

Systematic Literature Review: Educational Curriculum in Finland

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Article Info

Article history:

Accepted: 24 November 2025

Publish: 08 December 2025

Keywords:

Finnish Curriculum

Holistic Education

Multilingualism

Literacy

Teacher Autonomy

Abstract

This study examines the Finnish curriculum through a systematic literature review to explore its strengths, challenges, and implications for education. The Finnish curriculum emphasizes a holistic approach, supporting multilingualism, broad literacy, competence development, teacher autonomy, collaboration, interdisciplinary integration, and pedagogical continuity from early childhood to higher education. Multilingualism is recognized as an educational resource that promotes linguistic diversity and social equity, while literacy encompasses critical thinking, science, health, music, soft skills, and entrepreneurship. Teachers are granted significant flexibility to design multidisciplinary learning and collaborate with local communities, although variations in practice persist. Integration of subjects and experiential learning enhances holistic understanding and critical thinking skills. Despite challenges such as language hierarchies, uneven teacher implementation, and the need for additional pedagogical support, the Finnish curriculum represents an inclusive, progressive, and future-oriented model of education. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators aiming to implement effective curriculum reforms in diverse educational contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Finnish education curriculum is often regarded as one of the best systems in the world because it provides a strong foundation for student learning while enhancing teacher professionalism. This success depends not only on visionary policies, but also on the effectiveness of the implementation stage. Okyere (2025) emphasizes that successful education reform requires strategic attention to classroom practices, implementation challenges, and the adaptation process of stakeholders so that curriculum changes can run optimally.

Research by Laivuori et al. (2024) shows that teachers in Finland have high motivation and professional capacity to engage in the curriculum design process. This confirms the importance of the professional community of teachers and collaboration between stakeholders as the foundation for successful curriculum reform. Similar findings were reported by Tikkanen et al. (2017; 2019), who highlighted that policy consistency, teacher capacity, and strategies that reduce the pressure of reform are important factors in maintaining the sustainability of curriculum change. In addition, the literature emphasizes the need for integration between policy, practice, and curriculum adjustment so that all elements of education can function harmoniously in achieving learning objectives.

Based on these findings, this literature review seeks to explore and analyze how the Finnish curriculum is implemented in various educational contexts. Specifically, this study focuses on five main questions, namely: how does the Finnish curriculum support multilingual education and

linguistic diversity; how does the curriculum emphasize literacy and student competency development; how are teacher autonomy and collaborative practices integrated into curriculum implementation; how does the curriculum regulate interdisciplinary education to support holistic learning; and how is the Finnish curriculum designed to support early childhood education and higher education, including professional fields such as medical education.

By examining these five aspects, this article not only describes the strengths and limitations of the Finnish curriculum, but also provides theoretical and conceptual insights that can serve as a reference for other countries in designing curriculum reforms that are responsive to global demands and current educational needs.

