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Trust, Equity, and Teacher Autonomy: Lessons From the Finnish Education System

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Connecting Theory to Practice

**Trust, Equity, and Teacher
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Finnish Education System**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.3.2.10><https://mje.williamwoods.edu/>**Krystle Gremaud
Christina Price-Richardson****Abstract**

Finland is widely recognized as a leader in education, a reputation that grew after the country's strong performance on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2001. This paper examines key features of the Finnish education system, drawing from school and university observations conducted as part of the Teacher Leader Fellowship Program Abroad in April 2025. Findings illustrate how reforms initiated in the late 1960s, including the establishment of a national curriculum, rigorous teacher education, and a commitment to equity, contribute to strong student outcomes, high teacher satisfaction, and a culture of trust and professionalism. Three theoretical perspectives, constructivism, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and professional capital, help explain the effectiveness of Finnish practices in everyday learning environments. Classrooms emphasize student agency, collaboration, and experiential learning, while teachers enjoy autonomy supported by advanced preparation and collegial trust. Although structural differences limit direct transfer to the United States, practical adaptations such as project-based learning, formative assessment, teacher collaboration, and shared leadership offer realistic entry points. The Finnish model suggests that when pedagogy, culture, and professional respect align, schools can create conditions where students thrive and teachers feel valued.

Keywords

Constructivism, Education, Finland, Professional Capital, Sociocultural Theory, Teacher Professionalism

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Finnish Education

In 2001, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) published assessment results, recognizing Finnish education as one of the top education systems in the world (Saavedra et al., 2018). PISA, which measures student performance, is an international organization designed to compare student performance across countries, showing the strengths and weaknesses of the countries that are part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2001). Prior to this 2001 report, Finland had been considered “average,” but the effects of the educational reform, which began in 1968, were finally being seen (Saavedra et al., 2018).

In 1968, the Finnish Government began reforming its education system, with the aim to provide “a good basic education to all citizens irrespective of their socioeconomic background, gender, or geographical location” (Välimaa, 2021, p. 172), starting with the establishment of a national curriculum and mandating nine-year comprehensive schooling (Saavedra et al., 2018). Knowing these reforms would take a cultural shift, the government implemented these changes by region, with full implementation taking ten years (Saavedra et al.).

Through the Finnish educational reform, 10 pillars emerged: equity and inclusion; early childhood education; teacher professionalism and autonomy; teacher collaboration and trust; play-based learning; project-based approach; minimal homework, maximum breaks; emphasis on well-being and mental health; teacher-student relationships; continuous improvement and research-driven education (Finland Education Hub, 2023b).

Teacher Satisfaction and Autonomy

Teacher training programs in Finland are rigorous, with roughly one in ten applicants being accepted into a program (Wilkins & Corrigan, 2019). Recruiting talented individuals, training them well so they are effective teachers, and giving them the support they need to be autonomous are components of Finland’s success. Not only is Finnish education ranked among the top in the world, but teacher satisfaction is also high. Eighty-nine percent of Finnish teachers report they are satisfied with their position (Finnish Government, 2025). This satisfaction can be attributed to their autonomy. In Finland, by law, teachers must be included in policymaking. However, Finnish education policy is often predictable. Finland’s education system is unlikely to undergo radical changes with shifts in government officials. This stability leads to trust, which leads to job satisfaction (Välimaa, 2021).

Another contributing factor to teacher satisfaction in Finland is autonomy. Because Finland invests considerable effort in recruiting and training highly qualified teachers, once licensed, they are trusted to manage their classrooms and teach their students. Pollari et al. (2018) state, “Each teacher has a great deal of pedagogical freedom to plan and carry out their teaching and assessment procedures as they best see fit” (p. 5). Despite having a national curriculum (the equivalent of learning outcomes in the United States), there is no standardized testing or school inspections, which gives teachers the autonomy to teach and lead their students to discovery (Pollari et al.).

