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Early literacy practices and the Finnish national core curriculum

RIITTA-LIISA KORKEAMÄKI and MARIAM JEAN DREHER

In 2004 the Finnish National Board of Education launched a new curriculum framework that includes principles, instructional aims, and a brief list of content by subject areas. The intent of this framework is that teachers should interpret the core curriculum at the local level and apply it in their own schools and classrooms. This approach encourages teachers to use their professional knowledge and take into account their students and the learning environment in applying and implementing the curriculum. This case study sought to understand how this core curriculum has been implemented by way of observations of language and literacy lessons in 8 grade 1 and grade 2 classrooms during a 2-month period. The observations and the analysis were guided by earlier research conducted in classroom identified as ‘excellent’ in the US. The resulting data, in turn, were compared with the core curriculum. The findings show that, although some of the principles and the content of the core curriculum were reflected in practice, there were inconsistencies between the instructional methods used in the classrooms and the principles set in the core curriculum. Although some areas of the core curriculum were well represented in classroom language and literacy practices, others were covered only in part or not at all during the observation period.

Keywords: core curriculum; Finland; instructional methods; literacy instruction; primary education

In international comparisons Finnish students have an impressive record in reading tests. Fifteen-year-olds outperformed students in other countries in the first and second PISA assessments (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2001, 2004). In the most recent PISA, Finnish students ranked second in reading (OECD 2007). Although younger Finnish students have not participated recently in international assessments, in an earlier International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) assessment (Elley 1992), Finnish 9-year-olds showed the highest level of performance.

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There are several possible explanations for Finnish students’ success. One factor that contributes to making Finnish students so successful in reading is the national teacher-education system (Välijärvi et al. 2002). Finnish teachers are well educated. For example, to qualify as a teacher in grades 1–6, a person requires a master’s degree in education, with a thesis on pedagogical research. In addition, the practical part of teacher education integrates theory and practice by means of extensive, carefully designed field experiences administered by local universities with close school- and university-based faculty relationships. Such links between coursework and practice, and between school and university faculty, are among the characteristics of exemplary teacher-preparation programmes. In particular, the connection between theory and practice is critical to teacher education; otherwise, student-teaching dominates theoretical studies, a result that may lead to technical implementation of instruction instead of deeper understanding of learning and teaching. In Finland, entry to teacher education is highly selective; only ∼10–15% from the top cohort of the high school graduates are admitted to teacher-education programmes (Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen 2006, McKinsey and Company 2007).

Other possible factors contributing to high reading achievement include Finland’s historical commitment to learning to read on the one hand and current reading habits among the population on the other. For example, in the 18th century only people able to read the catechism were allowed to marry and take part in the Holy Communion (Kotkaheimo 1989, Markkola 2007). Contemporary Finland is ‘a reading nation’. Finns’ subscriptions to, and reading of, newspapers are at an exceptionally high level internationally (Sauri 2007). Finns use libraries more frequently than any other nation in the EU (Eurostat 2002).

Nevertheless, even with high-ranked performance on international tests, Finnish authorities are not satisfied. Analyses of OECD results reveal weaknesses in Finnish students’ performance. For example, the OECD data indicate that Finnish students’ scores on reflective reading did not reach the same level as their performance on more narrow reading-comprehension tasks. Specifically, Finnish students were not as competent in interpreting, questioning, evaluating, and making arguments as they were in finding information and comprehending reading. Finnish students were also relatively weak in expressing their own opinions and/or their opinions were often not well grounded (Linnakylä and Sulkunen 2005).

National evaluations of literacy achievement have also identified areas in which Finnish students are performing at less than optimal levels. For example, an evaluation of grade 6 students indicated that, whereas most students were rated at least ‘satisfactory’ on reading performance, 6% were rated ‘fair’ and another 8% were rated as ‘poor’. Overall, 22% of students performed poorly on writing, with a third of the boys weak in writing skills. In language performance, 15% of students performed poorly (Lappalainen 2003). Similarly, a Finnish National Board of Education assessment (Huisman 2006) of beginning grade 3 students’ performance on reading comprehension, writing, and language proficiency showed that, on average, girls performed at satisfactory levels in all three areas, whereas boys were satisfactory in reading but less than satisfactory in writing and language.
proficiency. However, girls’ average reading scores, even though satisfactory, were only at 69% of maximum, and boys at 66%. In addition, although girls had a positive attitude towards reading, boys were decidedly more negative.

Both international and national results indicate that there is room for improvement in students’ literacy performance. In addition, the demands of reading in modern society require flexible reading skills that can be applied widely in different contexts, not just the ability to comprehend texts literally (Linnakylä and Sulkunen 2005). To remediate weaknesses and meet new demands, Finland has engaged in a regular renewal of its national curricula. Recent reform efforts have included establishing a new pre-school level (age 6) and designing its curriculum (National Board of Education 2000) as well as revising the curriculum for grades 1–9 (National Board of Education 2004) and high school (National Board of Education 2003).

For example, in the new national core curriculum for grades 1–9 (National Board of Education 2004), Finland sought to create an instrument for teachers that would help students to achieve at even higher levels and be better prepared for current demands. This core curriculum for grades 1–9 advocates versatile working methods, with a variety of texts designed to make instruction interesting for all students and to teach students skills and strategies that meet their needs. As we describe below, beginning in grade 1, this core curriculum promotes purposeful learning in which children are problem-solvers and active participants in their own learning.

However, few research studies have been conducted on literacy practices in Finnish classrooms, and little information is available on how successfully teachers are able to interpret the core curriculum and implement it in their classrooms. If curricular reform is to be successful, then it is important to determine how the core curriculum is interpreted and implemented.

In this paper, we examine classroom practices in the early grades in Finland. We focused on grades 1 and 2 because the path to success starts very early in schooling (McKinsey and Company 2007). Therefore, the teachers of young students should have firm knowledge of early literacy and methods for teaching it. Furthermore, as we explain below, the demanding nature of Finland’s recently-adopted primary-school core curriculum makes early literacy instruction a particular concern.

**Background**

*The core curriculum*

In 2004 Finland adopted a new core curriculum for the comprehensive school, that is, grades 1–9 (National Board of Education 2004). This curriculum is intended to be the basis for instruction in schools, and teachers are to implement it in a way that is appropriate for local circumstances and their students. To clarify the context of our study, we summarize the content of this core curriculum, with a particular focus on grades 1 and 2 (7- and 8-year-olds).
The primary-school core curriculum begins with a general introduction to its principles. It then lists objectives for the curriculum and the content for achieving those objectives. Furthermore, there is a description of what constitutes good performance at the end of grade 2. The curriculum describes the concept of learning, learning environment, and students’ working methods. It advocates a concept of learning in which students are active participants in their own learning, both individually and socially. Students should be problem-solvers and, with teacher guidance, construct new knowledge, based on their prior knowledge, in interaction with their peers. Learning should be purposeful and goal-oriented. In constructing knowledge, the learning environment plays a central role: it should promote students’ curiosity, interest, and motivation. The physical environment includes materials, working tools, instructional materials, and library services, all of which should be used to provide diverse study approaches and encourage students’ active engagement.

