

# Finland • Terälahti a Nature-school holistic integrated approach

## *Special thanks to Jenni Skaffari and Katri Korpi For this contribution*

The Finnish school system is a little different to many other European countries. Tax revenue pays for the tuition of all students, so compulsory schooling is in principle free of charge for pupils/students. There is no private school system in Finland, and the law prohibits the pursuit of financial gain through education. Students receive free food lunch every day at school, and travel to school and back home, books and other supplies are also free for the students. No school uniforms are used in Finland. School starts at the age of 6. School days are relatively short; per week the hours are 22-24. Each lesson lasts 45 minutes, followed by a 15-minute break students spend outdoors.

The concept of a "sustainable future" is mentioned 48 times in the Finnish curriculum. The ecosocial education is central to the value base of primary and secondary school curricula and early childhood education. *"The guiding principle of ecosocial civilisation is to create a way of life and a culture that cherishes the inviolability of human dignity, the diversity and resilience of ecosystems, and at the same time builds a knowledge base for a resource-based circular economy"*<sup>110</sup>. The Finnish curriculum therefore strongly requires that a sustainable future is considered in teaching. It also encourages the whole school approach, which ideally would be a learning process for everybody in the school building (or surroundings). An ecosocial approach should be included in all school subjects according to the curriculum.

*What happens in *Dytiscus marginalis* life? Let's find out.*



Educational professionals, e.g. the recruitment of teachers, can have a big impact on the functioning of sustainable education in schools. It is up to the teacher to put these values into practice. For example, school meals provide a great opportunity to discuss with students the importance of their own choices and food waste. It is also possible to get vegetarian food at the school. The autonomy provided by the curriculum to teach using different teaching methods and emphasise themes according to the teachers' own preferences, can cause dilemmas between curriculum and schoolwork. Among other things, this dilemma has been verified in Niina Mykra's dissertation<sup>111</sup>. The teacher may not prioritise ecological sustainability themes in their teaching because the curriculum definitions are too broad.

**Terälahti Primary School**<sup>112</sup> • Terälahti School is a primary school in Tampere, located about 40 km from the city centre, surrounded by a lovely rural landscape with forests, fields and waterways. The school has about 75 students, aged 6-12. The same building also houses a kindergarten, library and the Nature School of Tampere, named Korento. There are about 14 adults working in the school building. The Terälahti school has been involved in the Green Flag program<sup>113</sup> (Finnish version of an Eco-School program) since 2002. Many things have taken root over the years in the daily life of the school, so there is little need to pay attention to them. These include sorting and recycling rubbish, saving energy and water, using recycled materials in fine arts and crafts, and using nearby nature as a learning environment. The aim is to make purchases as sustainably as possible.

However, there are some challenges. The biggest challenge of everyday life is time. It is difficult for a teacher to be away from their own class to hold for example an Eco-School committee meeting, but students would not be very excited if the meetings were always at their break times. This is a problem that almost all schools are struggling with. Some have made bold decisions, such as the Rovastinkangas school in Orivesi, where joining the school's environmental council is one of the electives that students can choose from.

Each school class, each autumn, votes for two class representatives to be on the Eco-School committee. The task of the student representatives is to bring ideas and thoughts of other students to the attention of the adults

in the school. Together the committee try to grasp feasible ideas and solutions to the issues and improvements that get suggested. A joint event for the whole school also takes

### Key WSA Principles in action at *Terälahti primary school*

#### Vision, Ethos, Leadership & Coordination

- As a nature-school a holistic integrated approach is central to the school's vision
- The school head teacher is hands on and support the teachers to meaningfully integrate sustainability into everyday school practice

#### Curriculum

- The national curriculum provides guidelines, but schools are independent in implementing the objectives of the curriculum through different teaching methods
- School arranges elective course for Eco-School pupil members
- Pupils have the opportunity to use their course time each week to work on individualised curriculums
- The sustainable future and eco-social education are cross-cutting values in Finland's curricula. Therefore, it is easy to organize such courses