Key Differences

The 10 key pillars of Finnish education are what differentiate the Finnish education system from other countries. Around the world, 155 countries mandate nine years of compulsory education (UNESCO, 2020). The majority of these countries use standardized tests such as PISA to measure student performance (Lau,

2022). The frequency of testing varies from country to country. In Finland, only one standardized test is administered at the end of a student's compulsory education. Finnish teachers, rather than focusing on testing, focus on inquiry, exploration, and play to learn. Schools are not ranked for performance, teachers are not ranked for performance, and students are given the time to learn and relax, making school a welcoming place, not one of stress or competition (Colagrossi, 2018).

Finnish students are older when they start school, the school days are shorter than American schools, and primary students often have the same teacher for up to six years. The typical school day in Finland starts between 9:00 and 9:45 AM and ends between 2:00 to 2:45 PM, with multiple breaks and adequate lunchtime provided (Colagrossi, 2018). Homework is not a standard practice. Finns believe that students need time to recharge and should have the opportunity to engage in activities that matter to them, such as sports, arts, or spending time with loved ones (Vietnam–Finland International School, 2023). In a nutshell, Finnish education focuses on holistic learning, which stems from creating environments where students can learn and grow, not compete and lose.

Observations from the Trip

In April 2025, the authors joined the Teacher Leader Fellowship Abroad in Finland, sponsored by the ARAMFO Educational Foundation. The experience offered a close look at Finland's student-centered educational approach, which emphasizes equity, trust, and well-being. Visits to schools, teacher education institutions, and community learning spaces illustrated how practices such as empowering educators, reducing reliance on standardized testing, and prioritizing student growth created balanced learning environments that support the social-emotional health of both students and teachers.

Finnish Educators

In Finland, teacher preparation is characterized by rigor and a high level of professionalism. At the University of Helsinki, Finland's leading institution for teacher education, admissions remain highly selective. In 2018, the university received 1,399 applications for its Teacher Education Program, yet only 8.7 percent were admitted, a level of selectivity that has remained consistent and underscores the continued demand for teacher education in Finland (University of Helsinki, 2018; 2025). This selectivity reflects a national belief that teaching requires advanced academic preparation, strong interpersonal skills, and a dedication to supporting the growth and success of every student.

Once in the profession, Finnish teachers enjoy a level of autonomy rarely seen elsewhere. During a visit with a high school teacher, the question was asked about their typical day. Laughing, the teacher replied, "Well, compared to you all, it's quite easy. I show up and I teach. I am not required to turn in lesson plans, write tests, analyze data, or do anything beyond the end of the day." Educators are trusted to make pedagogical decisions without administrative oversight or formal classroom observations, and they consistently report that this trust fosters innovation and meaningful collaboration while keeping the focus on student-centered learning rather than procedural compliance. Evaluation systems follow the same principles because Finnish schools do not rely on high-stakes or standardized testing. Instead, assessment is embedded in daily instruction through teacher-led feedback, which promotes deeper understanding, creativity, and intrinsic motivation.

Student-Centered Practices

Finnish education is grounded in societal values that shape every school environment. Children are encouraged to be brave in facing challenges, participate actively in learning and community life, act with humanity, embrace inclusivity, and assume the best in others (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016). These values reflect Finland's national commitment to balance and well-being. Believing that students and teachers perform best when expectations are reasonable and workloads are manageable, one administrator contrasted this philosophy with practices in the United States, stating, "In the U.S., you always strive for excellence. We strive for good enough."

Shorter school days support a balanced life, giving students time for hobbies, rest, and family while classroom routines reflect Finnish priorities. Instruction emphasizes both autonomy and collaboration, allowing students to work independently as well as together when appropriate. Each 45-minute lesson is followed by a 15-minute break during which students go outdoors, regardless of the weather, to enjoy free time, movement, and fresh air. While visiting schools, the authors observed elementary students playing outside, some riding bikes while the teacher walked and talked with them, some engaged in sport activities, and others engaged in fantasy play. In the high school, students were given time to sit in collaborative sitting areas, engaged in conversation, some played chess in the library, while others were freely walking around the neighborhood to get some fresh air before returning to their studies. Unlike in the United States, physical activity in Finland is integrated into the school day and considered an essential part of learning rather than a distraction.