The curriculum integrates principles for students’ working methods with the concept of learning and learning environment. Although the focus is on children’s own exploration and the use of drama, the teacher’s role in teaching and selecting appropriate working methods is also emphasized. However, those methods are not explicitly stated; the teachers must induce methods from general descriptions of the learning concept and learning environment.

The core curriculum provides objectives and a list of the content to be covered in each subject area. For the subject ‘mother tongue and literature’, the guiding principle is that students in grade 1 should build on what they have learned in pre-school or at home. Because children have different educational backgrounds, the instruction should take into account their different levels of learning. The objectives reflect this principle: ‘The pupils’ interaction skills will increase’; ‘the pupils’ reading and writing skills will develop’; and ‘the pupils’ relationship with literature and language will take shape’ (National Board of Education 2004). For each of these objectives, more specific objectives are specified, such as: students’ interaction skills should develop so that they ‘learn to ask and answer questions’; students ‘learn the basic skills of reading and writing’ and ‘conventions of written text’ as well as how to monitor their reading and writing; and students ‘become acquainted with the written form of language through listening and reading’, thereby increasing their vocabulary, expression, and imagination, and learning to choose interesting books at appropriate reading levels. (See the Appendix for a complete list of objectives.)

The content of ‘mother tongue and literature’ is also described as a listing (see Appendix). The list of content is neither detailed nor complete, and leaves the grades 1 and 2 teachers to structure the content according to the situation and level of students’ learning. This curriculum approach, although interesting, is demanding for teachers, as suggested by Alvestad (2001) and documented by Korkeamäki and Dreher (2002) in a pre-school context. In comparative terms, the Finnish core curriculum is evidently one of the least prescriptive curricula (McKinsey and Company 2007); it provides teachers with an opportunity to take into account their own classroom context and the children they work with. It treats the process of
implementing curriculum as equal in value to creating the document that forms the basis for the implementation.³

Teaching practices that follow from the core curriculum

One could posit that practices based on the Finnish core curriculum would have features in common with the classrooms described by Morrow et al. (1999) in a study of six ‘excellent’ teachers’ classrooms in the US. In these classrooms, children were engaged with their peers in activities in literacy-rich environments. The teachers offered varied opportunities for reading, such as individual reading, partner-reading, and guided reading in groups, as well as for listening to teacher reading aloud of high-quality children’s literature. The teachers also explicitly connected their instruction to particular contexts. Children wrote daily and extensively in journals or on interesting topics connected to the content areas or to such children’s experiences as movies they had seen. As a result of good management, there was an encouraging atmosphere in these classrooms.

Similar characteristics in high-quality classrooms have been found in other studies.⁴ Typically, in these high-quality classrooms, teachers have been shown to create a secure and positive atmosphere that precludes discipline problems. The teachers use a variety of teaching approaches, all of which involve scaffolding students’ learning by giving them support until they can apply what they have learned independently. Instruction in these classrooms is also characterized by a high degree of engagement, which meant that 90% of the students were involved in assigned activities 90% of the time. Pressley et al. (2001) concluded that effective teachers did not follow any prescribed instructional perspective; they combined practices that worked well in their own classrooms.

Bohn et al. (2004) found that similar characteristics were present from the very beginning of grade 1 in the classrooms of the effective teachers they observed. These teachers, for example, encouraged students’ self-regulation by asking them to take responsibility for their own behaviours while searching independently for answers to questions. In contrast, Bohn et al. noted that the less effective teachers they observed expected their students to follow strict rules in a ‘robot-like’ manner. Consequently, there were no activities such as searching independently for answers. In fact, effective teachers encouraged practices that reflected inquiry-based instruction, one of the aims in the Finnish core curriculum. Moreover, the core curriculum recommends that teachers should be researchers of their own work in order to find the best practices demanded by their own educational context and students (Westbury et al. 2005).⁵

The Hay McBer (2001) investigation of effective teaching in the UK documented similar practices. However, they also vigorously advocated highly structured learning environments, with teacher-led instruction. Equally important were such matters as the role of regular homework, a variety of teaching activities and questioning techniques—which allow monitoring of students’ understanding of the content—and the teachers’ ability to apply the methods of the national curriculum. Although Hay
McBer’s findings coincide partially with the findings of research described above, they more closely focus on teacher-directed instruction. However, they also noted that what is appropriate in one environment, in certain circumstances with particular students, is not necessarily appropriate to other contexts.

Similarly, the Finnish core curriculum recognizes that there is not just one way of establishing a good learning environment. The core curriculum allows teachers to use their professional judgement to match the curriculum in the classrooms with their context, which may be a strength in a country in which a teacher-as-researcher approach is emphasized. However, it also leaves room for unsatisfactory interpretation of the curriculum. Kansanen (2004) stated that, because the core curriculum is permissive, it leaves plenty of room for uneven interpretation.

Research on Finnish literacy instruction before and after the new core curriculum

The core curriculum is intended to lead to exemplary practice by setting out principles and objectives, and encouraging teachers to use it as the basis for implementing a classroom curriculum that meets children’s needs. In this study, we attempt to find out what kind of instruction occurs in classrooms, and whether the instruction reflects the principles and objectives laid out in the core curriculum.

However, what is already known about Finnish literacy instruction before and after the core curriculum? Such information is important for putting our findings in context and for understanding such larger issues as why Finnish reading achievement has been so impressive in international comparisons. Because this study deals with grades 1 and 2, we focus our review on the early grades.

Several studies have shown that, in general, instruction in Finland has been teacher-directed, using traditional instructional methods with textbooks. Literacy instruction in grade 1 has traditionally been based on textbooks that follow a phonics drill approach. For approximately half the textbook, the approach includes practising letter-sound correspondences and meaningless syllable drills, with emphasis on spelling and handwriting. Decoding practice continues with more meaningful content for the remainder of the textbook. These are whole-group activities with an emphasis on a teacher’s involvement and control. Although a child-centred pedagogy is the norm in kindergarten (ages 2–5, and until recently through age 6, now pre-school), beginning with grade 1 (at age 7) pedagogy has traditionally been teacher-centred and subject-based (see Haring 2003). Consequently, the instruction in grade 1 classrooms has focused on decoding and has left limited space and time for such activities as play and drama or children’s literature.

Because the current core curriculum is relatively new, little research is available on instruction since it went into effect. However, in a study currently under way, preliminary findings indicate that changes in grades 1 and 2 reading textbooks, exercise books, and teachers’ guides have
been minor (Korkeamäki and Dreher in progress). Because the earlier research, reviewed above, indicates that textbooks appear to drive practice, these results suggest few changes in early reading instruction. In addition, some surveys have been conducted. Huisman (2006) and Atjonen et al. (2008) reported that teachers viewed the core curriculum as a satisfactory basis for instruction but they thought that its objectives are quite demanding.

