

## Encouraging enough? A Case Study on Parental Feedback on New Assessment in Finnish Basic Education

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### ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative case study of the parental feedback about participatory assessment done during the first year (2016) of the implementation of the reformed Finnish basic education curriculum. It covered grades 1-6 and was a first time to have a broader, tri-angulated teacher-student-parent assessment on learning and schooling. Consequently, parents were selected from those grades, being of various ethnic backgrounds. This case study was conducted in a Southern Finland basic education school. Resulting trends were obvious: parents regarded this kind of participatory assessment meaningful. Second, the newer the whole schooling and curricula update was for parents, the better was the participatory feedback. As a result of this study, it is clear that while the discussion and longitudinal studies on learning and assessment are still on-going, there is no rush to return into an old system and heavy, centralized assessment instruction patterns. On the contrary, this study showed beneficial elements and development triggers towards even more collaborative and encouraging assessment.

**Key words:** Reform, Finnish Curriculum, Participatory Assessment, Motivation, Learning Culture

## INTRODUCTION

### Goals, Importance and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to analyze parental attitudes and feedback on the new assessment methods in the Finnish basic education (FBE). The topic has been largely discussed in public, but not researched, in various connections, media releases and informative presentations regarding the curricula reform. In brief, no academic studies have been completed on this case, neither proper learning and deep assessment analyses done among the students that have studied solely or mostly according to the new FBE curriculum, which came into force 2016 (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE], n.d.a; see also Appendix 1).

The importance of the study arises, first, from above-mentioned unstudied freshness, and multicultural variety of “best” assessment practices FBE curriculum (accepted 2014) characteristically offered for basic education providers, meaning mainly municipalities and cities. Second, a holistic assessment reform in its broad sense is an interesting update and participatory, enhancing assessment with parents has not been studied at all. Third, there are (inter)national ramifications, but arguments mainly maintain on the level of opinions. This study aimed to provide facts and factual trends for further discussion to develop the curriculum im-

plementation. Fourth, since no studies about parental attitudes and participation have been researched so far, this also is a beginning of a new interactive assessment era and its meaningful planning. By and large, previous research articles dealing with assessment have focused on curricula 2004 and learning outcomes, including also so-called ‘active learning’ (Berlinski & Russo, 2017; Finnish Education Evaluation Center [FINNEEC], 2015; Hendrickson, 2017; Härmälä, 2010; Moe, Härmälä, Kristmanson, Pascoal & Ramonié, 2015; Kumpulainen & Lankinen, 2016; Niemi, 2002; Niemi, 2012a; 2012c).

### Research Questions

This qualitative study addressed two research questions (RQs):

1. How do the parents see the importance of participatory assessment?
2. Are there any specific trends in parental attitudes?

## LITERATURE AND BACKGROUND

As it has been stated on several occasions, Finnish basic education has been intensively studied and followed since the success in PISA appeared, starting from 2001 onwards

(Härmälä, 2010; Hendrickson, 2017; Kumpulainen & Lankinen, 2016; Munthe & Rogne, 2015; Niemi 2002; 2012a; 2012b; 2012c; Niemi & Lavonen, 2012; Niemi, R., Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2014; see also Sahlberg 2015). Recent basic education reform (2016) has been gradually implemented in a planned schedule 2016-2019 (FNAE, n.d.a) and new, more participatory assessment has elicited and created positive and negative feelings, discussions about clarity, as well as opposing comments. The latter have become more audible, when upper basic education students have grade-by-grade joined to a new curriculum of transversal competencies, multidisciplinary learning, renewed student-centered pedagogy, and verbal, interactive assessment discussions (Appendix 1; FNAE, n.d.a). In summary, basic education curriculum reform officially aimed to secure necessary future knowledge, skills and encourage further learning (FNAE, n.d.a). Consequently, it listed transversal competences in all subjects for students, generalizing them as:

