

# New art and culture – inspired pedagogy to Finnish schools

A child-centred approach to organising extracurricular activities

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## Introduction

Promoting the accessibility of and facilitating access to arts and culture is one of the key priorities of cultural policy in Finland. Since 2016, the Ministry of Education and Culture has promoted and facilitated children's and young people's access to basic art education, arts and culture in a Government key project, which has in many ways proved successful in integrating arts and culture into the everyday life of children and young people. Rather than bringing children to arts and culture, the key project has brought arts and culture to children and young people by going where they spend a significant part of their time – their schools.

The premise of the key project has been to encourage children and young people to take an active part in arts and culture by providing them with highly accessible opportunities to participate in high-quality art and culture activities taught by professional instructors and educators.

In the first phase of the key project, these activities were introduced to primary schools as voluntary extracurricular classes or clubs scheduled during or after the school day. The Ministry hoped that this would prove effective in encouraging participation by removing obstacles such as lack of time, travel, access or an overall limited offering of activities, the latter three of which were considered possible hindrances especially in the case of smaller municipalities and more remote areas. To ensure that children and young people would get to take part in activities they found interesting and meaningful, the Ministry launched a national pupil survey to map preferred activities to all comprehensive schools in Finland.

The project has since evolved further into another initiative called the *Curious Class* (2018), which applies arts and culture in education during the school day, i.e. not only as extracurricular classes. Inspired by the OECD project on the same subject and still based on strong professional partnership, the initiative aims to support creativity and critical thinking among children and young people while improving access to culture.

The projects have also been aimed at increasing cooperation between professionals in children's culture, basic art education, primary schools and early childhood education and care as well as at promoting equal opportunities for pursuing art and culture in school

premises through the implementation of the Government key project. So far, the results of the key project have been promising in terms of accomplishing the project's main goals. According to the evaluation of all key projects' club activities funded by the Ministry in 2016–2018, approximately 90,000 pupils and day care children in 1,100 primary schools and 300 child daycare centres in Finland took part in extracurricular activities. A large percentage of these children found themselves a new favourite art or cultural hobby through the project.

To date, the national pupil survey to comprehensive schools has been carried out twice, receiving 200,000 individual responses. These responses have led the design of all club activities in the key project, thus indicating a strong commitment to the importance of consulting children on matters concerning them and their immediate wellbeing.

This introduction will elaborate on the key project at hand and present some of its key findings. In conclusion, some notions on best practices and future orientations are considered.

## The implementation project on children's culture and basic art education

In their strategic programme for 2015–2019, Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's Government introduced twenty-six *key projects*. As indicated by their attribute, the key projects are projects that the Finnish Government has deemed especially important to promote. One of the key projects is dedicated to art and culture and focuses on new club activities for children and young people. This key project is called *Access to art and culture will be facilitated*.

Implementation of the key project above was launched at the Ministry of Education and Culture in two different ways. One was aimed at improving access to children's culture and basic art education, and the other at supporting the effects of culture on wellbeing by investing in the acquisition of art in public buildings. Combined, these two implementation projects received approximately EUR 10 million in funding, of which approximately EUR 8 million were allocated to the implementation project on children's culture and basic art education for the years 2016–2018.

The goal of the implementation project at hand is “to offer children and young people greater opportunities to take an active part in art and cultural pursuits, as well as to improve their creative skills, cultural competence and capacity for learning.” (Pulkkinen, Berden, & Koskimies, 2018, “2.4. The Key Project: Improving Access to Arts and Culture”, para. 2.) The goals and implementation of the implementation project are based on numerous findings on the positive effects that cultural activities have on children. Previous research indicates that it is worth investing in artistic and cultural hobbies. Participation in music and handicraft improves pupils' academic (reading, writing, calculating) and social (regulation of emotions and behaviour) skills (Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2012, 2014), and self-control in general. In addition, incorporation of hobbies into a school day, thereby integrating the school day, can at best reduce anxiety and symptoms of depression (Metsäpelto, Pulkkinen & Tolvanen, 2010).

As such, the key project has also been aimed at renewing the current operating culture of schools as well as strengthening and consolidating the cooperation of comprehensive and early childhood education with arts and cultural organisations.

Spanning over three years, the project has been steered by the Ministry through the use of grants. Three calls for proposals have been published with the purpose of organising voluntary activities or clubs at schools. The project has also encompassed activities organised at daycare centres for younger children, with certain exceptions to the common criteria for the awarding of grants.

The implementation project has from the beginning been built upon the idea of quality and professionalism, requiring all activities to have been planned and carried out by cultural operators within the art and cultural education infrastructure that exists in Finland in addition to art education in schools:

- Basic Art Education is provided in various art and educational institutions in approximately 85 per cent of Finnish municipalities. Basic education in the different fields of art progresses in a goal-oriented manner from one level to the next, and the core curriculum has been confirmed for visual arts, crafts, media arts, music, literary art, circus art, dance and theatre.
- Children's Cultural Centres provide art education in municipalities and regions. A total of 27 centres cooperate nationally through travelling exhibitions and art workshops, by exchanging performances and methods and by engaging in joint productions.
- Other art and cultural operators such as art and cultural institutions, cultural heritage organisations, museums, libraries, choirs and the University of Arts arrange various forms of activities in the field of art and culture education. (Pulkkinen et al., 2018, “2.4. The Key Project: Improving Access to Arts and Culture”, para. 4.)