Huisman (2006) surveyed 357 grade 2 teachers who evaluated their own instructional practices by means of a questionnaire. When these teachers were surveyed, the core curriculum had been in effect for a year. The phenomena investigated in the questionnaire included the following: students practise spelling and learn to write complete sentences and the features of the Finnish language; students practise basic reading technique (decoding+fluency); students practise basic writing techniques; students listen to, read, and discuss different types of text; students are guided to use the library and choose texts on their reading level; students write texts about different types of situations; students learn concepts of different types of texts and literature; students discuss the texts they have read; and students deal with the texts by improvising, retelling, playing, and using drama. Huisman found that the teachers most commonly reported using tasks connected to textbooks and exercise books. In fact, the most commonly reported instruction was practising basic writing and reading techniques. Less common practices were improvisation, retelling, play and drama, as well as discussions about texts and literature. For example, 41% of the teachers reported that they very often concentrated on practising correct spelling and writing complete sentences, and 46% reported that they very often focused on basic reading techniques. In contrast, only 5% reported having students discuss the texts they read or having students improvise, retell, play, or using drama to elaborate texts. Only 23% reported having students listen to or discuss texts very often, while the figure for guiding library use was 20%, writing about different situations 11%, and using the context of different types of texts to learn concepts from them 3%.

Atjonen et al. (2008) studied the implementation of the core curriculum in grade 4 using questionnaire responses from 230 principals and 362 teachers. The researchers found that, although teachers viewed the core curriculum as an important guiding instrument, they reported practices that did not reflect having implemented it. For example, teachers reported that using a variety of instructional methods was important, and yet they reported daily use of a textbook. Similarly, their responses also indicated that they were teacher-directed in their instruction, although there were also some signs of movement to student-centred instruction.

However, both the studies of Huisman (2006) and Atjonen et al. (2008) are based on teachers’ reports, not on documentation of actual classroom practices. Similarly, although Huisman’s (2006) survey sheds some light on what was happening in literacy instruction in Finnish grade 2 classrooms soon after the core curriculum was in effect, it may have been too early for teachers to have changed their instruction according to the core curriculum. Thus, the purposes of our study were:
to determine what kind of literacy instruction took place in grades 1 and 2 in one Finnish school; and

- to find out how the teachers were able to interpret the core curriculum and implement it into their classrooms.

We attempted to determine the strengths and weaknesses in their instruction in relation to the core curriculum with the long-term goal of helping the teachers in their professional development.

**Research methods**

Our investigation is a case study of one Finnish school in 2006. We see our study as an intrinsic case study as defined by Stake (1994). The school is specific because it is a new school, bigger than any other school in the city in which the study took place. Located in a new suburb, the school includes children from kindergarten to secondary school. The vice-principal, who is responsible for the pedagogical development of the school curriculum, invited university researchers to help in her task through research and in-service training. The study reported here is the first step in this endeavour and in our research process which can be characterized as a type of action research. Therefore, this study is part of the process of trying to learn and understand what is happening in classrooms and to reflect on the practices in relation to the principles in the core curriculum with the vice principal and the teachers (see Stake 1994).

This study involved data from 44 pre-service teachers’ observations. The pre-service teachers were graduate students pursuing a master’s degree. At this phase, they already had considerable experience in working in classrooms. The observations took place in 8 grade 1 classrooms, 3 grade 2 classrooms, and one combined grades 1/2 classroom. Two of the 12 teachers who were observed were male. Only a quarter of the teachers had a permanent (analogous to tenured in the US) job in the school; the others held either substitute or temporary (untenured) status. They were young teachers: the least experienced teacher was in the first year of her career while the oldest had ~ 10 years of experience (the average age of the teaching staff of the school was just below 35 years).

Observations were conducted by groups of two-to-four pre-service teachers. Each group observed 5 lessons in the same classroom over the course of a semester, including one whole day. Groups visited the classrooms over several days, depending on their schedule of other courses. Observations occurred throughout February and March 2006. Having multiple observers in each classroom allowed us to cross-check observations. In addition, we engaged in member-checking, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), by presenting our findings to the teachers who were observed in order to determine their views on the accuracy of our interpretation of their teaching. The first author conducted member-checks by presenting the results in a PowerPoint presentation during which the teachers responded to each slide. The presentation was audiotaped and a colleague made notes.
Observations were part of the pre-service teachers' literacy course. The course also included consideration of the national core curriculum, so the pre-service teachers had some knowledge of it. However, they were guided to enter the classrooms with open minds and observe as carefully as possible both the activities and classroom discourse (e.g. by jotting down the dialogues in the classroom). To make the observations manageable and to gather impartial data from each classroom, the pre-service teachers were asked to observe the following elements of the classroom instruction:

- the structure of the lesson;
- the methods and materials used for literacy lessons;
- content of the lesson;
- students’ engagement and motivation;
- social interaction;
- physical environment (grouping of children, literacy environment such as texts on the wall and classroom library);
- general atmosphere in the classroom; and
- the use of teachable moments.

These categories were found to be important when investigating the best literacy practice in schools in the US (see Morrow et al. 1999, Tracey and Morrow 2002). The observers also noted the sequence of the lessons, including dialogue and the timing of activities.

In practice, the observations took place in the following way. The pre-service teachers took notes as they observed, and compared notes after each observation period (a lesson or a day). In doing so, it was possible both to finalize incomplete notes (especially the wording of dialogue), and to correct misheard words. At least one of the students in a group then typed the notes. In some cases, 2 students in a group typed the lesson observations independently, which made it possible to cross-check the notes. In the data-analysis sub-section, we present an example of how the dialogue was captured in the notes.

The pre-service teachers were asked both to follow the course of the lessons and to indicate the duration of each activity. Thus, they marked the time when the activity started and, when it changed to some other activity, it was marked accordingly. Even when the activity remained constant but the teacher changed his or her behaviour, that change was indicated. The following extract singles out time information in order to provide an example of how the duration of activities was recorded:

8.24: The teacher arrives in the classroom and asks the students to take textbooks and read in pairs.
8.29: Circle discussion about the story read before.
8.39: Pair-reading.
8.45: Circle discussion about the story read in pairs.
8.56: Independent work with exercise books.
9.00: Teacher circulates and asks questions.
9.04: Students work very quietly.
9.08: Teacher gives extra work for some of the students.
9.13: Teacher gives home work.\(^\text{11}\)(Observer’s notes, 2 March, 5: 7, 8, 9)
Data analysis

The analysis started with numbering the observational notes. Analysis followed as the data was read carefully, simultaneously highlighting, underlining, and making notes in the margins. Therefore, the data were analysed by using deductive content analysis (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2002). The categories were similar to the guidelines for the observations (see the categories above). The unit of analysis varied from a word to a sentence to an entire dialogue, depending on the meaning unit. For example, the unit of analysis for physical environment was a word such as ‘alphabet’ or a phrase such as ‘The students’ desks were organized into four groups, six students in each group’ (group setting). For the category of social interaction, the unit was either a phrase or a dialogue. In some cases, an entire recorded dialogue was the unit of analysis; this situation occurred when the entire dialogue needed to be examined in order to determine all the participants and the direction of the discussion (that is, whether the discussion went from teacher to student/s and back, or from student to student). The next example demonstrates such a unit of analysis:

Teacher: Next, page 92. What is the text about? You can infer it from the picture.
Student 1: About acting.
Teacher: Who are the main characters?
Student 2: Eemu, Aana, Iisi.
Teacher: Which play? At least the boys know it.
Student 3: Zorro.
Teacher: How do you recognize Zorro?
Student 3: He has the sword and that kind of a thing.
Teacher: How do you know who is playing Zorro?
Student 4: From the hair. (→ reduced to teacher-directed questioning).

