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Educational Change in the Finnish Upper Secondary School Curriculum: Selected Aspects of Health Education

The educational change

“Educational change, enacted by teachers, students, and schools, is driven by multidimensional educational innovations. A meaningful change is facilitated by three key components: a) updated teaching resources, i.e. “instructional resources, such as curriculum materials or technologies”¹, which ensure the relevance of the content and the engagement of both teachers and students in the evolving educational landscape; b) innovative teaching methods and activities, i.e. “new teaching approaches” and new “pedagogical theories which underlie the new educational policies or programmes”². A shift in belief systems regarding effective pedagogy is essential to support this transformation; c) teachers’ engagement and long-lasting perspective with special emphasis on clarity and transparency of educational change³. This makes it possible for them to efficiently identify and overcome ensuing problems, which is critical for sustainable educational improvements.

Definition of health and its educational implications

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as “a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being” rather than merely the absence of disease or infirmity. This holistic view positions health as one of our most valuable assets, deeply influencing all aspects of life, including education. It is

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¹ M. Fullan, *The new meaning of educational change*, New York 2001, p. 39.

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem.

a crucial value closely tied to an individual's lifestyle and well-being⁴. However, research by Grad and Kiliś-Pstrusińska⁵ reveals that adolescents and young adults often prioritise competitive or material values over health-related ones. This demographic tends to have “ambivalent attitudes towards health”,⁶ often displaying a lack of knowledge and a casual approach to essential health habits, such as nutrition, physical activity, adequate sleep, and stress management⁷.

This highlights a critical gap in health education: students often underestimate the long-term importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Addressing these misconceptions and fostering a more proactive attitude toward health should be an essential focus of modern educational programmes. Schools must emphasise health literacy to ensure students understand the impact of their daily choices on their overall well-being.

A systematic and universal approach to health education within the curriculum is essential for shaping healthy attitudes. This includes discussing issues that directly affect students, such as physical and mental overload. For instance, physical challenges like carrying heavy backpacks and living in poor hygienic or housing conditions⁸, as well as mental stress from an overload of school duties and inadequate time management, need to be part of the conversation. The curriculum plays a crucial role in equipping students with knowledge and skills to adopt healthy behaviours. By incorporating health education systematically, students can better understand how to balance their physical and mental well-being and take proactive steps toward managing their health.

Methodology of document analysis

The following research questions were prepared to investigate health education from a Finnish point of view:

1. What have been the trends in Finnish upper secondary health education in the context of skills, values and competences in the course of the last 10 years?
2. Which educational changes help students become thoughtful global citizens in the contemporary world?

⁴ R. Boguszewski, *Zdrowie i prozdrowotne zachowania Polaków. Komunikat z badań [Poles' Health and Health Behaviours. Research Message]*, 138, CBOS Warszawa 2016, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2016/K_138_16.PDF (accessed: 21.09.2024); R. Tabaszewski, *Ewolucja zdrowia jako kategorii prawnej w systemie ochrony praw człowieka Rady Europy*, „Studia Elckie” 21(2019), nr 4, s. 583-594.

⁵ I. Grad, K. Kiliś-Pstrusińska, *Postrzeganie zdrowia jako wartości osobistej przez młodzież szkół licealnych [Perception of Health as a Personal Value by High School Students]*, „Family Medicine & Primary Care Review” 17(2015), no. 1, p. 19-23.

⁶ D. Pankowska, *Health Education in Upper Secondary Schools – Assumptions and Opportunities of Implementation in the Light of the Curriculum*, „Przegląd Badań Edukacyjnych” 30(2020), no. 1, p. 6.

⁷ I. Grad, K. Kiliś-Pstrusińska, *Postrzeganie zdrowia...*, p. 19-23.

⁸ D. Pankowska, *Health Education in Upper Secondary Schools...*, p. 5-26.