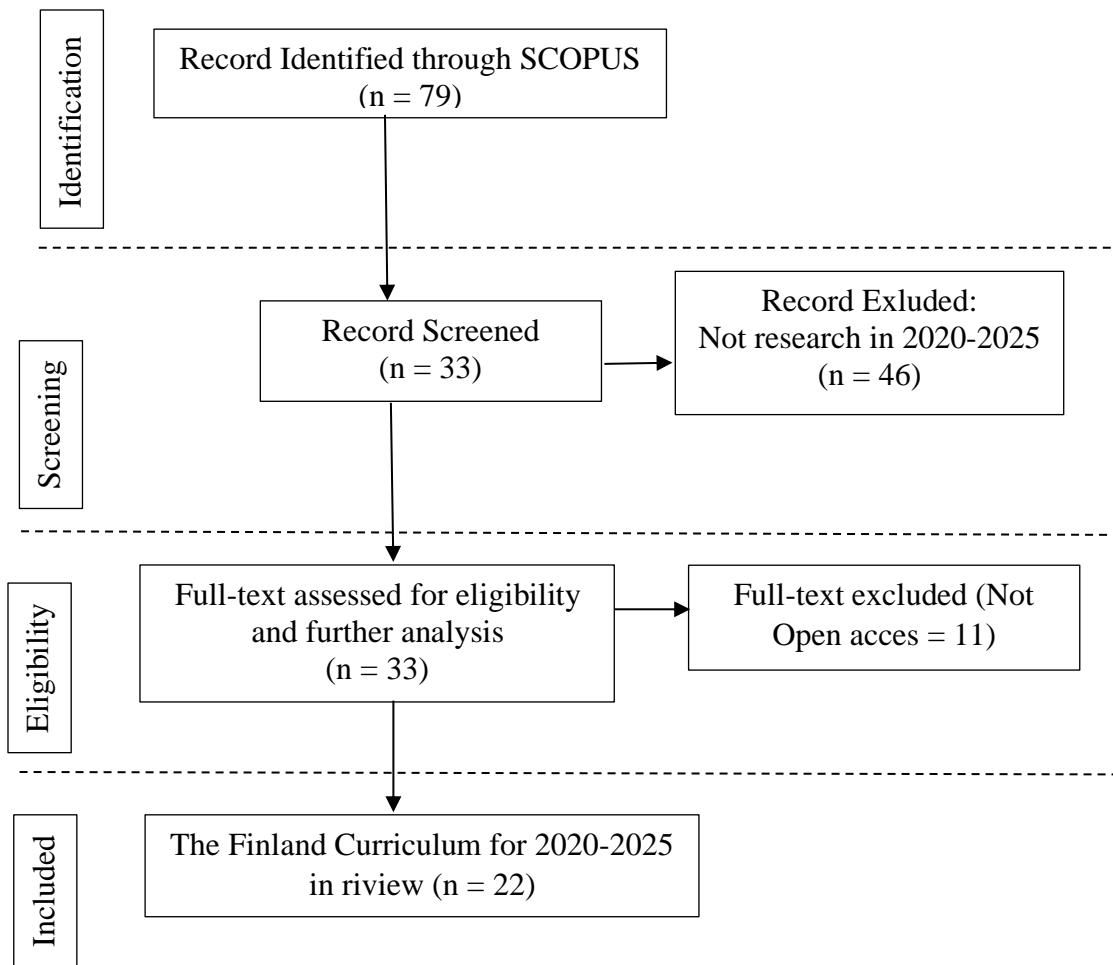
2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, a systematic literature review (SLR) was used in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines. This method provides a comprehensive overview of the education curriculum in Finland. The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method was used by going through the stages of identification, assessment, and analysis of research findings that met certain eligibility criteria (Udin et al., 2022). SLR is basically a structured technique for obtaining relevant information in accordance with predetermined eligibility requirements (Mengist et al., 2020). The PRISMA protocol provides a uniform and expert-evaluated approach to conducting systematic reviews using a checklist of best practices, which helps ensure the quality and consistency of the review process and reporting of results (Iffah et al., 2025). Thus, PRISMA supports a systematic review process that can be accurately and reliably reproduced (Moher et al., 2010). Identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (data collection) are fundamental elements of PRISMA.

Data identification and retrieval were conducted on the Scopus portal on November 12, 2025, at 12:35 p.m. Western Indonesian Time. The search results found 79 documents with the keyword "Finland curriculum." The 79 documents were then filtered by taking the last 5 years, namely 2020-2025. After the screening stage, there were 46 documents from 1972 to 2019, leaving 33 documents from 2020 to 2025. These documents consisted of scientific journal articles and conference proceedings.

At this stage, 11 documents were not openly accessible, so out of 33 documents, only 22 documents will proceed to the next stage of analysis to answer the research questions. The articles selected for further analysis are those that meet the following inclusion criteria: 1) listed in the Scopus database, 2) discuss the Finnish curriculum, and 3) are available in open access format.