- Thinking and learning to learn
- Cultural competence, interaction and self-expression
- Taking care of oneself and managing daily life
- multiliteracy
- ICT competence
- Working life competence and entrepreneurship
- Participation, involvement and building a sustainable future

(Source: FNAE, n.d.a)

Current competences, or future-oriented skills, have been analyzed in various international contexts, and there are several studies on these so-called 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2006; 2010a; 2010b; Darling-Hammond & Adamsson, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Barks, Zumwalt, Gomez, Sherin, Griensdorn & Finn, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012; Dede, 2010). These competences, and all the other learning and working activities, including multidisciplinary learning processes, are supposed to be assessed on frequent basis, meaning literally ‘often enough’, and giving more space for diversity in assessment methods. Educators are to use informal, guiding and encouraging assessment, not relying only on reports nor diplomas (FNAE, n.d.a). As a matter of fact, this holistic, research-based approach on future-oriented skills was a starting point to an overall curriculum reform, in which educational providers have further produced localized, more detailed and tailored curricula, assessment systems, in-service trainings and emphasis in an interesting way and multitude. De-centralized reform has created hundreds of interesting curricula interpretations as outcomes of diversity in education.

How will this curriculum process, and goals, be evaluated? While FNAE is a planning and conducting organization, the Finnish Education Evaluation Center (FINNEEC) plays a crucial role in national evaluation, which is based on their research, other studies and reports. Moreover, researchers at universities study actively the reform and Finnish teacher education has been, and is, research-based, guiding also teachers to study their own work (e.g., Kansanen, 2008;

Niemi 2012a). FINNEEC started their curriculum research by surveying the educational providers’ (municipalities and cities) self-reflection, quality management and implementation analyses (Harjunen, Hietala, Lepola, Räisänen & Korpi, 2017).

However, no participatory basic education assessment studies were listed for initial 2016-19 evaluation plans. Furthermore, FINNEEC has launched several longitudinal, but also grade-based, studies on learning for basic education (FINNEEC, 2016). However, their parental assessment research has been absent. Despite its central role in evaluation, FINNEEC has not included parent-student-teacher co-assessment surveys in the national evaluation strategy either for the next timeframe 2020-23 (FINNEEC, 2016). By and large, there is no relevant, trustworthy research on participatory, collaborative assessment products, results or practices, not to mention their development. As was previously mentioned, there cannot be any quantitative analysis, since the locally adjusted systems and practices offer a broad variety of de-centralized, innovative practices and interpretations. Irrespective of this academic lack, there are various studies regarding motivation and learning outcomes as listed in curricula (FNAE, n.d.a) to discuss the data carefully enough from several sound viewpoints (Assor, Kaplan & Roth, 2002; Assor, Kaplan, Kanak - Maymorr & Roth, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 2002; 2008; Dweck 2002; Loima & Vibulphol, 2014; 2016; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Palmer, 2009; Vibulphol, Loima, Areesophonpichet & Rukspollmuang, 2015). In this qualitative study, motivation enhancement via participatory and collaborative learning assessment is regarded as an essential learning promoter (Alderman, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Dweck, 2002; Loima & Vibulphol, 2014; 2016). Terminologically, this study prefers to talk about *content knowledge* instead of older *subject matter*, since the first term is broader: it is seen here to cover multidisciplinary skills, projects, and learning to learn in this curriculum. Meaningful and important are terms that are used as synonyms when analyzing the data and feedback.

## THE DATA AND METHODS

The data were collected in November-December 2016 immediately after the first participatory (i.e. student-parent(s)-teacher) assessment discussions had been carried out by all the stakeholders. The assessment discussion was verbal, since educational organizers, or providers, may decide – and largely decided – to give verbal feedback and assessment measurements in lower basic education grades (cf. FNAE, n.d.a). The verbal, participatory assessment was completed in four fields. First, there was a self-reflection of the student (first sector). Second, parents assessed the schoolwork from their point of view, having received a format and regular learning feedback for that beforehand. The third viewpoint was teachers’ assessment and presentation of an updated verbal assessment diploma to come. The fourth dimension was a collaborative *and* individual goal-setting for the student for next spring term (fourth sector). The assessment covered all the transversal

skills, subjects, and the multidisciplinary learning modules there had been at schoolwork according to the renewed curriculum (cf. FNAE, n.d.a). Finally, this collaborative assessment meeting replaced the traditional semester diplomas in line with the renewed learning concept presented in curriculum FNAE, n.d.a)