The author focuses on the evolution of skills and competencies brought about by the educational reforms in 2015 and 2019 in the field of health education. The analysis begins with a review of Finland's education reform process, examining the overarching mission and metatask of Finnish education, as articulated in the 2015 learning framework. Central to this study is how the curriculum supports the development of globally competent citizens, particularly through the objectives of health education. The review highlights the progression in teaching approaches, emphasising how these reforms shape students' preparedness for navigating global health challenges.

To provide a robust comparison of various perspectives, principles, and regularities, the problem-based method combined with critical discourse analysis was employed to examine documents related to values in health education at the upper secondary school level. The documents were analysed in light of their meanings and contexts, considering the discourse that reflects the conventions, values, and codes specific to different societies embedded in their respective cultures. Discourse reveals "social texts... particular signifying practices of a given group that are both constituted by and constitutive of the discourse field in which members of the group live and function"⁹. Primary sources, particularly curriculum documents and government publications, were utilised as they were essential for ensuring the study's validity and reliability. After an initial review, the most relevant materials were selected for final analysis, focusing on documents that effectively supported the arguments and ideas being explored. The analysis paid particular attention to the "constructive mechanisms embedded in the arguments, ideas, and concepts"¹⁰ within these documents, highlighting how health education is framed and shaped by these discursive practices.

Educational reform in Finland

The citizens of Finland embody the ideals of lifelong learning, demonstrating the essential knowledge and skills required in the rapidly evolving 21st-century workforce. This development was accelerated by educational reforms initiated in 1963. Finland's strong performance in the OECD's PISA assessments has reinforced its reputation as a global leader in education¹¹. The process of educational reform in Finland has been marked by a collaborative effort involving a wide range of stakeholders: headmasters, teachers, ministry representatives, Finnish teachers' unions, parents, local education authorities, and researchers. Together, they designed the reform and development of the core curriculum. From the outset, the process was transparent and inclusive, with extensive collaboration among participants. Finland's approach reflects "a gradual process of

⁹ F. Elbaz, *Knowledge and discourse: the evolution of research into teacher's thinking*, in: *Insights into Teacher's Thinking and Practice*, eds. C. Day, M. Pope, P. Denicola, London 1990, p. 15.

¹⁰ T. Rapley, *Analiza konwersacji, dyskursu i dokumentów*, Warszawa 2007, p. 194.

¹¹ A. Suwalska, *Lifelong Guidance in Finnish Education in the context of globalization*, „Studia Pedagogiczne” 50(2017), p. 69.

reforms that are based on a long-term vision of education”¹². The reform influenced education on three levels: national, municipal, and individual schools. Each group played an active role in shaping and guiding the process, contributing to the achievement of the reform’s goals. Students, parents, teachers, researchers, and various civil and social organizations also took part, leading to strong “commitment to local and school-based curriculum work by municipal authorities, principals, and teachers”. The collective effort of all stakeholders clearly demonstrated their sincere dedication to realizing the reform’s objectives¹³.

The 2015 learning conception in the light of learning environments and methods

The National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools 2015 emphasises a conception of learning that views it as a result of “students’ active, goal-oriented, and self-directed learning”¹⁴. In this framework, learning is not just about acquiring facts but involves students learning how to interpret, evaluate, and analyze new knowledge while deepening their competences and skills. Teachers play a crucial role in this process, offering guidance that helps build students’ confidence and enhances their critical thinking abilities. The learning process is rooted in the interactions between students, teachers, and the broader educational community, fostering a collaborative environment. This level of education places significant emphasis on observing the relationships between concepts, knowledge, and competences, empowering students to develop solutions to challenges they may face in real-world scenarios. By fostering an awareness of how they learn, students are encouraged to improve their study habits and thinking processes, equipping them to adapt to the complexities of a rapidly changing world.

