools were provided with financial resources from SITRA which enabled them to organize these activities. All students enjoyed equal opportunity to participate, regardless of their parents' level of income. The project was implemented in seven schools in different parts of the country.

There were some **guiding principles** in the implementation of the ISD program. These were discussed with the school principals in monthly meetings: The first principle was **child-centered** approach to extra-curricular activities with the following goals:

- Consideration of students' opinions and wishes for extracurricular activities. They were planned based on information provided by students and their parents in annual questionnaires sent to the home. They reported what kind of extracurricular activities the students had attended during the present school year and what kind of activities they would like to participate in during the forthcoming school year.
- Knowledge about the student's developmental needs; the arrangement of the school day by considering changes in students' activity level with the aim at a good rhythm in alternating teaching, free time and hobbies during the course of the school day. In many schools, lunch break is only 20 minutes which is too short and makes a day busy; during the experiment many schools lengthened it into an hour (siesta).
- Shared responsibility of adults for children's education and upbringing, and the acknowledged value of extra-curricular activities.

The second principle was **school-centered** organization which means that morning and afternoon activities and most hobby clubs were organized at the school under the management of the school principal. Advantages of the school-centered organization compared to the centralized organization for a whole community or to the fragmented organization of associations and enterprises are that space for activities is more easily available at school, and extra-curricular activities at school can be integrated with school work in terms of content and timing.

The third principle was **multi-professionality**. It means that the doors of school are open to artists and other specialists for extra-curricular activities. The school becomes a center of activities where teachers work with people from different professions and with different specialisms. Collaboration reduces costs, because often it is a matter of reorganizing the use of available resources rather than receiving extra resources for these activities.

The schools applying the integrated school day were successful in organizing activities. At the beginning, 18% of the parents of first- and second-graders estimated that their children need morning and afternoon activities, but during the last year, 77% of the first-graders, 71% of the second-graders, and 35% of the third-graders attended either morning or afternoon activities. Also 20% of the fifth-graders attended the morning activities. Participation in the hobby clubs also increased; the number of clubs grew four-fold during the program. During the last year, circa 70% of students in grades 1-6 attended them; the participation rate in lower secondary school was circa 50%.

The participation in activities offered by schools increased students' satisfaction with school as estimated by 89% of teachers. Also a half of the teachers assessed that their own satisfaction had increased. These findings are important because in the beginning the teachers were quite resistant to the program. The school had been the teachers' territory, and leading club activities had been their task on extra pay. Opening the doors of the school to multi-professional experts and letting students stay at school outside lessons supervised by other people, were new demands. There was also a threat that teachers would be expected to do extra work. The Trade Union of Education closely monitored the experiment. Experiences with the ISD program were however positive.

Results on the effects of the extracurricular activities on children were positive. Participation in activities at school reduced children's anxiety and depression compared with the situation when children were left to be alone (Metsäpelto, Pulkkinen, & Tolvanen, 2010).

Furthermore, participation in music and arts and handicraft clubs improved academic working skills defined by persistence, concentration, and carefulness; academic attainments defined by reading, writing, and arithmetic; and social skills indicating high emotion and behavior regulation (Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2012, 2014). They also improved self-regulation which is part of working skills such as persistence and carefulness. Self-regulation is a core capacity for human development as shown by the longitudinal study by Pulkkinen (2017) from middle childhood to middle adulthood.

Many parents were worried about the end of the program. They were pleased by, for example, the organization of hobby clubs in the afternoon which freed up the evenings for families and reduced the need for children to be transported to the hobby clubs. They acknowledged that they could concentrate on their work when they knew that their children were safely at school in their morning and afternoon groups.

The Finnish Minister of Education who closely followed the establishment of the ISD program became convinced about its positive effects on the ecology of school and on children's development. The costs of the ISD were reasonable in relation to its benefits. In a Ministry of Education report (OKM, 2005) concerning well-being at school, the integrated school day was ranked as *the first among the reforms needed* for improving well-being at school.

Governments, however, change in a democratic country, and new ministers have their own opinions and goals. The new minister did not want to establish the integrated school day, but she started a program for increasing funding for club activities which was described in chapter 2.1. As a result of it, club activities increased.

The integrated school day was not formally established, but seeds were sown on the fertile ground. In many schools and municipalities, different versions of it have been implemented. One version is a so called **flexible school day** that was piloted nation-wide in context with increasing funding for school clubs. The concept of a flexible school day refers to the 2013 initiative of the National Agency for Education (OPH, 2014; Rajala, 2014). By formulating funding criteria, it encouraged schools to arrange out of school time activities flexibly during the school day (whenever no formal lessons were taking place): in the morning, in the afternoon, and at midday. In 2013, 40 schools joined the flexible school day experiment, and in 2014-15, the number of schools was 196. The goals were

- to restructure the school day and revise the action culture
- to modify learning environment to support club activities
- to improve students' well-being, satisfaction, and school atmosphere
- to increase participation, facilitate group activities, and activate interest in hobby clubs

Flexible school day was established by organizing club activities at different hours (in the morning and afternoon, and mid-day) as described in the context of the integrated school day. One-fourth of Finnish children have school transportation up to 3 hours daily. The country is sparsely populated and hundreds of small schools have been dissolved during twenty years. If club activities were organized in a flexible way, also the children who were dependent on transportation could participate in them. Club activities were also organized on the multi-professional basis. Feedback from the pilot was very positive in the evaluations of parents and school staff as reported by Rajala (2014; see Pulkkinen, 2015, pp. 131-3).