Descriptive statistics are used to present data that has been extracted and tabulated. Findings related to the research questions are then presented in a narrative summary. Below is a flowchart of the PRISMA protocol.

**Figure 1.** PRISMA protocol flowchart

3. RESULTS

3.1. Research Results

The data regarding the research results are listed in the table below.

Table 1. Research Used in Articles on Education Curriculum in Finland

No	Author	Title	Findings
1	(Paulsrud et al., 2020)	Spaces for multilingual education: language orientations in the national curricula of Sweden and Finland	The Finnish curriculum emphasizes multilingualism as a resource, is inclusive, and promotes linguistic diversity. Sweden is more limited and less explicit.
2	(Gourvennec, 2020)	Cultural models of national lower-secondary curricula in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden	The Finnish L1 curriculum emphasizes literary literacy for the development of identity, empathy, and critical thinking, combining literacy competencies and aesthetic understanding.
3	(Erbay et al., 2021)	Comparison of Pre-School Education Curricula of	The Finnish preschool curriculum is holistic and participatory, focusing

4	(Haapaniemi et al., 2021)	TRNC, England, Finland, Southern Cyprus and India	on all aspects of child development and learning through play.
5	(Brännmark, 2022)	Teacher autonomy and collaboration as part of integrative teaching Reflections on the curriculum approach in Finland	Competency-based curriculum reform maintains teacher autonomy and encourages collaboration, although implementation varies.
6	(Khalili et al., 2022)	Konkurrerande språkuppfattningar. En studie av läroplaner för grundskolan i Finland, Norge och Sverige	The Finnish curriculum normalizes multilingualism as a social asset, but a language hierarchy remains.
7	(Nwoke et al., 2022)	Characteristics of human agency in liberal and Islamic religious education based on the national core curricula of Finland and Iran	The Finnish curriculum develops student agency, critical thinking, and social participation, emphasizing liberal and secular values.
8	(Summanen et al., 2022)	A Comparative Study of Upper Secondary School Biology Curricula in Two Countries: Finland and Nigeria	The Finnish biology curriculum emphasizes science literacy, conceptual understanding, and critical thinking, compared to Nigeria.
9	(Suomi et al., 2022)	Measuring Health Literacy in Basic Education in Finland	The Finnish Health Education Curriculum enables the development of curriculum-based health literacy measurement instruments with high reliability.
10	(Volmari, 2022)	Student teachers' views of their own musical skills to teach the National Core Curriculum in Finland	Music teacher education is declining, with only a few students feeling competent to teach music according to the national curriculum.
11	(Schleutker et al., 2023)	Constellation of trajectories and fast policy worlds: A spatiotemporal reading of experts' positions and social encounters in Finland's and Norway's recent curriculum reforms	Experts play a major role in curriculum reform through national and international interactions, influencing policy even if this is not always officially recorded.
12	(Honkimäki et al., 2024)	Presentation of the Preliminary Soft Skills Indicator (3Si) Model to Teachers and Curriculum Planners of Business Schools – A Sample from Finland	Soft skills are important in business education; the 3Si Model was introduced to measure and develop these skills.
		Academics' experiences of university-wide top-down curriculum reform in Finland	Academics experienced top-down reform in different ways (adoption, conciliation, active development, collaborative renewal); there was