#### Pedagogy & Learning

- The pedagogy of learning outdoors helps children to concretize challenges the world carries. In this way, students have better memories of learning and the connection between learning and their own lives
- One of the teachers dog acts as a school dog with pedagogical roles in the classroom

#### Institutional Practices

- Outdoor education is a central part of the school's everyday life
- Learning from nature is central to the school
- The Sustainability Education Development Project supports the change in the operating culture of education and training towards a more ecologically sustainable future
- Sorting garbage and saving energy is the minimum that all children and adults should be involved in

#### Community Connections

- A hut in Terälahti school field near to the river and an open shelter with fireplace can be found in the forest serve as meeting and relaxation places for nearby residents and pupils

#### Capacity building

- Many external actors provide training for educators and teachers online on SDG

place 2-3 times a school year, usually outdoors. As a small school, organising events is of great importance. Older students can work in more responsible roles because they have more experience with it. The smaller ones, on the other hand, take the model of the bigger ones, i.e. social skills are accumulated. Everyone learns to understand the difference and the good sides of each other and one another's strengths. They also learn how their own actions can influence the actions of the group. The head teacher also has a big impact on how a sustainable lifestyle is implemented in school. They can, for example, direct the teachers co-planning time to be for Eco-School planning or other sustainable education planning. It is important all adults at the school are involved in the planning, then the practices, etc., are transferred to the everyday life of the school.

The school administration can encourage a more ecological daily life, for example by pointing out the goals of global agreements to school plans. Guidance from the administration is often seen as a good incentive, but also too bureaucratic<sup>14</sup>.

The principal could emphasise the school's engagement with the SDG in a job interview by asking, for example, about enthusiasm and experience in sustainable education work. On the other hand, the principal can do nothing to the fact that one of the issues complicating the work is the turnover of staff. In many Finnish schools, the employment contract of many teachers is fixed-term and sometimes short-term. Getting a permanent job is often difficult to achieve. Correcting this would require broader policy instruments. If half of the adults are new every year, time must be spent learning the old practices instead of letting them develop and create new ones. In many cases, however, new adults bring with them ideas and skills that can be used directly.

In almost all municipalities in Finland, Eco-School participation fees are paid from the common budget for basic education, not directly from the budgets of the schools. This is a good incentive to participate in the Eco-School program. Teachers are however burdened by the fragmentation of work. Many may see environmental issues and sustainable development as just one additional obligation, among other things. This is what it feels like if the organiser of the teaching (the municipality) requires you to fill in forms and different plans. Another dilemma which is also pointed out in Mykräs dissertation (p. 205). While these dilemmas are apparent the school staff also emphasise that being one of the Eco-School it is worth it.

*"We are certified with our great work, and we really want to show it to everyone. We know it means we must document our plans and to-dos. We also know that somebody actually reads them (FEE Finland) and want to encourage us to do*

*better. If schools can't get that kind of a feedback, they are often discouraged and see the "extra documents" as a burden. That is why sustainable development should also be the administrations business as well as the field workers" (Jenny Skaffari).*

**Nature-school of Tampere (named Korento)** • Terälahti Primary School has a unique partner to work with. Korento Nature School is in the same building as Terälahti School. Nature schools are great examples of how basic education and early childhood education are supported in Finland in ESD. The nature school is part of the Tampere basic education. There are two environmental educators working at Nature-school. There are no full-time pupils/students at the nature school, but the nature-school operates as an additional service for Tampere schools and kindergartens. Especially in reinforcing the pedagogy of outdoor learning and ESD. Every day, the Nature School has different groups visiting Terälahti from Tampere schools and kindergarden/ preschools.

The pedagogy of learning outdoors has a strong connection to environmental education. In both, the emphasis is on strengthening the ecological dimension. The methods also emphasise experientiality and functionality. Students work hands-on. In fact, by searching, researching, and finding themselves students will have a better imprint on the theme of the day. At the same time, the relationship with nature is strengthening. Studies have also shown that learning in a green natural environment is more effective, whatever the subject is. (About Outdoor learning I). Teachers can also benefit from outdoor-teaching with students, e.g. because of the calming effect of nature and the effects on well-being.