These practices were observed across several schools of varying aged students. Classrooms were calm, purposeful, and unhurried. Teachers spoke in soft tones, and students moved independently and confidently between tasks. Lessons flowed naturally, blending instruction, discussion, creative work, and exploration. In a fifth-grade crafts class, for example, students pursued independent projects while the teacher quietly offered guidance through questioning rather than directing. Such experiences demonstrated how student-centered learning and autonomy are woven seamlessly into the curriculum.

Learning Spaces

The physical environments in Finnish schools also reflect the values and practices that define the system. Schools are community-based, often located within neighborhoods so that students can walk or bike to class. This sense of belonging extends to the buildings themselves, which are bright and open with abundant natural light and materials such as native wood, that create a warm, nature-inspired atmosphere.

Many schools take learning beyond the classroom by incorporating forest school practices. This means students spend time in nearby natural areas and engage in activities such as science observations, building shelters, and exploring local ecosystems, which help them develop confidence, environmental awareness, and a sense of adventure. Intentionally designed spaces and flexible layouts further support collaboration and movement. Examples witnessed by the authors included early childhood students growing the seeds they had collected in the forest and middle school students who were peer-teaching in the collaboration zones found throughout the school. Open classrooms, fluid common areas, and even hallways serve as learning spaces, giving students the freedom to choose where and how to work.

Finnish schools also function as community hubs, fostering connections among families, educators, and neighborhoods. By embedding well-being into daily routines and school design, Finland demonstrates that

academic success and personal growth are not mutually exclusive. Schools create environments where intellectual development, creativity, social-emotional learning, and community engagement coexist, preparing students to thrive both inside and outside the classroom.

Theoretical Connections

Examining the Finnish education system, three theoretical connections emerge: Constructivism, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Hargreaves & Fullan's Teacher Autonomy and Professional Capital Theory. These frameworks were selected specifically because they most closely align with the observed practices. Other theories, such as Dewey's Experiential Learning or Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, could be applied. However, the selected theories more closely capture the Finnish educational principles observed. These theories provide a holistic and cohesive framework that connects classroom pedagogy, social learning environments, and the professional conditions that support both teaching and learning.

Constructivism

Constructivism is a learning theory built on the idea that individuals learn best by actively engaging with experiences and interactions rather than passively receiving information (McLeod, 2025a). In the classroom, this shift changes the student's role. Rather than being empty vessels waiting to be filled with facts, students become explorers, encouraged to ask questions, think critically, make connections, and learn from mistakes. The Finnish National Core Curriculum reflects this philosophy, stating that "students should be active participants in their own learning, and that they should learn to set goals and solve problems independently and together with others" (English et al., 2022, p. 2).

This approach is not just theoretical but woven into the daily routines of Finnish schools. Teachers act as guides, supporting inquiry while giving students space to collaborate and discover. Much of the curriculum is built around cooperative learning, where peers work together to solve problems and share ideas. Classrooms are calm yet dynamic, emphasizing teamwork and dialogue over rote memorization. When paired with Finland's emphasis on outdoor activities and play, these practices provide students with hands-on opportunities to sharpen critical thinking, strengthen collaboration skills, and prepare for future challenges (Finland Education Hub, 2023a).

Sociocultural Theory

Another theoretical connection that emerges in Finnish education is Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which states that learning is social (McLeod, 2025b). According to Vygotsky, "adults in society foster children's cognitive development by engaging them in challenging and meaningful activities" (as cited by McLeod, 2025b, para. 10). As a culture, Finns value education and highly respect their teachers (Finland Education Hub, 2023b). Viewed as a "more knowledgeable other" (MKO), teachers are given the autonomy to lead students to discovery (McLeod, 2025b). Finnish curriculum often incorporates group learning and collaboration, which contributes to social learning. Students work together to solve problems while teachers guide the students to discover. For example, in one classroom a math lesson was observed. The lesson was not based on drill and practice as often seen in the United States but was exploratory. In groups, concepts were discussed and as a group, the application of how this was used in day-to-day life was presented. Students were allowed to ask questions, make observations, and draw conclusions, making the learning both applicable and meaningful. Value in education, trust in teachers, and social learning through collaboration are all aspects of Finnish education supported by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory.