Next, each lesson was analysed in detail by applying the techniques explained above. Table 1 gives an example of the analysis of one lesson. The analysis continued by comparing and linking the categories and their properties and finding relationships among them. Examination revealed overlap in the categories. For example, the structure of the lesson and the methods and materials used for literacy lessons were related to the students’ engagement and social interaction, and social interaction was related to the atmosphere of the classroom at a given event. Despite the overlap, we found it useful to keep the categories separate. Each classroom analysis was compared to other class analyses to find similarities and differences.

The final step in our analysis involved comparing the findings from the observational notes to the principles of the core curriculum and the content of ‘mother tongue and literature’. First, general principles of the core curriculum were reduced to three main categories: concept of learning; learning environment; and methods. These three main categories included characteristics given in the core curriculum, as displayed in table 2. Next, the observational data relevant to the three main categories were summarized in the columns. Then the content of core curriculum and the
summaries of the observational data were compared and considered (see table 2). Finally, the content of ‘mother tongue and literature’ in the core curriculum was examined line-by-line; we marked in the margins points that were found in the data.
We report the results in two sections: the type of literacy instruction that took place in the classroom, based on the analysis of the observations; and the match between the instruction and the principles set forth in the core curriculum. Member-checking indicated that the teachers generally agreed with the findings. However, in reporting the results, we refer to information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core curriculum</th>
<th>Practices in the classrooms</th>
<th>Reflection on the core curriculum and practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concept of learning</strong></td>
<td>Mostly actively taking part in discussion, silent workbook engaged student, but not always and not for all of them; pair-reading activated well. Problem-solving according to teacher guides. Individual tasks but social completion was allowed; pair-reading was a well-received social activity.</td>
<td>Although there was no loitering in the classrooms and the students took part in activities, the practices did not allow students to be engaged in long-term project work and solve their own problems collaboratively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Active learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Problem-solving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Individual and social purposeful</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning environment</strong></td>
<td>New environment but crowded, no place for reading corners or drama etc. but places for pair-reading were found outside the classrooms. Most classrooms were organized into groups. Textbooks and workbooks frequently used, modest or no classroom library. In most classrooms the atmosphere was relaxed but in two of them there were management problem. Public library in use: The students had a book borrowed from the library in their desks but not used during the observations.</td>
<td>The classroom organization did not lead to students working more collaboratively. Place was missing for freer activities or the space outside classrooms was not yet functioning as planned. The requirement for using library services was fulfilled but only partially. The unused library books in the desks may indicate that time used with textbooks and workbooks is valued more than free reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• promotes motivation and interest</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• physical environment includes materials, working tools and library services which provide diverse study methods for students’ active engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• relaxed atmosphere</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Methods</strong></td>
<td>Students own exploration was limited to independent work. Drama was very rarely used and, when used, only for short periods of the lesson. Play was limited to using games and didactic play. Mostly teacher-directed questioning and student independent work with text and workbooks. Variety of ways of reading the textbooks (e.g. paired reading, reader’s theatre, reading alone).</td>
<td>Methods were not diverse but rather limited to teacher-directed questioning and silent paperwork. Freer activities were missing almost completely. Several techniques used only for practising reading aloud.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• students’ own explorations and drama</td>
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<td>• the strong role of the teacher as an instructor</td>
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<td>• diverse study methods</td>
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from member-checking whenever there was a difference between the data and the teachers’ views or when teachers offered an explanation for a finding.

**What kind of literacy instruction took place in Finnish grade 1 and grade 2 classrooms?**

Our analysis revealed classroom arrangements, materials, and the classroom library as important contexts for instruction during the observational period. The classrooms were crowded because there were more students than the classrooms had been designed for. Only one classroom had space reserved for morning circles, and only one classroom had a reading corner. In one classroom the desks were organized in rows; but in all others the desks were organized so that children sat in groups, in pairs, or in a circle. In three grade 1 classrooms, there was some version of ability grouping based on students’ reading performance. This grouping was not permanent; the arrangement was changed frequently.

The display of classroom materials was very limited. All the classrooms displayed the alphabet and numbers, a calendar, and students’ names. Almost every classroom had labels showing places for materials. Children’s art-work was also labelled. Two classrooms displayed rules for sorting garbage, one had rules for behaviour, and one classroom had a poem. Interestingly, only one classroom had labels attached to pictures on a theme being studied. None of the classrooms had students’ writing on the walls, such as stories or students’ reports on a project.

It is important to note here that the larger culture shapes the school culture. Finns prefer simplicity and avoid clutter. Therefore, the classroom interiors differ from classrooms in such countries as the US. Similarly, it is customary to write in exercise books or workbooks, not on separate pieces of paper. Exercise books, in turn, are difficult to display on the walls. However, student work from projects on themes is typically displayed either in the classrooms or in some other location in the school.

The size of classroom libraries varied according to the teacher, but generally they were meagre. The largest library included 89 books; the smallest very few. The largest classroom library consisted of the teacher’s own books and those she had borrowed from a public library; it also included children’s magazines and issues of a prestigious magazine for adults. There was one other similar classroom library in another classroom. Although the classroom libraries were negligible, the students typically had a book from a public library to read when they did not have anything else to do. A library bus visited the school weekly because the public library was not within walking distance.

Every classroom had reading textbooks and workbooks in use. Teachers’ guides corresponding to textbooks were widely used. In addition, handouts were also common. These materials guided the instruction, as reported below.

The social environment and school climate were closely connected to the classroom arrangement and teaching methods. The classroom atmosphere,
in turn, was connected to classroom management which was generally orderly; the classroom climate was relaxed, encouraging, and friendly. In most classrooms, teachers encouraged students to help one another in their groups. If a student needed help while the teacher was busy with another student, the teacher typically said something like: 'Would you please tell Erika how to ...?' In most classrooms, during their seat-work, students discussed their own matters quietly and did not disturb students in nearby groups. However, the data did not reveal collaborative work following problem-solving assigned by the teachers. Rather the seat-work and tasks occasionally afforded opportunities for peer discussions and help for those who needed it.