In light of the 2015 National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools, it is essential to note that the development of learning environments and methods is deeply rooted in the curriculum’s learning conception and its subject-specific goals. First, the curriculum emphasises methods that encourage exploration, experimentation, and problem-solving. These approaches aim to foster critical and creative thinking, particularly in multidisciplinary contexts. By engaging in problem-solving activities, students enhance their ability to think critically and innovatively. Second, there is a focus on structured learning processes, where planning, skill evaluation, and responsible work habits are essential. Students are encouraged to actively plan their studies and assess their competencies, thereby taking ownership of their learning jour-

¹² A. Suwalska, *The direction of educational reforms and challenges for sustainable development in Finnish education*, „Forum Pedagogiczne” 9(2019), no. 2, part 2, p. 260.

¹³ I. Halinen, A-S. Holappa, *Curricular balance based on dialogue, cooperation and trust – The case of Finland*, in: *Balancing Curriculum Regulation and Freedom across Europe*, eds. W. Kuiper, J. Berkvens, CIDREE Yearbook 2013, p. 39-62.

¹⁴ The National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools 2015, p. 14.

ney. This structured approach supports not only the improvement of learning outcomes but also a healthy and collaborative learning environment, emphasising teamwork and shared responsibility. Third, the curriculum underlines the importance of creating space for creative thinking and research-based study. Digital learning environments play a key role in this, offering access to diverse learning materials and tools. Students are trained to critically evaluate information, honing their digital literacy skills. Additionally, personal learning paths are emphasised, allowing students to develop online study skills and participate in distance learning, which has become increasingly relevant in today's educational landscape. This forward-thinking approach to education equips students with the tools to navigate and succeed in a rapidly evolving world, fostering both independence and collaboration.

Mission of general upper secondary education

The analysis of key documents reveals that the overarching mission of general upper secondary education is to strengthen students' transversal competencies and broad knowledge base¹⁵. These competencies are built on values, knowledge, skills, and attitudes that promote critical thinking, enabling students to understand complex interconnections in life and the world around them. This stage of education is pivotal in shaping students' identity, worldview, and life philosophy, fostering a deeper understanding of their place within the broader global context. It supports students in developing the intellectual and ethical frameworks necessary for navigating the complexities of contemporary life, while also empowering them to become active and responsible global citizens.

Metatask of Finnish education

The metatask of Finnish education is to equip younger generations with the skills necessary to thrive in contemporary culture and an ever-evolving future. The OECD's Education 2030 framework emphasises the importance of learners' ability to navigate a complex and uncertain world. In this context, exercising agency means having the capacity to establish a clear educational purpose and identify actionable steps toward achieving educational goals. In this perspective, future-ready students need to exercise agency "in their own education and throughout life, (...) to participate in the world and, in so doing, to influence people, events and circumstances for the better"¹⁶. To facilitate this, teachers must recognise and honour learners' individuality while also understanding their relationships with families, peers, and communities, as these dynamics significantly impact student learning.

¹⁵ National Core Curriculum for Upper-secondary Education 2015. The Finnish National Agency of Education, p. 214.

¹⁶ Future of Education and skills 2030, <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/future-of-education-and-skills-2030.html> (accessed: 21.09.2024).

It is essential to focus on fostering “the interactive, mutually supportive relationships that help learners to progress towards their valued goals”¹⁷. In this holistic view, a learner encompasses not just the student but also their teachers, school administrators, parents, and community members. Personalised learning environments should support students’ passions, learning experiences, and collaboration with others. In an era of transformation, “digital literacy and data literacy are becoming increasingly essential, as are physical health and mental well-being”¹⁸.