The data has some specific characteristics due to the new assessment procedure. Given the fact that this kind of participatory, summarizing assessment by all above-mentioned stakeholders is a new approach for schooling and pupils' learning, the data for this case study represents qualitative, unique information from the first implementation semester. Consequently, it only represents the case school, thus offering qualitative trends but no countrywide scale or statistic information. Those could, and should, be collected and analyzed when the first cycles (2017-20, 2020-23) of national curriculum implementation and learning research by Finnish Education Evaluation Center (FINNEEC) have been accomplished (FINNEEC, 2016).

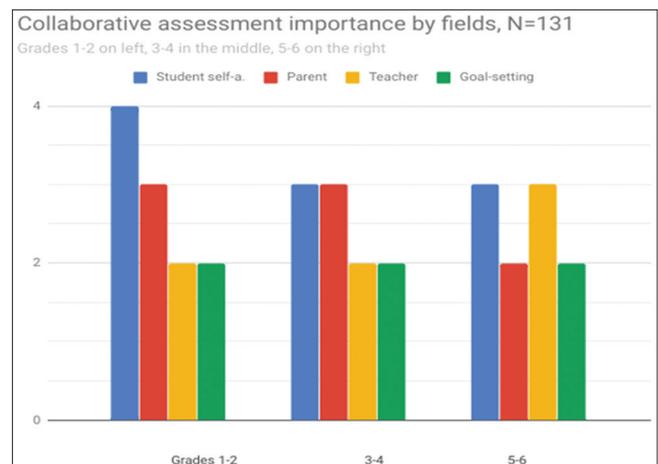
Anonymous data questionnaires were collected by teachers and principal, and 131 parents out of the total 280 left their feedback. The percentage may have an impact on the data trends, but assumedly as a sign of some satisfaction – with no need to add any parental feedback about their first assessment participation. The questionnaire was in Finnish, and immigrant parents got professional translating aid into their assessment meetings. No interviews were included to the data, since the parents were already discussed, instructed and interviewed by teachers in their participatory assessment meetings. Furthermore, more than 50 different languages were used in assessment meetings and repeated translations for those all would have been practically impossible in a given assessment timeframe.

The questionnaire asked, whether a) self-assessment made by a student b) assessment presented by parent(s) c) assessment performed by the teacher d) collaborative goal-setting for the next spring were meaningful and valuable information. In order to, first, have a comparison with familiar elements (teachers' assessment, goal-setting) all four fields were questioned at the same time. Second, in terms of research ethics it was clearer to aim for a holistic data. Questions about gender, age, ethnicity or educational background were not asked, and some space was left for open feedback as well. The scale offered options for marks from “not meaningful” up to “highly meaningful/important”, having also choices for “relatively meaningful” and “meaningful”. No school test scores were asked, but there was an option to give, for example, a more familiar, semester “rating” (4-10) in an open answer (cf. FNAE, n.d.b).

## FINDINGS ON PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT

### Was it Meaningful or Not?

To visualize the parental feedback as a summary, this study presents the feedback in a table. The option ‘not meaningful’ is given table value 1, while ‘relatively meaningful’ means level 2, ‘meaningful’ equates to a 3, and ‘highly meaningful/important’ is given a value of 4.



**Figure 1.** Collaborative (participatory) assessment importance according to parental feedback in 2016, case basic education school, Southern Finland.