In two grade 1 classrooms, the teachers experienced difficulties in classroom management. However, in many classrooms, one or two individual students demonstrated off-task behaviour. During member-checking, one teacher explained that a rationale for using textbooks and workbooks was that the students concentrated best while working with workbooks. Indeed, in a few classrooms (but by no means all), there was quite a chaotic atmosphere during a thematic unit on newspapers. The data show that the students were inexperienced in working with newspapers and the teachers gave vague instructions for the tasks and used terms that were unfamiliar to students.15

During the observational period, the instruction in all grade 1 and 2 classrooms was based on reading textbooks and their teachers' guides, except during the thematic unit on newspapers. Thus, the reading materials were the stories in these books rather than children’s literature, and student writing consisted of filling in empty spots for letters, syllables, and words in exercise books. The period of teaching letters and sounds one-by-one had already been completed at the time of the observations; instead, the focus was on long vowels and double consonants to ensure the correct spelling (which was done by teaching the syllabification of the words). Dictation was used to assess students’ spelling, a practice similar to US spelling tests. The content of lessons also included practising sentence formation, punctuation, compound words, and parts of speech. These components were practised orally with the whole group and individually as silent seat-work.

All these activities are typically given in the guidelines in the teachers’ guides. Accordingly, both the content and the method of lessons usually followed the prescriptions of the textbook authors instead of those of the teachers in the classrooms. As a result, few opportunities were provided for students’ spontaneous interests, activities, or questions on the content. The data revealed only brief instances of spontaneous lessons, such as when a problem in spelling led to a short instructional moment on that difficulty.

The lessons were typically teacher-directed, whole-group work using teacher questioning, followed by independent work in small groups during which students were allowed to discuss the content and help each other. In general, the lessons had many goals, and to achieve those goals several short activities were needed. As a result, the lessons appeared fragmented, as the following extract demonstrates:
Practising how to browse text (teacher reads the first two words of a sentence and students should find the rest): 4 minutes.
Checking homework from handouts: answering reading comprehension questions: 6 minutes.
Pantomimes: 4 minutes.
The teacher introduces a new story from the textbook: 4 minutes.
Discussion about playing to activate students’ background knowledge: 5 minutes.
Reading the story in pairs: 10 minutes.
Retelling the story: 3 minutes.
Working with workbooks: reading comprehension tasks: 5 minutes.
Discussion about a play the students were going to see: 5 minutes.
(Observer’s notes, 21 March, 18: 1, 2, 3, 4)

Reading aloud with the whole group was sometimes used to practise reading. In whole-group reading situations, students took turns reading a few sentences at a time. However, more frequently, students read in pairs, as they did in Extract 1. They were allowed to choose the place for their reading, even in the hall where there were tables, chairs, and small sofas. This activity was observed to be very successful and goal-oriented, although the teachers were not able to monitor each pair’s reading as strictly as in the classroom during round-robin reading. The students negotiated their turns to read more than one sentence at a time. Extract 2 shows an example:

**Extract 2**

*Student 1:* Let’s read together.

*Student 2:* No, let’s not read. I’ll read the whole page first by myself and then you read it alone. (Student 1 agrees and they read so.)

*Student 1:* Now let’s take turns, I’ll read this line first, then you that one and I this one.

*Student 2:* Yes, let’s do that. (Observer’s notes, 21 March, 10: 8)

If the time allowed, students read the text through several times by changing the method or the roles in their reading, as seen in the example in Extract 2. As can be seen from the extract, the students’ agreement was not taken for granted; they negotiated and found ways that pleased both students. Observations showed that students stayed on task and did not misuse time in pair-reading, suggesting that pair-reading was an effective way of practising fluency because it gave each student more time than the round-robin technique. At the same time, pair-reading also provided opportunities for peer interaction and negotiations without a teacher’s input. Although not in the instance shown in Extract 2, teachers usually asked comprehension questions related to the story after the students had completed their reading in pairs. In a less typical lesson than the one summarized in Extract 1, drama, puppet theatre, and improvisation were used in one portion of a lesson. Similarly, in other atypical lessons, the students wrote responses related to the theme or to the story they had read according to each student’s ability and motivation. In one classroom, students regularly kept logs. Some
students were very enthusiastic about writing in their logs, but some found it difficult to know what to write.

As noted earlier, during the observation period, one thematic unit—on newspapers—took place in all classrooms. During this unit, the working methods were very different. For example, teachers read the news aloud, although reading aloud was not otherwise a daily activity during the observations. The students read newspapers based on their own choice while they were flipping the pages and cutting pictures for their notebooks. Students’ reading was limited to headings and captions. As they did when working with their reading workbooks, students completed their tasks independently, each of them having their own newspaper instead of working collaboratively. However, they talked—quite loudly—to their peers in the group while working.

The newspaper theme was well organized in some classrooms, especially in one classroom in which the data showed that students were engaged and on-task in general. Their teacher talked to the students gently. For the newspaper theme, the teacher explained the objective of making their own newspaper based on the local paper. The students knew what to do and why.

Students’ engagement depended on the situation, the tasks, and the number of students present in the class. (The teachers have the opportunity to group students flexibly, which means that all students are not always present in the classroom.) Also students had different preferences; for example, as noted above, some liked journal-writing and some did not. Although it seemed that students concentrated when they were working with workbooks, the following comments noted from children show that it was not always the case: ‘I will give up’; ‘I can’t take it any longer’; ‘I don’t understand this’; ‘I’m not interested in this’ (Observer’s notes, 31 March, 17: 20). Some students got bored and some did not understand the directions given in the workbooks. However, in general, students worked hard and mostly participated by raising their hands when the teachers asked questions. The data showed that the more often the activity involved students’ own input, such as using their imagination or experience, the more they were engaged. For example, on Mondays—in some classes, every morning—students participated in discussion about their ‘news’; although the discussion was teacher-directed and the interaction took place more between the teacher and students than among the students, the students were very engaged.

Homework played an important role in the classrooms. Students had to read the text practised at school to their parents who were expected to sign it. Tasks from exercise books were also assigned as homework. The teachers then checked the homework. If the students failed to complete their work at home, there were required to do so in an after-school hour.

In summary, although the instruction was very similar in all the observed classrooms, there were slight differences. In general, reading textbooks and workbooks, with their accompanying teachers’ guides, played a significant role in the observed practices. Instruction was teacher-directed, but students sat in groups and in most classrooms they were encouraged to help each other. There was more variation in reading than writing practices. Student engagement depended on the activities, and the classroom management was adequate most of the time.
How do the classroom practices reflect the principles of the core curriculum?

In general, our analyses, presented in table 2, indicated that what was observed during the 2-month period did not correspond to the national core curriculum’s principle of students’ active participation in interaction with their peers in an encouraging learning environment. The main problem was the teacher-directed approach to instruction and the frequent use of the reading textbooks with the teachers’ guides. Most students took an active part in lessons by raising their hands, concentrating on the tasks, reading in pairs, and helping each other. However, because teachers followed the teachers’ guides, there was no opportunity for spontaneous changes according to students’ interests, reactions, and questions, as would be expected from the national core curriculum.