Towards student-oriented teaching in the light of OECD Competencies 2018

As we approach the year 2030, individuals are expected to cultivate the ability to create new value, and “should be able to think creatively, develop new products and services, new jobs, new processes and methods, new ways of thinking and living, new enterprises, new sectors, new business model sand new social models”¹⁹. In this context, students are called to be active participants in all dimensions of life, navigating uncertainty through multiple perspectives and contexts—historical, present, and future, as well as within diverse social spaces. It is essential for students to appreciate the natural world’s fragility and complexity, recognising its intrinsic values to transform society and shape their future. Building upon the OECD’s Key Competencies “the OECD Education 2030 project has identified three further categories of competencies, the ‘Transformative Competencies’, that together address the growing need for young people to be innovative, responsible and aware: Creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, taking responsibility”²⁰. In a contemporary world rife with inequities, there is a pressing need for effective strategies to navigate diverse perspectives and interests. This complexity requires individuals to adapt to a rapidly changing environment filled with tensions and dilemmas from a global perspective.

The foundation of transformative competencies lies in asking critical questions rooted in norms, values, and meanings, such as: “What should I do? Was I right to do that? Where are the limits? Knowing the consequences of what I did, should I have done it?”²¹ These inquiries are emphasised in the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools 2019, highlighting the importance of reflective thinking in education. Within this framework, self-regulation emerges as a central competency. It encompasses essential skills, such as self-control, self-efficacy, responsibility, and adaptability in problem-solving. These attributes are crucial for taking accountability for one’s actions

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 4.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 5.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 6.

and navigating complex situations effectively. By fostering self-regulation, educators can empower students to become responsible decision-makers who are equipped to handle the challenges of modern life.

Health Education in Upper Secondary Education

Health is understood “in terms of physical, mental, and social well-being as well as functional capacity and work ability”²². Health-related phenomena are perceived through the prism of varied health literacy, which include “knowledge, skills, self-awareness critical thinking, and ethical responsibility related to health”²³. The scientific foundations of health Education emphasise a profound respect for life and the inherent dignity of all individuals, aligned with the principles of human rights. This framework acknowledges the importance of nurturing holistic well-being, which encompasses not just physical health but also social and psychological aspects.

Simultaneously, the author acknowledges the objectives of physical education, which are implemented through a diverse array of teaching opportunities in both summer and winter sports, as well as indoor and outdoor activities. These instructional methods are grounded in understanding the physical, social, and psychological capacities of students, closely intertwined with health education. By encouraging active participation in physical activities, these programmes promote the adoption of a healthy lifestyle. To familiarise students with various forms of exercise and sports, several compulsory courses are recommended, such as “Energy from Exercise” and “Active Lifestyle”. These courses are designed to help students grasp the significance of physical activity in relation to their overall functional capacity, thereby enhancing their health and well-being. Through such comprehensive approaches, students can develop a deeper understanding of how active living contributes to their physical, social, and psychological health.

The research findings offer valuable insights into the future of health education, a topic actively discussed within both scientific and educational communities. This study contributes to a multidimensional understanding of the significance of educational reform quality and the time required for its effective implementation. By enriching the practical knowledge within comparative pedagogy, the results enable a comprehensive analysis of educational changes and reforms and their direct implications for students in the context of Health Education. Such insights are essential for policymakers, educators, and researchers, as they highlight the interplay between educational practices and student outcomes, thereby fostering a more effective health education framework.

²² National Core Curriculum for Upper-secondary Education 2015. The Finnish National Agency of Education, p. 214.

²³ Ibidem.

Task of the subject Health with general objectives of health teaching

In the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools (2019), health is defined as encompassing physical, mental, and social well-being. The basic value of the subject is to build a respectful life full of dignity “in accordance with human rights, equality, equality, responsibility and active citizenship”²⁴. Health education is recognised as a multidisciplinary subject that aims to cultivate students’ health competencies and their ability to think independently, ethically, and responsibly. This approach emphasises understanding the broader dimensions of health and empowers students to identify and modify the factors that contribute to a fulfilling and healthy life within their health environments.