*Highly meaningful student's self-assessment.* As Figure 1 clearly indicated, the parental feedback of the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> graders emphasized the importance of student's self-assessment up to highly important (4). Consequently, this emphasis highlighted the importance of continuous self-assessment for the student as well. This trend has also been clearly recognizable in previous motivation and learning studies during this millennium, in terms of both the skills and content knowledge (e.g., Assor et al., 2002, 2005; Loima & Vibulphol, 2014; 2016). Teachers' allowance and support for enthusiastic learning may significantly promote internal (or intrinsic) motivation thus reflecting positive learning outcomes, including self-assessment and willingness for development in assessing oneself (Assor et al., 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Dweck, 2002; Loima & Vibulphol, 2014; 2016). In addition, the highlighted importance also seemed to mean a firmer “belonging” to the school community for lower-grade students as well as their parents, adding the meaningfulness of self-assessment from this social viewpoint in changing circumstances (cf. Alderman 2008; Salmela-Aro, 2009; Loima & Vibulphol, 2016). Third approach for this trend was presented by Niemiec and Ryan (2009). Their self-determination theory stated that people simply ‘like’ – being thus internally motivated – to learn. In this first participatory assessment round ever, the pupils' role seemed to be showing, or even ‘proving’, to the parents and teacher, how good a 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> grader could be in assessing him/herself (cf. Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). By and large, the assessment “table” was *tabula rasa* before this sharing, collaborative assessment occasion for 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> graders. As an official starting point for self-assessment development, this was seen highly important by parents. Subsequently, it underlined their support and appreciation.

### A Trend towards Earlier Evaluation System Found in Upper Grades

Apart from this emphasis and trend in the first two grades, students' self-assessment was seen as an important field of assessment with the grades 3.-4., as well as in grades 5.-6.

To sum it up, self-assessment played the most crucial role in terms of assessment reform importance in overall parental feedback. A connection to 21<sup>st</sup> century working life skills, and their adjustment may be found in previously mentioned curricular transversal skills and rethought learning and assessment skills by parents as well as curriculum developers, and researchers (FNAE, n.d.a; Darling-Hammond, 2010b, 2014; also Dede, 2010; Moe et al., 2015; Vibulphol et al., 2015). An open feedback comment supported this by noting that this kind of assessment replaced traditional school diplomas 'more than well'. On the other hand, a parent of a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader estimated that self-assessment skills were not adequately developed, needing more rehearsal. That was the exact objective of the curriculum, and school, as well. At least some parents already wanted to emphasize the importance of transversal skills, early starts and repeated practices in their assessment.

*Assessment given by parents.* According to the data, parents themselves felt their assessment was meaningful and important. In particular, this was the case in lower grades 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>. While 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders' parents had received traditional school year diplomas for already 4-5 years during the previous curriculum, they saw their assessment role 'quite meaningful', but not so important as the parents of the younger pupils had estimated. The data indicated that the previous curriculum had established a sound routine for schooling and evaluation practices already in the case of 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders as for their parents (FNAE, n.d.b; Alderman, 2008; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Loima & Vibulphol, 2014). In terms of motivation, engagement and learning outcomes, there also appeared to be a social connection here with the school as a "belonging" community as well. While younger students in grades 1-4 had more recently started to attend to schooling and education, their "belonging" to a renewed collaborative assessment system was more firmly supported by parents (cf. Alderman, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2002, 2008; Dweck, 2002; Loima & Vibulphol, 2016; also Palmer, 2009; Salmela-Aro, 2009). On the other hand, the very same parents may have had senior children in upper grades (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>) and adjusted their own assessment role to a more familiar 2004 curriculum assessment system – simultaneously supporting more firmly the participatory and collaborative assessment for their younger children. Consequently, they seemed to feel their support and activity was less needed, once lightly senior students had already familiarized themselves with school, and assessment, during their lower grades. Even a single school-year more mattered in terms of "belonging", motivation to perform, social experience in a group or another, age-related goals and school routine (Alderman, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Loima & Vibulphol, 2016; Salmela-Aro, 2009; cf. Skinner, 2012). In conclusion, the curriculum reform had not so much effect on this parental reflection and feedback of meaningfulness. According to findings, their accustomed goals in supporting their children of different age and experience mattered more (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Salmela-Aro, 2009; cf. Skinner 2012). Consequently, they acted as the renewed curriculum assessment had intended and the school suggested, i.e. supporting and

encouraging the younger learning generation. Apart from this topic, a question regarding previously received diplomas as motivation enhancers remained unanswered by this data.