The rigid structure in lessons did not allow much time for reflective discussions or for expressive oral and written work. The data indicated that activities such as drama were rarely used and, when it was, only for a few minutes. Lack of such activity does not coincide with the idea in the curriculum of improvisation, narration, play, and drama. Furthermore, the data showed that the discussions were one-sided interactions: answering the teacher’s questions or students talking to the teacher. In contrast, the core curriculum emphasizes oral and written expression in different situations, and one-to-one, small-group, and class discussion (see Appendix).

The reading textbooks used in the classes were based on fiction, and provided a comprehensive set of plans organized around a main story (beginning in the fall and continuing to the end of the term), with new events and activities springing from this main story line. Plans include such items as stories in the teacher’s manual to be read aloud to the students and short stories with illustrations in the students’ books for students’ reading. All the activities, even teachers’ questions, were related to the main story. Consequently, the textbooks provided a ready-made theme which the teachers duly followed, without making room for the students’ own themes or projects based on their interests and motivation, as suggested in the core curriculum. Because teachers followed the textbooks and related workbooks, problem-solving and writing were also limited to workbook-level tasks instead of the solution of more genuine problems that children might have encountered if they had been reading, for example, children’s literature, websites, or other sources of information. Because the textbooks consist of fiction, the variety of genres listed in the core curriculum received little attention.

It was evident that teachers focused on reading rather than on writing instruction. For example, there were very few opportunities for students to engage in writing, and if there was an opportunity to write, some students struggled with it. There was no instruction on strategies for free writing during the observed period. However, in one classroom the students regularly kept logs.

The core curriculum emphasizes that students should experience the joy of creating and that the content should come from a variety of sources such as the students’ own experiences (as noted, one teacher had children keep
logs), observation, opinions, or imagination. The core curriculum also states that students should develop their reading and writing skills by using information and communications technology. According to the core curriculum, these students’ electronic or printed texts—as well as texts produced by others—should be discussed in groups. However, sharing students’ compositions was not a common activity.

Although our data revealed several shortcomings in the practices when compared with the core curriculum, there were also data that confirmed that parts of the content of the core curriculum were very well covered. In particular, the content dealing with language awareness, such as letter-sound correspondence, word, syllable, sentence, and punctuation, was frequently addressed according to teachers’ guides. Children’s responses made it clear that the basic letter-sound relationship and decoding had been gained before the data-gathering period started. Therefore, the instruction concentrated on teaching the spelling of long vowels and double consonants.

There were also several activities for improving students’ reading comprehension of the stories and extending students’ vocabulary. However, the reading-comprehension instruction consisted mostly of teachers asking comprehension questions, not explicit instruction on how to examine the text and pictures. These questions were available in the teachers’ guides, as were the suggestions for activities of vocabulary instruction. The observations also showed that practising handwriting was common in both grades 1 and 2. Not only is handwriting practice in grades 1 and 2 a Finnish tradition, this practice matches the list of the content of the curriculum (see Appendix).

As already noted, classroom libraries were inadequate. Interestingly, although the name of the subject is ‘mother tongue and literature’ and one category in the core curriculum has been named as ‘literature and language’, the core curriculum does not mention classroom libraries. Instead, the core curriculum encourages teachers to teach students how to use the public library and how to choose books appropriate to their reading level. Although students had a book in their desks, there was no observation of students spending time reading the books or sharing their reading with their peers and teachers.

In addition, it is important to note that reading and the use the public libraries have long been strong in the Finnish culture. Therefore, the core curriculum states that the use of the public library and selecting appropriate books must be included in the school practices. However, the lack of comprehensive school libraries hinders effective project work and other such undertakings (Linnakylä and Sulkunen 2005).

Our findings are two-fold: on one hand, they confirm that some principles and content of the core curriculum were reflected in practice, and, on the other hand, that several of the practices seen in these classrooms can be criticized in light of the core curriculum. This means that there was not a close correspondence of instructional methods used in the classrooms and the principles set in the core curriculum; some content areas of language and literacy were well represented according to the core curriculum, but many were covered only partially or not at all.
Discussion

Our results revealed that the instruction in the school did not correspond fully with the requirements of the core curriculum. There were two types of shortcomings: those in the working methods, and those in the content covered during the observation period. The working methods used in the classrooms very rarely led to students’ collaborative problem-solving or to dialogues with students discussing and commenting on each other’s ideas and opinions. Instead, the students worked frequently with workbooks connected to reading textbooks. This finding contrasts with the instruction observed taking place in high-quality classrooms. In fact, students in studies of high-quality classrooms were not observed to work with workbooks at all; instead concepts, skills, and vocabulary were taught in the context of a variety of reading material and children’s literature.

The observed instruction was very much connected to reading textbooks, workbooks, and teachers’ guides, despite the fact that these teachers were young enough to have participated in teacher education that focuses on the concept of the teacher as a researcher (see Kosunen and Mikkola 2002). Teacher-researchers should be independent from prescribed activities and apply the curriculum according to their professional skills. Furthermore, although the reading textbooks, and all the materials including the teachers’ guides, were published after the new core curriculum was in place, they appear not to reflect fully the principles of the core curriculum. For example, those materials recommended teacher-directed whole-class activities, with a preponderance of activities based on reading the text and working independently with the workbooks, and provided very few opportunities for students’ participation in creative writing, drama, and children’s literature (Korkeamäki and Dreher in progress). When commenting on the results during member-checking, teachers confirmed that they followed the teachers’ guides.

As noted above, Kansanen (2004) has contended that because the core curriculum does not explicitly state the methods, it leaves considerable room for loose interpretation. Indeed, the research reviewed earlier suggests that there is room for different interpretation of ‘excellent’ classroom practices. However, although the core curriculum leaves much to teacher expertise, certain practices do not fit well with the intent of the curriculum. For example, most lessons consisted of teacher-directed, whole-group work, followed by independent small-group work; but the core curriculum, as well the literature on best classroom practices, suggests a more active role for students in monitoring their activities and learning with the help of their peers and teacher.

Problems with implementing a national curriculum have been documented in other countries, including those with a well-educated teacher workforce. For example, Pollard et al. (1994a, b) studied the implementation in English primary schools of the highly centralized National Curriculum enacted with the 1988 Education Reform Act. They noted that ‘both the spirit of the changes provided for in the 1988 Act and the heavy-handed character of their implementation led inevitably to open hostility between Government and educational professionals’ (Pollard et al. 1994a: 2). Indeed,
Pollard et al. (1994a: 18; see also Hayes 2001) found that ‘the reforms introduced constraint and regulation into almost every area of teachers’ work’ and that the level of specificity and detail was such that teachers worried that they would become classroom technicians rather than professionals whose judgement was valued. Thus, ‘the introduction of the National Curriculum into England was seriously compromised because of the ways in which professionally committed teachers were alienated’ (Pollard et al. 1994a: 18).