From a teacher’s perspective, educating students about health, safety, health promotion, and disease prevention presents a multifaceted challenge. It requires an understanding of diverse individual, communal, societal, and global worldviews. The primary aim of teaching is to enable students to acquire both individual and communal knowledge, fostering their ability to critically evaluate health-related information and communication. Moreover, the goal is to empower students to analyse the underlying factors that influence their health choices and habits, encouraging discussions about the consequences tied to different lifestyle choices. Teaching “allows students to examine a wide range of ethical and legal issues related to health and illness, which is led through variety of ways to help them develop into balanced and civilised human beings as a part of extensive competence”²⁵.

Teaching health education equips students with essential well-being skills and fosters an understanding of health from individual, community, and societal perspectives. Health education develops “student’s self-knowledge to identify their own strengths and build identity. The teaching process is based on mental well-being-related factors which include emotional and interactional skills”²⁶. According to the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools (2019), the teaching process incorporates well-being-related factors, emphasising emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills (p. 330). Health education is closely tied to the concept of a sustainable future, emphasising the acquisition of social competencies. One of its primary objectives is to create a safe environment that addresses health inequalities and informs students about lifestyle choices. Ethical and environmental competencies are integral to the curriculum, encouraging discussions on consumption habits and their impact on health. Furthermore, health education explores diverse health cultures, acting as a bridge to develop students’ global and cultural competen-

²⁴ The National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 2019, <https://verkko.kauppa.oph.fi/EN/page/product/national-core-curriculum-for-general-upper-secondary-education-2019/2763815> (accessed: 21.09.2024), p. 328.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 310.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 330.

cies. This holistic approach prepares students not only to navigate their own health journeys, but also to engage thoughtfully with the world around them.

The goal of health education is to empower students to develop a comprehensive understanding of health and to effectively seek out health-related information from a variety of sources. This includes evaluating the reliability and validity of the information they encounter. Students learn to differentiate and explain the risks, causes, and consequences associated with health and disease, enabling them to make informed decisions. Through this process, students become attuned to their own needs, perceptions, experiences, attitudes, and values as they relate to health choices, particularly concerning consumption habits and their impact on health and the environment. Health education provides an overview of health promotion, helping students understand the significance of their lifestyle choices, and the health-related challenges they may face.

Trends in Health education to prepare competent global citizens

The author wants to reveal the scientific foundations of health education which involve respect for life, and a life of human dignity in compliance with human rights. Health related phenomena are perceived through the prism of varied health literacy, which include “knowledge, skills, self-awareness critical thinking, and ethical responsibility related to health”²⁷.

Table 1. Comparison of trends in Health education (N.C.C. for General Upper Secondary Schools 2015²⁸, 2019²⁹) and competences 2030³⁰.

Competences to transform society 2030 (OECD 2018)	National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools 2015	National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools 2019
Creating new values	Health-related values, recognition of health cultures, the history of health and illnesses in ever-globalised world	Building a respectful life full of dignity “in accordance with human rights, equality, responsibility and active citizenship” (p. 328)
Reconciling tensions and dilemmas	Examining health from varied perspectives (health, illnesses, health promotion, prevention and treatment of disease)	Differentiating between knowledge and everyday knowledge to explain the risks, causes, and consequences of health and disease

²⁷ National Core Curriculum for Upper-secondary Education 2015. The Finnish National Agency of Education, p. 214.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ The National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 2019.

³⁰ Future of Education and skills 2030.

Taking responsibility	Health literacy includes the acquisition, critical evaluation, interpretation, application of health information, understanding the effects of the environment on health	Explaining the risks, causes, and consequences of health and disease
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After completing a course in health education, students become adept at creating new value, recognising diverse health cultures, and building a life rooted in dignity and respect. They are trained to navigate and resolve tensions and dilemmas related to health, covering aspects like health promotion, disease prevention, and treatment. With a thorough understanding of health literacy, students are capable of evaluating, interpreting, and applying health information responsibly. Students also gain knowledge about the risks, causes, and consequences of health issues, allowing them to take informed responsibility for their well-being. Their education extends into understanding key health determinants and models, such as “the theory of planned behaviour, socio-cognitive theory, health belief model, change phase model, medicalisation and illness, or alternative therapies”³¹. Additionally, students delve into foundational aspects of physical and mental well-being, including the significance of rest, sleep, weight management, and sexuality, while learning to address issues related to stress and crises. This holistic education prepares them to lead healthy, balanced lives and engage with complex health issues in a thoughtful and responsible manner.