*Teachers' assessment.* According to previous curricula, since the Finnish public basic education started in the 1970s, the teachers had been main, and often only active actors, in assessment and evaluation. That had been the dictated trend in curricula during 1990s, and curriculum 2004 (FNAE, n.d.b) when it was guided by adding national core curriculum descriptions of 'good' knowledge and skills in each subject (subject matter). However, in the participatory assessment data for 2016, teachers' role was seen as 'relatively meaningful' by parents of the grades 1-4. For teachers' professional understanding and self-esteem, this was a big change in 2016 curriculum: from a teacher of subject matter to a learning coach of more holistic content knowledge, including transversal skills and multidisciplinary competences (e.g. Kansanen, 2008; Niemi, 2002, 2012a; Vibulphol & al., 2015). On the other hand, in upper grades 5-6, teachers' role was already institutionalized by the previous schooling years during the curriculum 2004, and parents seemed to recognize and confirm this by lowering their own importance in the event. Apart from subject matter connection, students' self-assessment was seen as meaningful as teachers' assessment in grades 5-6 in parental feedback. In addition, the data trend had dual surprising dimensions on these grades. The parents, whose children had performed well in the older assessment system and arithmetic evaluation, expressed their wish to have 'clear numbers' back in school diplomas. On the other hand, the parents whose children had not been so successful in the older evaluation (cf. curriculum 2004, FNAE, n.d.b) expressed in their open feedback that the participatory and collaborative co-assessment was more encouraging and enhanced learning support for their children than the semester diploma had been. As was the case in previously discussed assessment fields, "belonging" played an important role in teacher's assessment (Alderman, 2008; Assor et al., 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2002, 2008; Dweck, 2002; Ryan, 2008; Loima & Vibulphol, 2016; Salmela-Aro, 2009; also Kim, Schallert & Kim, 2010; and Niemi, R. & al., 2014). However, in this case it was more about belonging to a performance-based classroom sub-group than an institution.

In a detailed framework and socio-cultural context, parents of previously 'good students' seemed to feel that their students' sub-cultural performance status in a classroom was somehow obscured by a new participatory and verbal assessment. Apart from this 'good and successful' trend, the previously 'weaker' students seemed to have received more intrinsic motivation enhancement from renewed and participatory verbal assessment. Consequently, this strengthening of internal motivation replaced some of their culturally adapted status and former lesson behavior: *situation-based interest*. It appears in learning situations, in which students have lost, or were about to lose, their internal motivation (cf. Loima & Vibulphol, 2016). Furthermore, the state of amotivation is a rapid growth-factor for a randomized situation-based interest, which often means other 'belonging' to temporary social context or sub-group than learning and/

or active learners in the light of curricula objectives (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Salmela-Aro, 2009; Loima & Vibulphol, 2016; cf. Hendricksson, 2017).

*Goal-setting.* Even though the participatory goal-setting was to support and further enhance all the previously mentioned fields of assessment (FNAE, n.d.a) and construct continua up to next assessment discussions, diplomas and further collaboration, it was only seen as ‘relatively meaningful’ by the parents. Moreover, this finding revealed that the whole assessment was mostly seen as it had been in previous curriculum (FNAE, n.d.b): a reflection and assessment of the past, which followed given formal standards, or guidelines. The third aspect in this meaningfulness may rise from the newness of this kind of participatory collaboration with the teacher, students and parents. Irrespective of instructions, it was brand new experience and assessment (cf. Alderman, 2008; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Diplomas and assessment seemed to represent so firmly the past autumn term that a meaningful and activating goal-setting for the spring was not seen as particularly important. It seemed to be enough that the teacher presented the updated spring term diploma format and expected learning outcomes for the remaining school year and grade. Regardless of this extraordinary co-planning opportunity, the major role in future planning remained the same: it has been seen traditionally as teacher-based information and agreement (cf. Hendricksson 2017; Härmälä, 2010; Niemi 2002, 2012a, 2012b; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Salmela-Aro, 2009). The data does not tell, whether an earlier goal-setting in the beginning of school year could have emphasized this field, thus adding awareness.

