

EDUCATION

The Joyful, Illiterate Kindergartners of Finland

Forget the Common Core, Finland's youngsters are in charge of determining what happens in the classroom.

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“The changes to kindergarten make me sick,” a veteran teacher in Arkansas recently admitted to me. “Think about what you did in first grade—that’s what my 5-year-old babies are expected to do.”

The difference between first grade and kindergarten may not seem like much, but what I remember about my first-grade experience in the mid-90s doesn’t match the kindergarten she described in her email: three and a half hours of daily literacy instruction, an hour and a half of daily math instruction, 20 minutes of daily “physical activity time” (officially banned from being called “recess”) and two 56-question standardized tests in literacy and math—on the fourth week of school.

That American friend—who teaches 20 students without an aide—has fought to integrate 30 minutes of “station time” into the literacy block, which includes “blocks, science, magnetic letters, play dough with letter stamps to practice words, books, and storytelling.” But the most controversial area of her classroom isn’t the blocks nor the stamps: Rather, it’s the “house station with dolls and toy food”—items her district tried to remove last year. The implication was clear: There’s no time for play in kindergarten anymore.

A working paper, “Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?” confirms what many experts have suspected for years: The American kindergarten experience has become much more academic—and at the expense of play. The late psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim, even raised the concern in an article for *The Atlantic* in 1987.

Researchers at the University of Virginia, led by the education-policy researcher Daphna Bassok, analyzed survey responses from American kindergarten teachers between 1998 and 2010. “Almost every dimension that we examined,” noted Bassok, “had major shifts over this period towards a heightened focus on academics, and particularly a heightened focus on literacy, and within literacy, a focus on more advanced skills than what had been taught before.”

In the study, the percentage of kindergarten teachers who reported that they agreed (or strongly agreed) that children should learn to read in kindergarten greatly increased from 30 percent in 1998 to 80 percent in 2010.

Bassok and her colleagues found that while time spent on literacy in American kindergarten classrooms went up, time spent on arts, music, and child-selected activities (like station time) significantly dropped. Teacher-directed instruction also increased, revealing what Bassok described as “striking increases in the use of textbooks and worksheets... and very large increases in the use of assessments.”

But Finland—a Nordic nation of 5.5 million people, where I’ve lived and taught fifth and sixth graders over the last two years—appears to be on the other end of the kindergarten spectrum. Before moving to Helsinki, I had heard that most Finnish children start compulsory, government-paid kindergarten—or what Finns call “preschool”—at age 6. And not only that, but I learned through my Finnish mother-in-law—a preschool teacher—that Finland’s kindergartners spend a sizable chunk of each day playing, not filling out worksheets.

Finnish schools have received substantial media attention for years now—largely because of the consistently strong performance of its 15-year-olds on international tests like the PISA. But I haven’t seen much coverage on Finland’s youngest students.

So, a month ago, I scheduled a visit to a Finnish public kindergarten—where a typical school day is just four hours long.

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Approaching the school's playground that morning, I watched as an army of 5- and 6-year-old boys patrolled a zigzagging stream behind Niirala Preschool in the city of Kuopio, unfazed by the warm August drizzle. When I clumsily unhinged the steel gate to the school's playground, the young children didn't even lift their eyes from the ground; they just kept dragging and pushing their tiny shovels through the mud.

At 9:30 a.m., the boys were called to line up for a daily activity called Morning Circle. (The girls were already inside—having chosen to play boardgames indoors.) They trudged across the yard in their rubber boots, pleading with their teachers to play longer—even though they had already been outside for an hour. As they stood in file, I asked them to describe what they'd been doing on the playground.

“Making dams,” sang a chorus of three boys.

“Nothing else?” one of their teachers prodded.

“Nothing else,” they confirmed.

“[Children] learn so well through play,” Anni-Kaisa Osei Ntiamoah, one of the preschool's “kindergarten” teachers, who's in her seventh year in the classroom, told me. “They don't even realize that they are learning because they're so interested [in what they're doing].” When children play, Osei Ntiamoah continued, they're developing their language, math, and social-interaction skills. A recent research summary “The Power of Play” supports her findings: “In the short and long term, play benefits cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development...When play is fun and child-directed, children are motivated to engage in opportunities to learn,” the researcher concluded.

Osei Ntiamoah's colleagues all seemed to share her enthusiasm for play-based learning, as did the school's director, Maarit Reinikka: “It's not a natural way for a child to learn when the teacher says, ‘Take this pencil and sit still.’” The school's kindergarten educators have their students engage in desk work—like handwriting—just one day a week.

Reinikka, who directs several preschools in Kuopio, assured me that kindergartners throughout Finland—like the ones at Niirala Preschool—are rarely sitting down to complete traditional paper-and-pencil exercises.

And there's no such thing as a typical day of kindergarten at the preschool, the teachers said. Instead of a daily itinerary, two of them showed me a weekly schedule with no more than several major activities per day: Mondays, for example, are dedicated to field trips, ballgames, and running, while Fridays—the day I visited—are for songs and stations.

Once, Morning Circle—a communal time of songs and chants—wrapped up, the children disbanded and flocked to the station of their choice: There was one involving fort-making with bed sheets, one for arts and crafts, and one where kids could run a pretend ice-cream shop. “I’ll take two scoops of pear and two scoops of strawberry—in a waffle cone,” I told the two kindergarten girls who had positioned themselves at the ice-cream table; I had a (fake) 10€ bill to spend, courtesy of one of the teachers. As one of the girls served me—using blue tack to stick laminated cutouts of scoops together—I handed the money to her classmate.

With a determined expression reminiscent of the boys in the mud with their shovels, the young cashier stared at the price list. After a long pause, one of her teachers—perhaps sensing a good opportunity to step in—helped her calculate the difference between the price of my order and the 10€. Once I received my change (a few plastic coins), the girls giggled as I pretended to lick my ice cream.