In health education, students are required to engage in mandatory modules like *Me and the Good Life (ET1)*, where they explore various perceptions of what constitutes a good life. They reflect on key concepts, such as happiness, meaning, well-being, and agency, while examining choices that emphasise respect for equality. This module encourages discussions on different models of a good life, guiding students to understand the diverse factors that influence personal well-being. In the *Health as a Resource (TE1)* module, students gain foundational knowledge about health promotion and the determinants of health. They study the connections between lifestyle choices and health outcomes, considering the impact of their family and community environments. This course also delves into the “the formation of the phenomena of different health cultures and evaluate their importance for health and apply key social psychological models and theories in explaining the adoption of lifestyles”³². The curriculum goes further by addressing issues of medicalisation, illness, and alternative treatments. Students also explore topics like

³¹ The National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 2019, p. 310.

³² Ibidem, p. 330.

health-promoting behaviours (nutrition, exercise, rest, sleep, weight management), as well as individual, communal, and societal factors that support mental health. Lessons include discussions on the role of stress and crises in mental health challenges, preparing students to approach health holistically and from multiple perspectives.

In the *TE2 Health and Environment* module, students explore the intersection of health and various environments, particularly focusing on the media and its impact. They “examine the health effects of other living environments and evaluate the importance of one’s own choices for the health of the environment”³³. The curriculum encourages students to understand the connections between the physical and psychosocial environments, while also addressing the forms and risks of addiction. Students analyse addiction from a comprehensive perspective, studying its biological, psychological, and social mechanisms.

In the *TE3 Health and Society* module, students gain a comprehensive understanding of how social conditions impact health, as “social and health policy and other social policy, science and technology to the health of the population, evaluate the importance of illnesses and diseases for the individual and society, as well as the effects of lifestyles from the point of view of non-communicable and infectious diseases”³⁴. Additionally, the course covers factors contributing to health disparities within Finland and on a global scale.

Conclusions

The text analysis reveals that through the subject of Health Education students develop essential knowledge, skills, values, and competencies, better preparing them to be thoughtful global citizens. They learn to identify and differentiate between various lifestyles and health cultures, as well as how to manage stress, overcome addictions, and address common illnesses. This comprehensive education equips students with an understanding of the mechanisms that affect human health, enabling them to make informed life choices that promote well-being.

Students gain practical insights into the roles of nutrition, exercise, rest, and sleep in maintaining both mental and physical health. Moreover, the curriculum emphasises global citizenship by educating students about human dignity, human rights, equality, and responsibility, all while considering the risks and consequences that impact health. As a result, they become adept at identifying media manipulation regarding health information, empowering them to make well-informed health decisions.

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³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 331.

Summary

The research analyses change within Health Education in upper secondary education in Finland, taking into account skills, values and competences of students. There is underlined the role of educational changes in becoming a thoughtful global citizens in the contemporary world. There is also put an emphasis on acquisition of knowledge about health promotion and theories that explain healthy lifestyles. Students also study about healthy skills linked to medicalization and alternative treatments. They also evaluate the effects of lifestyles from the point of view of infectious diseases. They are able to analyse the factors contributing to health and health inequality in Finland and globally.

All changes within Health Education are analysed on the canva of metatask and mission of the main goals of general upper secondary education and also OECD competences 2018.

Keywords: National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools 2015 in Finland, Health Education, National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools 2019, values, skills, competences.

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