			criticism of the administrative aspects.
13	(Yildirim et al., 2024)	Teaching Summative Assessment: A Curriculum Analysis of Pre-Service Language Teacher Education in Sweden and Finland	The teacher education curriculum emphasizes summative assessment, but receives less attention than formative assessment; variation in teaching methods between programs.
14	(Hammond et al., 2025)	Reflecting on the powers, possibilities and constraints of geography curricula in England, Finland and Sweden	Geography in Finland is taught in conjunction with natural sciences; the curriculum emphasizes cross-curricular competencies and teacher flexibility, without national exams.
15	(Immonen & Sivula, 2025)	The politics of heritage education: an analysis of national curriculum guidelines in Estonia, Finland, and Sweden	Finnish heritage education connects with local communities, builds cultural identity, and emphasizes language, crafts, and religion.
16	(Khawaja et al., 2025)	Complex outcomes of recontextualised history: comparing lower secondary national curricula in Sweden, England and Finland	The Finnish history curriculum emphasizes critical thinking, the formation of active citizens, and disciplinary skills; it tends to be Eurocentric.
17	(Kiilakoski Ord, 2025)	& The UK National Youth Work Curriculum Democratic challenges from Finland	The Finnish youth work curriculum is participatory and relevant to the local context, unlike the top-down model in the UK.
18	(Kokkonen et al., 2025)	Investigating outdoor education in Finland and Australia: positioning outdoor education as curriculum	Outdoor education in Finland is not given much attention in the formal curriculum; curriculum support is needed to strengthen the practice.
19	(Löfström, 2025)	Reading between the lines: Democratic citizenship in the history curriculum in lower secondary education in Finland	The history curriculum supports democratic citizenship skills, although direct socio-political aspects are less visible; emphasis on historical interpretation.
20	(Niemelä et al., 2025)	Powers of knowledge in secondary religious education curricula of Sweden, England and Finland	Finnish religious education emphasizes the development of ethics, self-reflection, and personal values, in contrast to the academic focus of the UK and the intercultural focus of Sweden.
21	(Raappana & Peuhkuri, 2025)	Curriculum as a tool for legitimising entrepreneurship education in Finland	The core and local curricula support the legitimacy of entrepreneurship education, but practical implementation remains challenging.
22	(Vanhainen et al., 2025)	A New Curriculum for Palliative Undergraduate	Competency-based curricula for palliative care education provide



Figure 2. Distribution of the number of publications on the Finnish Curriculum for the period 2020–2025

Findings

RQ1: How does the Finnish curriculum support multilingual education and linguistic diversity?

The Finnish compulsory school curriculum explicitly promotes multilingualism and positions multilingualism as an educational resource, with a multilingual perspective integrated throughout the curriculum to support linguistic diversity and social justice for all students (Paulsrud et al., 2020; Khalili et al., 2022). However, critical analysis shows that the curriculum still contains a language hierarchy, in which not all languages are given equal status in the expected multilingual competencies, so that power relations between languages continue to influence how multilingualism is constructed (Brännmark, 2022). In addition, religious education reinforces the multicultural orientation of the curriculum by emphasizing ethics, self-reflection, and understanding of diverse worldviews, so that diversity is understood not only in terms of language but also in terms of values and identity (Niemelä et al., 2025).

RQ2: How does the Finnish curriculum emphasize literacy and student competency development?

The Finnish curriculum emphasizes various forms of literacy, ranging from multiliteracy, critical literacy, to science, health, and music literacy, as part of comprehensive student competency development. In the L1 curriculum, general literacy and literature are directed at shaping identity, empathy, aesthetic understanding, and critical thinking skills (Gourvennec, 2020). In the field of science, the biology curriculum highlights scientific literacy through an emphasis on scientific content knowledge and the ability to explain phenomena scientifically (Nwoke et al., 2022). The Health Education (HE) curriculum enables the development of competency-based health literacy instruments that have been proven to be reliable (Summanen et al., 2022). In business education, soft skills are beginning to be integrated through the 3Si model, although they are not yet a dominant part of the curriculum (Schleutker et al., 2023). Teacher education also includes summative assessment literacy, although greater attention is still given to

formative assessment (Yildirim et al., 2024). On the other hand, prospective teachers feel that they lack the musical competence to meet the demands of the national curriculum, indicating a need for strengthening in this area (Suomi et al., 2022). In addition to these various literacies, entrepreneurship education has gained legitimacy through national and local curricula, although its implementation in schools still faces a number of practical challenges (Raappana & Peuhkuri, 2025).