Teacher Autonomy and Professional Capital Theory

Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) Professional Capital Theory argued that strong teaching develops when schools invest in teachers by giving them opportunities to learn, collaborate, and exercise professional judgement, rather than relying on control, compliance, or test scores. Professional capital is built from three connected elements: human capital, which encompasses rigorous preparation and ongoing professional growth; social capital, which reflects trust and collaboration among colleagues; and decisional capital, which highlights the authority teachers have to make informed choices about their classrooms and students. When these three forms of capital are built together, teachers are not only highly skilled but also respected as professionals. In short, when educators are trusted, they are empowered to reach their full potential and have greater impact on student learning. Finland offers a clear example of how these principles work in practice.

Human capital is established through rigorous teacher preparation programs that require all teachers to earn a Master's degree in a five-year program that blends theory with extensive practical experience (VisitEDUfinn, n.d.). Social capital is fostered through collaboration with time and space built into the school day for teachers to plan together, share ideas, and support one another in both formal and informal settings (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Decisional capital is most evident in the trust placed in Finnish teachers. Educators are free to decide how to teach and assess their students without constant oversight or high-stakes testing. They are not micromanaged but instead are expected to hold themselves accountable through expertise, collaboration, and reflection (Fullan, 2016).

This professional culture, rooted in preparation, trust, and autonomy, shows how investing in teachers transforms the profession. By respecting educators as decision-makers and collaborators, Finland demonstrates that empowered teachers create classroom environments where professional judgment is valued and student learning flourishes. Fostering the human, social, and decisional capital collectively among their nation's teachers builds the professional capital needed to impact the education and lives of students and communities in positive ways.

Lessons for Practitioners

Visiting Finnish schools and teacher preparation programs offers a vivid picture of how theory and practice come together in everyday teaching. What stands out is the way classrooms balanced student-centered learning, collaborative communities, and empowered teachers. While Finland's system is unique, many of the strategies can be adapted for use in U.S. schools without replicating their culture-inspired model. Importantly, these practices are not isolated strategies, but are grounded in Constructivist, Sociocultural, and Professional Capital frameworks that explain why they are effective.

Prioritizing Active, Experiential Learning

Consistent with Constructivist Principles, learning in Finland is built on the idea that students construct knowledge through experience, reflection, and social interaction. Classrooms are full of inquiry-based projects, collaborative problem-solving, and hands-on exploration. Teachers guide the process with thoughtful questions while allowing space for students to take ownership of their learning. For practitioners, this means designing lessons that move beyond memorization and encourage exploration and discovery. Project-based learning, movement breaks, outdoor activities, and creative projects all help students stay engaged and process information more deeply. The underlying constructivist principle is that knowledge is

more meaningful and transferable when students actively engage with content rather than passively receive it.

Fostering Collaborative, Sociocultural Learning

Aligned with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, learning in Finland is deeply social and shaped through interaction with others. Classrooms, hallways, and common spaces are intentionally designed to encourage interaction and peer support. Students regularly work together to share ideas, solve problems, and reflect on their progress, while teachers provide guidance that helps them grow more independent. Educators elsewhere can take inspiration from this by creating structures that emphasize collaboration and community. Group work, peer feedback, and flexible learning spaces make social interaction a natural part of the learning process. Involving families and local communities further reinforces the Sociocultural Theory that learning occurs beyond school.

Emphasizing Teacher Autonomy and Professional Capital

Grounded in Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) Professional Capital Framework, one of the most significant differences in Finnish education is the level of trust placed in teachers. They plan lessons, assess student learning, and collaborate with colleagues without the constant oversight or pressure of high-stakes testing and performative evaluations. This autonomy is supported by strong preparation, ongoing professional development, and a culture of collaboration. Schools thrive when teachers are trusted as professionals. Supporting teacher leadership, creating time for collaboration, and encouraging professional judgment in areas like assessment and curriculum design all build what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) call professional capital. When teachers feel respected and empowered, they are more likely to reflect on their practice, innovate in their instruction, and respond flexibly to student needs.