#### 4. Towards the amendment of school legislation

The Minister of Education and Culture requested Lea Pulkkinen in 2015 (1) to write a report containing information on the impacts of a flexible school day on students' well-being, based on research and effective practices; and (2) to make development proposals concerning an appropriate structure for a flexible school day that would also encompass extramural morning and afternoon activities.

The key proposals contained in the report (Pulkkinen, 2015, Abstract) were:

- One hour of freely selected and voluntary club activities should be included in the school day of each student. These activities are organized not only by the school personnel but also by art and cultural actors, libraries, crafts associations, sports and

youth organizations, and other partners. The municipality's cultural services would have the task of drawing up for the schools a list of local actors interested in organizing club activities and working with the schools.

- In consultation with students and parents, diverse club activities will be developed that may encompass instructor-led clubs for pursuing various hobbies or student-centered workshop activities. These activities would be flexibly scheduled to take place during the school day (at times when formal lessons are not taking place), taking student well-being and equal access to club activities into consideration.
- Morning and afternoon activities in basic education would be updated and linked to the rearrangement of club activities.
- The action plan of the next government should provide for the drafting of statutes and an investigation into the costs with the aim of making the offering of club activities an established practice, and integrating morning and afternoon activities with the club activities. It needs to be made clear that one hour of club activities a day does not meet the needs of younger students and students in need of particular support provided by the safe presence of an adult in the mornings and the afternoons.

On the basis of results in international studies and domestic best practices, the reform was expected to improve the student's school engagement and to increase school satisfaction, with positive effects on students' academic success and personality. If the school day offers the students close and encouraging human relationships and diverse activities, it stimulates enthusiasm for learning and students' willingness to take part in building their own futures. A special attention in this report was paid on the students (one-third in some parts of the country) who have long transportations to school every day.

The report includes a *review of international studies* on the significance of out of school time activities for students. Research results have been unreservedly positive from the perspective of academic success, the students' personal development, and the community (Pulkkinen, 2015, pp. 33-34; 2016).

They can be summarized as follows. **Out of school activities ...**

*School engagement*

- have an extensive influence on the well-being of students; it can be seen in students' school engagement and more positive attitudes toward school and education
- increase interest in learning and the continuation of education

*Knowledge and skills*

- improve school success; (mathematical skills have been particularly studied);
- develop skills in activities that students choose and consider important;

- develop skills for work such as concentration, doing homework, and regular school attendance;

*Personal characteristics and well-being*

- strengthen personal characteristics such as optimism, self-esteem, and emotional well-being; the latter refers to lower levels of depression and social anxiety;
- promote health and physical fitness;

*Social relationships and adjustment*

- improve peer relationships, capacity for relationships, and civic skills; and
- improve adjustment to school and society by reducing risky behaviors such as the use of alcohol and delinquency.

Factors that **contribute to positive outcomes** can be summarized as follows:

*Quantitative factors*

- The number of hours of participation in out of school activities of up to 15 hours per week; (more than 15 hours per week reduces family interaction)
- Participation in multiple activities has a more positive effect on wellbeing than an intensive participation in a single activity; positive effects increase up to five different activities, after which the increase in the number of activities has no additional value
- Positive influences of participation in activities become visible when the participation is long-lasting, i.e. measured in years
- Participation in activities should be started in middle childhood (ages 7 to 12), because the learning of skills needed for activities takes time; a new hobby is seldom started during adolescence due to the person's lack of the basic skills required for the hobby.

*Content factors*

- Participation in the arts (music, visual art, drama, and crafts) is consistently associated with school success, wellbeing, and good social relationships
- Participation in voluntary work has special significance for social development, and more generally, for the development of responsibility
- Sports offered at school are associated with positive development. However, the effects of participation in sports generally depend upon the culture within the sports clubs; for instance, an increase in drinking alcohol has often been reported

*Personnel*

- The quality and good planning of activities and the competence of personnel who organizes and supervises these activities are crucial
- When planning activities the students' interests, needs, developmental stage, and time schedules need to be elicited and taken into account.
- Cooperation between the school, families, and other organizations at which students' activities are offered facilitates participation and its positive effects

*Interaction*

- Participation with friends and the possibility of forming new friendships inspires children and young people to participate in activities
- A good relationship with the supervisor is a key criterion for the student enjoying the activity and continuing to participate in it
- The experience of being cared for, empathy, and the student's individual needs being considered affect whether or not he or she will continue to participate in an activity.