RQ3: How are teacher autonomy and collaboration integrated into the Finnish curriculum?

Competency-based curriculum reform and integrative learning in Finland expand teachers' professional autonomy and encourage collaboration in planning and implementing learning. Teachers are given a high degree of flexibility to design multidisciplinary approaches, so that curriculum practices can vary between schools according to their respective contexts and interpretations (Haapaniemi et al., 2021). At the youth services level, curriculum development is supported by a bottom-up participatory model that gives considerable space for the agency of field practitioners and ensures the relevance of the curriculum to local needs (Kiilakoski & Ord, 2025). In higher education, top-down curriculum reform continues to be accepted by academics, although their responses show four different patterns of adaptation, ranging from acceptance to creative modification (Honkimäki et al., 2024). Furthermore, the role of experts in curriculum reform is influenced by national and international interactions that shape the power dynamics in policy production, suggesting that curriculum change is not only technical but also a political and relational process (Volmari, 2022).

RQ4: How does the Finnish curriculum emphasize science education and subject integration?

The Finnish curriculum emphasizes cross-disciplinary integration by linking various subjects through a thematic approach and transversal competencies. Geography, for example, is taught within the framework of Environmental Studies in grades 1–6 and then stands as an independent subject at the secondary level, but remains connected to the seven transversal competencies that form the character of holistic learning (Hammond et al., 2025). Heritage education expands this approach by emphasizing practical experiences rooted in local communities, minority groups, and everyday cultural practices, thus differing from history, which is more oriented toward narrative representations of the past (Immonen & Sivula, 2025). In history classes, the curriculum is geared toward developing critical thinking skills and shaping active citizens, although its content still exhibits Eurocentrism bias (Khawaja et al., 2025). Efforts to strengthen democratic citizenship are present through an emphasis on historical interpretation skills, although this aspect is not always explicitly stated as a curriculum objective (Löfström, 2025). On the other hand, outdoor education has great potential in supporting holistic and experience-based learning, but its integration into the formal curriculum is still limited due to a lack of pedagogical documentation and adequate resource support (Kokkonen et al., 2025).

RQ5: How does the Finnish curriculum support early childhood education and higher education?

In early childhood education, the Finnish preschool curriculum is designed to be holistic, flexible, and play-based, with an emphasis on continuous observation and family involvement as an important part of the learning process (Erbay et al., 2021). At the higher education level, top-down curriculum reforms still provide room for interpretation by academics, who understand them through four different patterns of experience in the process of adapting to change (Honkimäki et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in medical education, Finland has developed a new competency-oriented palliative care curriculum that is clearly structured and aligned with

European standards, providing a stronger foundation for professional learning for prospective doctors (Vanhainen et al., 2025).

3.2. Discussion

The results of the study show that the Finnish curriculum is designed with a strong focus on inclusivity, social justice, and a holistic approach to education. In the context of multilingualism, the compulsory school curriculum in Finland treats linguistic diversity as an educational asset, with a multilingual perspective integrated throughout the curriculum structure to support linguistic diversity and social justice (Paulsrud et al., 2020; Khalili et al., 2022). However, critical analysis shows that there is a certain language hierarchy that makes some languages more dominant, so that the gap between policy ideals and socio-linguistic reality remains (Brännmark, 2022). Religious education also reinforces multicultural orientation by emphasizing ethics, self-reflection, and understanding of diverse worldviews, so that diversity is understood not only in terms of language but also in terms of values and identity (Niemelä et al., 2025).

In terms of literacy and competency development, the Finnish curriculum emphasizes multiliteracy, critical literacy, science literacy, health literacy, music literacy, as well as identity development, empathy, and critical thinking skills (Gourvennec, 2020; Nwoke et al., 2022; Summanen et al., 2022; Suomi et al., 2022; Schleutker et al., 2023). Entrepreneurship education and soft skills strengthening are beginning to be integrated into national and local curricula in response to global demands, although their implementation in schools faces practical challenges (Raappana & Peuhkuri, 2025). Pre-service teacher education emphasizes formative assessment literacy, while music literacy still needs strengthening (Yildirim et al., 2024; Suomi et al., 2022).