Integrating Theory into Practice

The compelling aspect of the Finnish model is how theories such as constructivism, sociocultural learning, and professional capital come together in everyday practice. While classrooms emphasize active, student-centered learning (Constructivism), schools are built around collaboration and community (Sociocultural Theory), and teachers are trusted to make informed decisions (Professional Capital). The result is a system where reform is not about new programs or mandates but about aligning philosophy with daily practice. For educators, this means creating learning experiences that prioritize student choice and reflection, structuring classrooms to support dialogue and peer learning, and embedding assessment into the learning process as formative feedback rather than high-stakes tests. Recognizing the broader social and cultural context by connecting families, communities, and real-world experiences to what happens in the classroom are also critical aspects to integrate into professional practice.

Challenges and Adaptation

Ultimately, the Finnish example demonstrates that connecting theory to practice is not only possible but also powerful. When pedagogy, culture, and professional trust combine, schools become places where students thrive, teachers feel empowered, and communities see education as a shared, meaningful endeavor. While the Finnish education model offers many compelling practices, significant structural differences between Finland and the United States (U.S.) mean that direct transplantation of policies is neither practical nor advisable. For instance, Finland's system is underpinned by strong societal trust in teachers, relatively

homogeneous cultural norms, and centralized funding that ensures equity of resources; in contrast, the U.S. system is highly decentralized, marked by considerable variation in funding across districts, and shaped by different cultural expectations about accountability and autonomy (Chung, 2023).

Given these differences, adaptations should be realistic and context-sensitive rather than ambitious and radical. For example, U.S. school districts might begin by strengthening teacher professional capital through enhanced collaboration, peer-coaching, and shared decision-making at the school level, building on existing structures rather than waiting for system-wide overhaul. Piloting Finnish-inspired models in discrete contexts (e.g., high-need schools) where trust and professional autonomy can be nurtured incrementally may be more feasible. Furthermore, given U.S. resource and accountability constraints, schools could adopt a hybrid approach: maintain current accountability frameworks while gradually increasing teacher influence over pedagogy and curricula. In doing so, these adaptations respect the local U.S. context while moving toward the spirit of the Finnish model, i.e., autonomous, well-supported teachers operating in a collaborative culture.

Additional adaptations may include adaptations to teacher preparation programs, mirroring Finland's model of clinical practice and increased coursework in child pedagogy (Darling-Hammond, 2017), reducing standardized tests, replacing these with teacher designed formative assessments that support learning instead of ranking (Sahlberg, 2021), implementing a holistic curriculum that includes social-emotional learning, recess, and arts (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020), and create collaborative leadership structures where teachers help with policy development (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Finally, and likely most importantly, school funding and resource equality need to be mandated, ensuring all schools receive equal and equitable opportunities.

Conclusion

Finland's education system is an educational icon and a case study in how intentional, equitable learning environments are built on trust, student-centered teaching, and teacher empowerment. Active learning, deep collaboration, and professional autonomy are not abstract ideals but standard elements of the school day that consistently support both student growth and teacher well-being. Educational theories, including constructivism, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and Hargreaves and Fullan's Professional Capital Theory help explain why these practices succeed, creating a coherent connection between philosophy and classroom strategy.

For educators in the United States, Finland's experience serves as a reminder that student learning and teacher professionalism can be strengthened through gradual reforms. Strategies such as project-based learning, collaborative school structures, formative assessment, and the cultivation of professional capital can guide U.S. school culture toward more equitable and student-centered outcomes while acknowledging the realities of resource variation, complex accountability rules, and cultural expectations.

The challenge is that direct application does not work across such different contexts. Differences in funding, governance, and levels of societal trust underscore the need for adaptation. By aligning core theoretical principles with practical strategies while remaining attentive to local constraints, U.S. educators can create environments where students thrive, teachers feel empowered, and schools function as collaborative communities. The Finnish model offers inspiration, demonstrating what is possible when pedagogy, professional respect, and school culture come together.

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