In contrast, the implementation of the national core curriculum in Finland has occurred in a very different context. First, as Bennett (2005: 11) pointed out, in Finland national curricula are developed ‘on a consultative basis, and receive the critical analysis and consent of the major stakeholders before becoming statutory’. Second, as we have explained, the Finnish core curriculum is one of the least prescriptive curricula, relying on the professional judgement of teachers. Perhaps as a consequence of these two factors, teachers in our study, as well as in the work of Huisman (2006) and Atjonen et al. (2008), were positive about the core curriculum while recognizing that the objectives were quite demanding.

Hence, rather than more stringent regulations, our findings imply that these teachers need additional in-service training in interpreting the core curriculum. This is likely to be the case with other schools as well (see Karikoski and Korkeamäki 2006). The findings also highlight the challenge for a teacher-education approach that focuses on inquiry-based teaching. Although the inquiry-based approach reflects the principles of the core curriculum, it has not been successfully implemented in the school we studied. As Alvestad (2001) noted, this type of curriculum requires much from teachers. A curriculum such as Finland’s requires extensive professional knowledge of both content and pedagogy, particularly if teachers are to feel empowered to move away from prescriptions in instructional guides (see Grundy 1987). The requirement of professional knowledge is very important in the light of the research which has shown that traditions, such as teacher-directed, subject-based instruction, are very persistent (Lauriala 2004). Our data suggest that there is a mismatch between the practices in the observed school and the national core curriculum. In the classrooms we observed, students are typically not offered opportunities for sharing their ideas, thinking critically, and responding by presenting an appropriate argument to support their opinion.

Although our purpose was to study practices at one school, the question arises as to whether the practices we observed are similar to those in other Finnish schools. If instruction in other Finnish schools is similar, including in the upper grades, it may well be one explanation of PISA results that show that the Finnish students are not as strong in reflective reading, argumentation, and critical reading as in other areas (OECD 2004). As we have noted, there is not an extensive body of research on literacy practices in Finnish classrooms, and in particular very little after the most recent core curriculum was adopted. However, based on the existing work described earlier, the practices we observed appear similar to those observed or reported in other Finnish schools both before and after the current curriculum went into effect. As in our current study, for example, instruction has typically been teacher-directed with traditional instructional methods with textbooks.
Given Finland’s success in international evaluations, it is tempting to wonder whether teacher educators should leave well enough alone. Perhaps it does not matter if practice varies from the spirit of the curriculum, if performance is good. However, Finland has identified areas of performance it is not satisfied with, such as interpreting, questioning, evaluating, and making arguments. It seems likely that practices that promote these types of thinking need to start early, as the core curriculum suggests and as the research from excellent classrooms supports. To make this happen, pre-service and in-service teacher educators face the task of reviewing their courses and professional development experiences from the point of view of their effectiveness in helping teachers interpret and implement the core curriculum. Although Finnish teacher education has had the goal of educating teachers as researchers for many years (Kosunen and Mikkola 2002), this goal needs continuous development, especially with respect to integrating the theory and practice (see Westbury et al. 2005).

In helping teachers learn to work with the core curriculum, teacher educators, like the teachers themselves, face a difficult task. Even though teachers in Finland are well educated, a curriculum like Finland’s presents obstacles. Because it provides only principles and objectives, it requires not only considerable content and pedagogical knowledge, but also a significant commitment of time. Although the teachers in our study viewed the core curriculum favourably, as did those in other schools (Atjonen et al. 2008), well-educated teachers with a favourable view of the core curriculum find it challenging, even if only time constraints are considered. Indeed, the previous core curriculum (National Board of Education 1994), which was much less detailed than the current one, is judged to have failed (Norris et al. 1996, Korkeakoski 1999) because it provided so little detail. Although the current curriculum has better defined the teaching and learning concepts, it still leaves much for teachers to interpret.

The question of curricular specificity in relation to interpretation and implementation is evident in other research. For example, in the US, Pence et al. (2008) investigated how well pre-school teachers implemented a new language-rich curriculum. Within the same curriculum, one part (activity contexts) was well specified, whereas the other part (relational and instructional processes within the classroom) was much less defined, requiring a good deal of teacher interpretation in order to modify existing practices to correspond to that aspect of the curriculum. After in-service training, Pence et al. found that fidelity to the well-specified part of the curriculum was high. However, for the less specified relational and instructional processes, implementation fidelity was low, and did not differ at a statistically significant level from an untrained comparison group of teachers.

The findings of Pence et al. (2008) seem to suggest that a more detailed curriculum may be more likely to be implemented as intended, assuming that there is support for the curriculum. However, the situation is far from simple. Some curricular goals lend themselves to specificity more than others. In the study by Pence et al., one part of the curriculum was formulaic, whereas the other was a more difficult aspect to delineate because it involved much more sophisticated decision-making on the part of teachers. In the latter case, teachers needed to learn instructional processes; such
learning is complicated and closely linked to understanding of children’s thinking and learning processes. Learning instructional processes requires more time and deeper understanding. The type of sophisticated decision-making needed to accomplish such instruction does not result from following a prescribed plan. Because the Finnish core curriculum aims to have teachers be independent from prescribed activities (e.g. in a teacher’s manual or in a detailed national curriculum), detailed specifications of lesson plans or instructional activities would not accomplish the purpose. Even if some additional detail (such as sample lessons or specific guidance on working methods) were included, teachers would need to understand that these were only examples and they would need to make them their own by means of time-consuming reflection, in-service training, and practice. A critical issue would seem to be making sure that teachers understand the principles and have the content knowledge so that they can use their pedagogical knowledge to call up a repertoire of ways to achieve those principles. Because the intent of the Finnish core curriculum is for teachers to use their professional expertise, the specificity issue is inherently challenging.

Other factors may also affect the implementation of a curriculum. Westbury et al. (2005), for example, identified structured school days as a problem in applying and implementing the curriculum in the field. Teachers have many lessons to teach, with short breaks between them, which leaves very limited time for planning and reflection. However, comments during member-checking indicate that the teachers in the current study had positive attitudes toward learning from their practices and developing their instruction together with university staff.

Because their workload is heavy, it is understandable that teachers use materials that are easily available for them. Therefore, it is of crucial importance that the reading textbooks and teachers’ guides follow the principles and the content of core curriculum. This means, for example, that stories alone cannot be the context for literacy instruction; a variety of genres is needed, including information and electronic texts, in order to meet the goals of literacy instruction in the 21st century (Heilä-Ylikallio and Korkeamäki 2007, Kletzien and Dreher 2004). In addition, although publishing companies have a vested interest in workbooks, there should be clear suggestions and guidance for students’ work with real problem-solving in more authentic texts.