Throughout the morning I noticed that the kindergartners played in two different ways: One was spontaneous and free form (like the boys building dams), while the other was more guided and pedagogical (like the girls selling ice cream).

In fact, Finland requires its kindergarten teachers to offer playful learning opportunities—including both kinds of play—to every kindergartner on a regular basis, according to Arja-Sisko Holappa, a

counselor for the Finnish National Board of Education. What's more, Holappa, who also leads the development of the country's pre-primary core curriculum, said that play is being emphasized more than ever in latest version of that curriculum, which goes into effect in kindergartens next fall.

"Play is a very efficient way of learning for children," she told me. "And we can use it in a way that children will learn with joy."

The word "joy" caught me off guard—I'm certainly not used to hearing the word in conversations about education in America, where I received my training and taught for several years. But Holappa, detecting my surprise, reiterated that the country's early-childhood education program indeed places a heavy emphasis on "joy," which along with play is explicitly written into the curriculum as a learning concept. "There's an old Finnish saying," Holappa said. "Those things you learn without joy you will forget easily."

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After two hours of visiting a Finnish kindergarten, I still hadn't seen children reading. I was, however, hearing a lot of pre-literacy instruction sprinkled throughout the morning—clapping out syllables and rhyming in Morning Circle, for example. I recalled learning in my master's degree courses in education that building phonemic awareness—an ability to recognize sounds without involving written language—was viewed as the groundwork of literacy development.

Just before lunch, a kindergarten teacher took out a basket brimming with children's books. But for these 5- and 6-year-olds, "reading" looked just like how my two toddlers approach their books: The kindergartners, sitting in different corners of the room, flipped through pages, savoring the pictures but, for the most part, not actually deciphering the words. Osei Ntiamoah told me that just one of the 15 students in her class can currently read syllable by syllable. Many of them, she added, will read by the end of the year. "We don't push them but they learn just because they are ready for it. If the child is willing and interested, we will help the child."

There was a time in Finland—in the not so distant past—when kindergarten teachers weren't even allowed to teach reading. This was viewed as the job of the first-grade teacher. But, as with America, things have changed: Nowadays, Finnish teachers are free to teach reading if they determine a child is—just as Osei Ntiamoah put it—“willing and interested” to learn.

Throughout Finland, kindergarten teachers and parents meet during the fall to make an individualized learning plan, shaped by each child's interests and levels of readiness, which could include the goal of learning how to read. For Finnish kindergartners who seem primed for reading instruction, Holappa told me it's still possible to teach them in a playful manner. She recommended the work of the Norwegian researcher Arne Trageton—a pioneer in the area of play-based literacy instruction.

Meanwhile across the Atlantic, kindergarten students like that of the Arkansas teacher are generally expected—by the end of the year—to master literacy skills that are far more complex, like reading books with two to three sentences of unpredictable text per page. “These are 5- to 6-year-olds!” the Arkansas teacher wrote in disbelief. More than 40 states—including Arkansas—have adopted the Common Core State Standards, which contain dozens of reading expectations for kindergartners. In the United States—where 22 percent of the nation's children live in poverty (more than 16 million in total)—the Common Core's emphasis on rigorous language-learning in kindergarten could be viewed as a strategy for closing the alarming “Thirty Million Word Gap” between America's rich and poor—holding schools accountable for having high expectations for their youngest students.

Furthermore, unlike the reality of teaching kindergarten in Finland where the poverty rate is 10 percent and the student-teacher ratio is typically 14:1 (based on national guidelines), most American kindergarten teachers don't have a choice whether or not they teach reading. Under the Common Core, children should be able to “read emergent-texts with purpose and understanding” by the end of

kindergarten. Ultimately, they're expected to, at the very least, be able to decode basic texts without the support of a teacher.

“But there isn't any solid evidence that shows that children who are taught to read in kindergarten have any long-term benefit from it,” Nancy Carlsson-Paige, a professor emeritus of early childhood education at Lesley University, explained in a video published by the advocacy group Defending the Early Years.

Research by Sebastian Suggate, a former Ph.D. candidate at New Zealand's University of Otago studying educational psychology, confirms Carlsson-Paige's findings. One of Suggate's studies compared children from Rudolf Steiner schools—who typically begin to read at the age of seven—with children at state-run schools in New Zealand, who start reading at the age of five. By age 11, students from the former group caught up with their peers in the latter, demonstrating equivalent reading skills.

“This research then raises the question,” he said in an interview published by the University of Otago. “If there aren't advantages to learning to read from the age of five, could there be disadvantages to starting teaching children to read earlier?”

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At the end of my visit to the Finnish kindergarten, I joined the 22 children and their two teachers for a Friday event that only happens on weeks when children are celebrating their birthdays. The birthday child that week sat at the front of the classroom in a chair facing his peers and teachers, all of whom sat in a semicircle, and a table with a candleholder to his left.

I expected the celebration to end after the lighting of candles and “Happy Birthday” song, but it didn't. One of the boy's classmates, donning a hat that looked like a beret and wearing a mail carrier's sling over his shoulder, took him by the hand, and the two proceeded to dance as we sang the Finnish children's song, “Little Boy Postman.”

Once the song was complete, the little postman took out a card and handed it to his classmate. “Would you like me to help you read this?” one of the birthday boy’s teachers asked. “You help,” he responded, a hint that hadn’t quite mastered the skill yet. I watched his face carefully, searching for any hint of shame. I found none—but then again, why should he have felt embarrassed?

The flickering six candles reminded me he’s only a little kid.

We want to hear what you think about this article. [Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com](mailto:letters@theatlantic.com).

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