Teacher autonomy and collaboration are other important pillars. Teachers are given a high degree of flexibility to design multidisciplinary and varied approaches between schools (Haapaniemi et al., 2021). The bottom-up participatory curriculum model involves local communities and supports the relevance of the curriculum to community needs (Kiilakoski & Ord, 2025). At the higher education level, although curriculum reform is top-down, academics are given room for adaptation through various implementation patterns (Honkimäki et al., 2024), while national and international power dynamics continue to influence the reform process (Volmari, 2022).

Cross-disciplinary integration is another focus, where subjects are linked through thematic approaches and transversal competencies. Geography and natural sciences are integrated to form a holistic understanding from the elementary level (Hammond et al., 2025), heritage education emphasizes practical experiences rooted in local communities and everyday cultural practices (Immonen & Sivula, 2025), and history education is directed towards developing critical thinking skills, shaping active citizens, and strengthening democratic awareness (Khawaja et al., 2025; Löfström, 2025). Context-based outdoor education reinforces experiential learning, although its integration into formal curricula remains limited due to pedagogical documentation and resource support (Nimelä et al., 2025; Kokkonen et al., 2025).

This holistic principle is also evident from early childhood education to higher education. Preschool curricula emphasize play, observation, and family involvement to support children's social-emotional development (Erbay et al., 2021). At the higher education level, curriculum reform allows for flexible interpretation by academics, including in the development of competency-based curricula in palliative medicine education (Honkimäki et al., 2024; Vanhanen et al., 2025).

Overall, the Finnish curriculum successfully combines multilingualism, broad literacy, teacher autonomy, collaboration, cross-disciplinary integration, and pedagogical continuity from early childhood to higher education. Challenges remain, such as language hierarchy, variations

in implementation among teachers, and the need for more equitable pedagogical support. Nevertheless, the Finnish curriculum remains a model of inclusive, relevant, and progressive education that emphasizes social justice and future readiness.

4. CONCLUSION

The Finnish curriculum emphasizes a holistic approach that supports multilingualism, broad literacy, competency development, teacher autonomy, collaboration, cross-disciplinary integration, and pedagogical continuity from early childhood education to higher education. Multilingualism is seen as an educational resource that strengthens linguistic diversity and social justice, while literacy encompasses critical literacy, science, health, music, soft skills, and entrepreneurship to shape competent and creative individuals. Teachers are given a high degree of flexibility in designing multidisciplinary learning and collaborating with local communities, although variations in practice remain. The integration of subjects and experience-based education strengthens holistic understanding and critical thinking skills. These principles are applied continuously from preschool to higher education, although challenges such as language hierarchy, implementation gaps between teachers, and the need for pedagogical support still need to be addressed. Overall, the Finnish curriculum presents a model of inclusive, relevant, and future-oriented education.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to all previous researchers who have conducted research and published papers on the Finnish curriculum. Their contributions and findings have enriched our knowledge and provided a solid foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of the principles, implementation, and development of the Finnish curriculum from various perspectives. The authors also express their appreciation to research database managers, such as Scopus, who have provided access to relevant and high-quality literature sources, enabling the data collection and analysis process to be carried out effectively. We would also like to thank all those who have provided support, input, and assistance during the preparation of this literature review article. We greatly appreciate the contributions from various parties, and we hope that this work can be beneficial for the development of academic studies and educational practices related to the Finnish curriculum.

6. DECLARATIONS

Author Contribution	: Nina Faoziyah : Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft, Editing and Visualization; Mulyono : Writing - Review & Editing, Formal analysis, and Methodology; Budi Waluya : Validation and Supervision.
Funding Statement	: This research was independently funded.
Conflict of Interest	: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Additional Information	: Additional information is available for this paper.

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