What other meaningful information did the parents reveal in their feedback? Some comments from parents in upper grades told about an interesting experience, and wished for more options to participate and collaborate in a similar way (cf. FNAE, n.d.a). Apart from this, in lower grades (1-2) participatory assessment had been seen as a sound compensation for annual school diploma. On grades 3-4 a parent wrote that there was nothing more that s/he could have wished for this participatory assessment event. By and large, the socio-cultural experiences of the past, or previous school culture seemed to influence on feedback, making it more ‘acceptable’ to act in familiar framework as it came to upper grades (Alderman, 2008; Loima & Vibulphol, 2016; Niemi, 2014; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Palmer, 2009; Salmela-Aro, 2009). According to these examples, individual parental expectations were more than adequately covered by a new, participatory assessment in the first time it took place.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Main research findings from the first verbal cooperative parent, student and teacher assessment meeting in 2016 were positive in the light of the reformed curricula objectives. The younger the student was, the more important his, or her, self-assessment and parental assessment were together. Parental feedback of the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> graders emphasized the importance of student’s self-assessment up to highly important, while grades 3-4 and 5-6 were in the same, lower but meaningful level. Intrinsic motivation and socio-cultural be-

longing had obvious connections to self-assessment values. Parental assessment was supporting, motivating, and facilitating by nature. In particular, some parents of lower grades estimated that collaborative assessment replaced the traditional semester diplomas ‘more than well’.

Furthermore, parents recognized their assessment role more meaningful in lower grades 1-4, while teachers’ assessment received more (traditional) importance and meaning in grades 5-6. Increasingly familiar cultural “belonging” to institution, sub-cultural students’ classroom roles as “good” or “weaker” learners, previous curricula with formal semester diplomas and prompt, arithmetic assessment had established a *status quo* in upper grades. Cooperative assessment even seemed to increase some obscurity for previous students’ roles, as some parents indicated. On the other hand, the new assessment meeting was seen as a motivating opportunity and support for previously “weaker” students. Fourth part of cooperative assessment meetings, the goal-setting (together) was seen meaningful, but not highly meaningful. Previous curricula had obvious footprints in all meanings in upper grades. Irrespective of these main trends, the age of a student affected more than curriculum reform, transversal skills or verbal learning assessment. Parents had a stronger support for younger and less experienced students.

In the light of these trends, it seemed to be obvious that participatory assessment will need more time, and preparations, to become truly collaborative and more participatory as well. The remnants of 150 years old past-tensed diploma evaluation and teachers’ major role in it were, and are still, rooted deeply into social comprehension of curriculum, assessment and whole education. Irrespective of this, there was already a clear change found in parental feedback in the case of younger pupils. A further change for broader and more collaborative learning assessment will come, if teachers and schools as responsible stakeholders prepare well enough, give parents active roles and specific assessment tasks in some transversal skill-development areas, not to mention sound motivation support – in other terms, in overall content knowledge assessment. Apart from the progress, previous curricula, behaviorist or cognitive learning comprehension and easy-to-read diplomas have their clear supporters. In summary, more preparation time for mutual collaboration and goal-setting, clarifying role discussion and shared responsibilities in supporting the students’ holistic learning willingness seemed to be main – but lacking – improvement triggers in the data findings.