Moreover, organisation of the activities had to follow certain criteria, which included a minimum requirement of thirty lessons (over the school year) and adherence to the wishes expressed by pupils in the national pupil survey. These criteria were not fully applied to activities at daycare centres, since under section 3(3) of the Act on Early Childhood Education (2018/540), the pedagogy of early childhood education in Finland should be partly based on art and cultural heritage education, providing children with positive learning experiences. Hence, organisations hoping to provide activities for younger children were invited to adopt a more sporadic approach, providing children with opportunities for unique and out-of-the-ordinary experiences.

### **The national pupil survey as a basis for a child-centred approach**

The implementation project strongly emphasised pupil involvement in its implementation. The subjects of club activities have been determined by the results from consultation. The national pupil survey drafted to enquire about the preferences of pupils aged seven to sixteen was launched by the Ministry of Education and Culture as part of the Government's key project. The survey was designed and developed to be child-friendly, making use of gamified elements to map the preferences of pupils in terms of the arts, cultural and sports activities they were most interested in trying at schools. All club activities provided at schools as part of the key project had to be designed on the basis of pu-

pils' interests and only club activities corresponding to pupils' interests could receive support from the Ministry.

In the survey, children and young people were asked to rate different activities and answer a set of questions concerning their cultural and artistic pursuits, and a personal history of recreational activities. The students were also able to state their preference in terms of when they would like to take part in different activities. Children's Cultural Centres were consulted in drafting the set of alternatives. The link to the survey was then distributed to 230 comprehensive schools in Finland.

With its 200,000 individual responses over three years, the survey has provided valuable information on the demand for arts and culture activities among children and young people in Finland. The response rate corresponds to a third of all pupils in Finland, and the results show that many of the respondents are interested in more than one activity (Pulkkinen et al., 2018). All results of the survey have been published to encourage municipalities to consider their cultural offering in terms of demand.

## Evaluation and exemplary cases of successful cooperation

The first phase of the key project (2016–2017) was evaluated externally in the Niilo Mäki Institute. Concluded in 2018, the evaluation considered the performance of the project in terms of the overall reach and performance of the projects financed, the rate of success experienced by the parties involved and the improvement in access to arts and culture. The evaluation was based on three quantitative sets of material and one qualitative set of material. Quantitatively, most of the material consisted of survey data collected for the Niilo Mäki Institute's report. Data from the feedback collected by the Ministry and the grant applications submitted during the first call were also used.

Two cases of individual implementations of the key project are considered below to provide a concrete illustration of the fieldwork of the projects and the factors affecting their success. The projects described in more detail have been analysed as part of the evaluation by the Niilo Mäki Institute.

Both of the cases considered below have continued and developed their projects in their municipalities over the whole three-year period (2016–2018). In both cases, project workers have continued their work and developed their projects in their municipalities over the whole three-year period (2016–2018).

### Architecture! Introduction to architecture at school clubs in Kuopio

Architecture! was a project by Lastu School of Architecture and Environmental Culture. The project took place in two lower comprehensive schools (covering ages seven to twelve) in Kuopio, where the goal was to introduce basic architecture education to local schools. Kuopio is located in the region of Northern Savonia (Pohjois-Savo) and is Finland's ninth most populous city. Although the city's population is well spread, the city's urban areas are populated comparatively densely thereby making Kuopio Finland's second-most densely populated city.

The pupils participating in the project practiced expressive skills, creativity and crafts, and explored different sides of architecture by building models and model cities using recycled materials. Both Lastu and the schools in Kuopio regarded the cooperation as being successful. As regards resources, the schools provided the space and some of the materials, whereas Lastu took care of communications, most of the materials, etc. (Määttä, Korpivaara & Palmu, 2018.)

Another goal of the project was development-oriented, as the project also sought to map the possibilities of consolidating basic architecture education in the city of Kuopio. This proved challenging due to financial restraints but the importance of this spirit of development for the success of the project was recognised in the evaluation. Furthermore, the school principal highlighted the importance of having a professional instructor to lead the clubs. On the one hand he referred to the lack of resources at schools for organising extra-curricular activities such as clubs, and on the other hand he pointed out that when working in a school setting, possessing strong pedagogical skills is paramount. (Määttä et al., 2018.)

Overall, the project received positive feedback and increased equal opportunities for students to participate in artistic and cultural pursuits. Besides the above, the genuine will of schools to cooperate was a significant factor in the project's success. Both the pupils and their teachers reported being happy with the clubs. The pupils were reported to have asked for longer sessions and the school principal also pointed to the pride that the pupils felt over their work. (Määttä et al., 2018.)