Limitations of the research

It may be argued that pre-service teachers, because of their very limited experience, lack credibility as observers of classroom interactions. However, as we noted above, the pre-service teachers in our study were graduate students pursuing a master’s degree who by this point in their teacher education had considerable experience in working in classrooms. In addition, all lessons were seen by two-to-four observers so that data could be cross-checked. Finally, we used member-checking to confirm our results with the teachers who were observed. In doing so, the teachers commented on areas
that they did not agree with or needed an explanation. We have noted these instances in the results.

Our findings are limited in that they were based on only one school. In addition, although there were 44 observers and more than one in every classroom, there is still a risk that the observations did not cover all aspects of the instruction because the period of observation was limited. For example, as noted earlier, no lessons were observed in which composing took place. Although all classrooms were observed on multiple occasions, only one of these observations involved a whole day. Thus, it is possible that some practices were used more widely than the data revealed. However, our findings appear to be similar to patterns identified in other work.

Notes

1. See, e.g. Darling-Hammond et al. (2000).
2. See Fisher et al. (1996).
4. See Bohn et al. (2004), Hay McBer (2001), Pressley et al. (2001), and Wharton-McDonald et al. (1998).
5. See also Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen (2006).
6. i.e. evaluations of grades 1–9 in all subjects by Apajalahti et al. (1996), Norris et al. (1996); evaluations of 'mother tongue and literature' instruction reported in grade 2 by Huisman (2006) and in grade 6 by Korkeakoski (2001); and interviews of grades 1 and 2 teachers by Haring (2003).
7. See Korkeamäki and Dreher (1993).
8. Although Huisman's (2006) report dealt with beginning grade 3 students’ achievement, she examined their grade 2 teachers’ practices.
9. All pre-service teachers who participated in the course took part in the observations. Observations with reflective discussion were part of their coursework.
10. All grade 1 and 2 classrooms at the school were included in the study.
11. These observer’s notes (and others in this paper) were translated from Finnish by the first author. In many observations, the procedures of a lesson appeared in intervals of a few minutes. Five-minute intervals were very common; but for some lessons even 2-minute intervals were frequent.
12. i.e. each student’s set of notes was assigned a number and pages of these notes were numbered as well. The subsequent analysis made clear that the observational notes followed the guidelines given for observations.
13. In other words, the data were read line-by-line, reducing them and tallying the reduced data from each classroom into categories in a grid; see Miles and Huberman (1994).
14. Numerals were used to help find the data from the observational notes for constant checking. The first numeral indicates the number of each observer’s notes and the number or numbers after the colon indicate the page number of the notes. The arrows (see table 1) point to a reduced phrase inferred from the data.
15. For example, one teacher asked students to cut out news from foreign countries. In Finnish, news from foreign countries is a compound word ‘ulkonaamuutinen’ and includes a lot of information that is difficult for a grade 1 student to understand without a thorough explanation.
16. It is necessary to note here that, during member-checking, teachers reported that the grade 2 practice on Fridays was to combine all their students and place them in ability groups. In these groups, students composed together for 30 minutes and were assisted more personally. The students were allowed to continue these compositions either at home or later in school. However, in grade 1, the focus was on spelling, and children were expected to learn how to spell words correctly before writing more freely.
17. For a typical feature of the Finnish language, see Korkeamäki and Dreher (2000).
18. During member-checking, teachers responded to the lack of classroom libraries, noting that the goal is not to establish a library in each classroom, but to equip several libraries which will serve more than one classroom. The school’s architecture is based on the idea of a few classrooms sharing space in a foyer just outside the group of classrooms. These spaces have been planned to be places for such libraries. In fact, by the time of member-checking the teachers had ordered information books based on the second author’s presentation on the importance of information books as part of a comprehensive reading programme.

19. In rural areas, the public libraries used to be in the same building as the primary school. This is no longer the case.


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Korkeamäki, R.-L. and Dreher, M. J. (in progress) How do 1st- and 2nd-grade textbooks, workbooks, and teacher guides reflect the principles and content of the subject mother tongue and literature in the Finnish National Core Curriculum? (Faculty of Education, University of Oulu, Finland).


Appendix

Excerpt from the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Helsinki: National Board of Education 2004).

Chapter 7: Mother tongue and literature: Grades 1–2

Objectives

The pupils’ interaction skills will increase

The pupils will:

• become accustomed to interactive situations at school.
• learn to listen with concentration.
• learn to ask and answer questions, and to relate their own knowledge, experiences, thought and opinions.
• develop their overall linguistic and physical expression.

The pupils’ reading and writing skills will develop

The pupils will:

• learn the basic techniques of reading and writing, and the concepts that are necessary in that learning; they will come to understand the importance of practice and regular reading and writing.
develop their reading and writing skills, including their media literacy, as well as their communication capabilities in an information-technology learning environment.

- learn to observe themselves as readers and writers.
- learn gradually to take into account conventions of written language when writing their own texts.

The pupils’ relationship with literature and language will take shape

The pupils will

- become acquainted with the written form of language through listening and reading; their imaginations, vocabularies, and ranges of expression will be enriched, and they will obtain material for their thought and expression.
- learn to choose reading material that interests them and to read books that correspond to their reading skills.
- become accustomed to examining language and its meanings and forms.
- become accustomed to texts being spoken of with such concepts as sound, letter, syllable, word, sentence, terminal punctuation, heading, text, and image.

Core contents

Interaction skills

- oral and written expression in various school interaction situations, and one-on-one, small-group, and class discussions.
- focused, precise, and inferential listening.
- reworking of things heard, seen, experienced, and read, with the help of improvisation, narration, play, and drama, integrating these skills into other artistic subjects.

Reading and writing

- diversified daily reading and writing.
- analysing printed and electronic texts through group discussion.
- ample practice with the correspondence between sound and letter.
- practising written and spoken standard language.
- word recognition, progressing from short words towards long, unfamiliar ones; gradual shifting from reading aloud to reading silently.
- introduction to and application of strategies that improve text comprehension.
- breaking down speech into words, syllables, and sounds; practise with writing words.
drawing the forms of letters, learning capital and lower-case printed and cursive letters, and combining letters (see model letters, numbers, and punctuation).

learning to hold a pen or pencil properly, use appropriate writing posture, co-ordinate hand and eye, and write on a computer.

spelling at the sound and sentence level: spacing between words, word division between lines, capital initial letters in familiar names and at the beginning of a sentence, terminal sentence punctuation and its use in the pupil’s own texts.

production of texts based on the pupil’s own observations, everyday experiences, opinions, and imagination, with emphasis on content and the joy of creating.

**Literature and language**

literature and other texts, the pupils listening as the teacher reads, looking at the illustrations, and gradually reading on their own.

reading and treatment of books, with reading experiences and the general experiential aspect being central; use of literature as a stimulus in creative activity.

literary discussion, in connection with which concepts of the principal character, setting, and plot; connecting the reading to one’s own life, and to things previously read, heard, and seen.

learning to use a library.

observing language and its forms and meanings.