In terms of research-based assessment development, there are numerous topics to study carefully enough in the near future. This paper was an initiative step. For younger students, the transversal skills, their development and optimal assessment in qualitative surveys seemed to become a next priority. These studies are needed to offer teachers proper in-service training as well. Second, senior students and their families may benefit from studies that focus on their comprehension changes towards participatory assessment, and continuous evaluation. Moreover, senior students will be served by studying their performance in contextualized content knowledge, including future working-life skills and self-esteem in relation to assessment. No mental by-standers

produced by a school reform will be needed in future society, however. Finally, positive and collaborative assessment needs to be constantly studied.

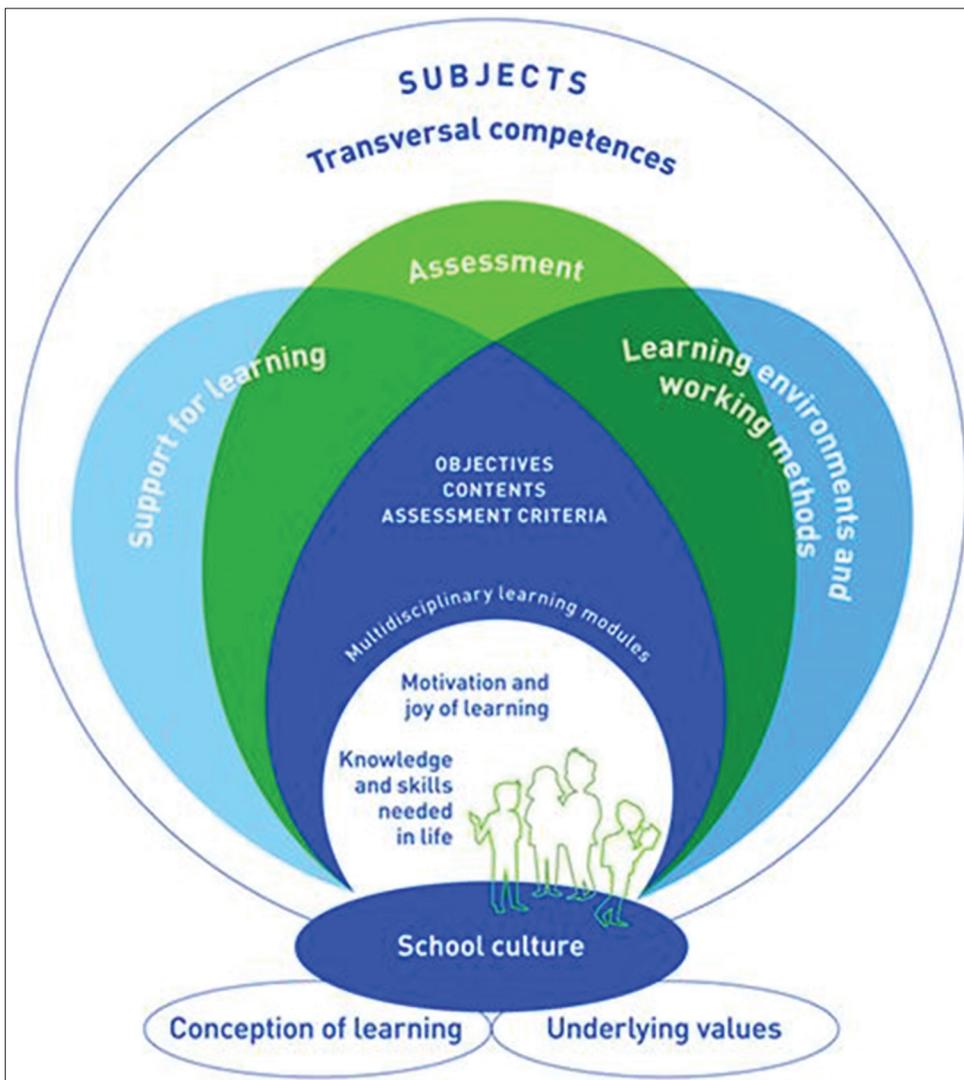
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## APPENDIX 1

## Finnish Basic Education Curricula



Source: Finnish National Agency for Education (n.d.a)