### **"PopUpSipoo" Improving the availability of children's culture in Sipoo**

The "PopUpSipoo" project in Sipoo was aimed at enhancing the availability of children's culture in Sipoo, located some thirty kilometres to the northeast of Helsinki, the Finnish capital. The project was initiated and developed by the municipality of Sipoo, which has strong ties to the education administration. The goal of the project was to introduce and develop extracurricular activities at schools. This is something that had not earlier been done at the municipal level. The hope was to offer the pupils new experiences. (Määttä et al., 2018.)

The municipality of Sipoo has large centralised schools and many small village schools, which posed challenges with regard to the activities. There were thirty extracurricular groups tailored according to pupils' wishes, with twenty-one instructors in nine schools in the school year 2016–2017. The activities included animation, piano playing, film, architecture, beatboxing and parkour, the latter of which was the most popular of all the club activities. Not everyone who wanted could participate in the parkour groups because increasing the group size could have presented a safety hazard. (Määttä et al., 2018.)

Challenges occurred related to the short-term nature of financing, finding instructors in the sparsely populated areas of Sipoo, facilitating coordination and information exchange. Despite these difficulties, the PopUpSipoo project managed to improve and diversify the availability of children's culture. Through the project it became possible for the local children and young people to engage in cultural forms, such as beatboxing, architecture and pop singing, that were not previously available. These opportunities were also seized. The PopUpSipoo project introduced a new type of operating culture to schools; pupils began to see school as a place where they can stay after lessons to pursue a hobby. The success of

the project was attributed to three key factors, i.e. the active involvement of municipal education administration, the positivity of the art practitioners' in carrying out the activities and, as in the case of Kuopio, the willing attitude at schools to cooperate. (Määttä et al., 2018.)

## ***Curious Class* pilot**

The importance of cultivating the creativity and critical skills of pupils in formal education is widely shared. As pointed out by the OECD however, there is only limited evidence of it being carried out systematically. Systematic development of these skills has been considered by the OECD to be hindered by the lack of formal assessment of these competencies in education systems, thus offering little incentive to teachers to develop such assessments. The OECD also maintains, that despite the wide agreement on the importance of the matter, grasping creative and critical skills on a more concrete level, such as that of curricula, has remained unclear. (OECD, 2015.)

The OECD CERI's international project is rooted in the effort of providing a framework for the assessment of developing creative and critical skills at schools. It is assumed that by developing an international framework that can be used to assess creative and critical thinking skills, teachers and pupils can be helped to develop these skills. Skills development would be founded on a more concrete understanding of their meaning and cultivation, and the progress in making these skills visible in schools. The assessment tool is further elaborated in the OECD report on the subject, making clear the manifold efforts to ensure its commitment to student- and teacher-friendly language. Moreover, concrete tools so as to provide proof on the cultivation of creative and critical skills at schools alongside the more traditional skills have been developed. (OECD, 2015.)

Based on the OECD project findings and pedagogical frames developed, a pilot project in Finland has been carried out since 2018 as part of the implementation project. Approximately 2,500 students in fifty schools are involved in projects, in which school teachers and art professionals and educators work closely together in school surroundings. The whole project phase contains an inner evaluation element, with institutional monitoring (classroom observations) and comparison and analysis of the project planning forms with the contents of the completion forms. Additional research activity measuring the impact of the *Curious Class* project on children's academic achievement, social competence, self-concept, creative skills and critical thinking will be performed by researchers from the University of Helsinki.

## **Key findings and conclusions**

In terms of the overall performance of projects funded by the Ministry, the evaluation by the Niilo Mäki Institute concluded that in successful projects, club instructors had both good pedagogical and group management skills, support from the work and school communities, good cooperation skills and, obviously, shared an enthusiasm for doing artistic or

cultural work with children. If pupils' wishes had been taken into account in the schools, the school had a culture-friendly attitude, the school's facilities and tools could be used for project work and information about the extracurricular groups for pupils was effective, the project turned out to be successful (Määttä et al., 2018).

The national pupil survey revealed that most pupils were interested in many forms of art and culture (Pulkkinen et al., 2018). The results presented a challenge to the municipalities in Finland to improve pupils' access to art and culture for which there was a clear demand. In successful projects, the support of local authorities played a major role, as it was crucial that the local authorities had a positive attitude to improving the accessibility of art and cultural activities (Määttä & et al., 2018).

The project has shown that there are pupils who have a strong interest in, for example, cultural heritage, architecture and dancing, and identified the importance of bringing these activities even to those pupils who live in very tiny villages and in the far north of Finland.

In conclusion, the project has so far offered new openings for art and culture-inspired pedagogy in Finnish schools, as shown by the Ministry's own and external evaluations. The implementation project has first and foremost been aimed at creating a new operating culture. The project has proved successful in this regard by establishing a new model of organising extracurricular and club activities as part of the school day. In comparison to more traditional activities, the project marked a prominent change in terms of the involvement of pupils. Their wishes were used in determining the demand, which also led to a wider offering of activities. Had the children's wishes not been known, the actions would likely have been less successful. As for the future, the way ahead looks promising with the model spreading continuously and the new operating culture sparking increased interest nationwide.

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