The report also found indications of strong pressures to modify the school day as summarized in the report by Pulkkinen (2015, Abstract). These pressures stem from (1) the

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stresses a child's right to be heard and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities; (2) European Commission's recommendations on investing in children and improving children's well-being; (3) development in other European countries; (4) the Finnish Government's objectives of providing an opportunity for students to pursue hobbies as part of the school day; (5) the reformed core curriculum of basic education; (6) the enthusiasm with which more widespread club activities and experiments on modifying the structure of the school day have been received by the schools and parents; and (7) the willingness of partners to participate in organizing club activities.

Finland's new government established in 2015 with Juha Sipilä as Prime Minister did not include in its action plan the establishment of the proposal that Pulkkinen prepared at the request of the Minister of Education in the former Government (2011-2015). However, parts of the proposal are now being implemented in the form of key programs as explained above. A problem with the key programs is that they end soon and without an amendment to the school legislation their continuity is threatened.

In Finland, school legislation is complemented with the national core curriculum. The core curriculum is defined in Finland as a national level document, which is the outcome of a broad national discussion of different stakeholders. The previous national core curriculum was prepared in 2004. It was reformed in 2014 and it became in force in the fall of 2016 (OPH, 2015).

The values behind the Finnish core curriculum for basic education are "human rights, equality, democracy, natural diversity, preservation of environmental viability, endorsement of multiculturalism, individualism (both in terms of responsibility and as part of a community), and respect for rights and freedoms. The roots of the values originate from both Western classical and new humanism, and are incorporated into subject matter and everyday activities in schools" (Vahtivuori-Hänninen, Halinen, Niemi, Lavonen, & Lipponen, 2014, p. 23).

Its fundamental value is that every pupil is unique and has the right to high-quality education. It states:

*Comprehensive basic education is founded on the inherent value of childhood. Every child is unique and valuable as he or she is. Every child has a right to evolve to his or her full measure as a human being and member of society. In this process the child needs encouragement and individualized support and an experience that he or she is listened to at school, that his or her opinions are valued, and that his or her learning and well-being are*

*important. What is important is the experience that he or she can build together with other people the positive functioning and well-being of his or her community* (OPH, 2015, p. 15, italics and translation by the author).

In accordance with the Basic Education Act (1998/47§) that schools can organize library, club and other activities closely relating to education as part of basic education, the core curriculum (2015, p. 41-42) states:

*Club activity is out of lessons activity that is based on the educational goals of the school. It is part of free basic education. With flexible arrangements it supports the student's experience of an integrated day.*

The core curriculum also expects that morning and afternoon activities should be locally integrated in the school curriculum. The core curriculum anticipates the amendments needed to the school legislation.

## 5. Conclusions

Difficulties in changing the school day structure have become obvious during twenty years. Reasons for difficulties obviously lie in the hundred years of traditions in organizing school work, teachers' working hours, and club activities. Teaching time in Finland is 16 to 24 hours per week and three hours have to be reserved for joint planning, whereas in many other countries teachers have so called total working time up to 40 hours per week covering all teachers' responsibilities (Hautamäki, 2015). Inviting partners from outside school to supervise children's activities did not belong to the school culture. Neither did it belong to the school culture to allow school premises to be used for club activities in the evening without paying rental fees; they were generally too high for children's hobbies.

The organization of extracurricular activities in school premises in a new way which makes the school a center of activities demands a change in the school culture. It takes time. Steps toward the change have already taken. The doors of schools are opening. The amendment to school legislation is expected.

There are several specific aspects to be considered in the organization of extracurricular activities:

1. Activation of local cultural and other organizations and individuals with special talents and skills to participate in leading extracurricular activities for students
2. Arrangement of school transportation in a way which makes it possible for every student to participate in extracurricular activities

3. Timing of extracurricular activities to meet childrens' needs and the integration of morning and afternoon activities with hobby clubs
4. The use of school premises for extracurricular activities thus making the school to serve as activity centers and to increase students' satisfaction with school
5. Attention to students in lower secondary and higher secondary schools (including vocational school) so that participation in hobby clubs would continue beyond the primary school.
6. Hearing students' wishes for extracurricular activities
7. Ensuring that every student has at least one hobby that she or he likes.

The Minister of Education and Culture set a working group to prepare a proposal on how to ensure that every child and young person have at least one hobby that she/he likes. The working group proposed to the policy-makers to strengthen children's participation, inclusion and hearing, make schools places for hobby activities, and enhance cooperation between schools and art, cultural and sport professionals. The work towards these aims has started.

There is a saying that it is better to start building a new world instead of changing the present. In time being the new structure, the new culture will take over and the old will disappear. Maybe soon it is time for new culture in Finnish schools.

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