The visiting group chooses a theme for themselves. The theme is implemented and considers the curriculum and subject objectives. The theme is addressed through the phenomenon. There are no separate subject lessons, but

**"Be enthusiastic on whatever you find outdoors. You can combine that with every school subject of your choice. What is this leaf? From where did it appear? Why it is on the ground? What colour is it? What forms do you see in it? How many veins it has? Why is it build that way? Let the pupils ask questions, you discover that they see the world more diverse than you. Learn from them. Learn together."**

*Environmental educator, Jenni Skaffari*

studying phenomenon brings for example, mathematics, environmental studies, exercise, cooperation skills and much more to the school day.

*"The teacher who visits in the nature school with a class also get tips and enthusiasm for outdoor learning pedagogy. Learning is multidisciplinary, experiential and exploratory. The learning environment is almost always nature. Korento Nature School and Terälahti School are located next to a magnificent forest and a soothing river. "We have the opportunity to bring experiences for students and teachers that they may not notice them during the normal school day, such as silence. Becoming aware of silence, too, can be a wake-up call for some individual to want help build a sustainable future. They may realise that there is still wonderful nature left here, this is something to enjoy" (Jenny Skaffari).*

#### **Examples from Terälahti Primary School**

One of the teacher's dog acts as a school dog with pedagogical roles in the classroom. The pupils think the dog is just a top thing, even if it does nothing. Also, the cat of the teacher living nearby will occasionally hang out in the school yard and let the students stroke him. That makes Terälahti unique compared to many schools. Students have a chance to relax next to a furry (little) friend during lessons.

*How does a miniature world look through a lens? What do you see? / Tynne, the furry friend to lean on to when one struggles, for example in math*



*“Terälahti school did a decaying test in autumn 2021. We buried various biowaste next to the school field. The aim was to find out how long it will take for even the smallest and most common biowaste to decay. We immediately noticed that nothing would disappear from nature in a couple of weeks. This was a surprise for many children, as well as for many adults. We also buried a mask and a tinfoil. It is no surprise to anyone that they are still there. This biowaste experiment also helped pupils understand that the amount of our food waste makes difference. We also discussed how these products of our choice have ended up as food for us. Terälahti is part of Tampere, the 3th largest city in Finland. However, Terälahti is located 40 kilometers from the city center, so we are in rural area. This has been an advantage for the Terälahti school when we have studied food production. In families of many pupils, cattle are raised or they cultivate. Food production is closer to their daily lives” (Katri Korpi, Terälahti primary school teacher).*

There is a hut in Terälahti school's field near to the river. The open shelter with fireplace can be found in the middle of the forest. Both places serve as meeting and relaxation spots for nearby residents and pupils.

**MAPPA .fi service** • “Many Finnish schools’ educators and teachers use Mappa.fi-material service website. At MAPPA-material bank teachers can find more than a thousand materials and tools for outdoor learning, environmental education and teaching a sustainable lifestyle. The MAPPA.fi service is a versatile entity that looks at things from different perspectives, the contents of which do not follow only one specific ideology”<sup>115</sup>.

#### **Multiple actors support basic education in Finland •**

For ESD, Finnish schools are also helped by The Finnish Association of Nature and Environment Schools that organises and develops LYKE-network. “The network offers environmental education services for schools and kindergartens on local level”<sup>116</sup>. Nature School Korento is part of this network.

The goal of the LYKKE-network is to promote sustainable lifestyles, environmental responsibility, and knowledge of nature, and to support outdoor teaching and functional learning. To achieve its purpose, the association coordinates and develops the national LYKE network, manages the MAPPA.fi service and acts as the coordinator and one organiser of the ULOS-UT-OUT major event. The activity is based on networking and the utilisation of group insights. As a result of the cooperation, impressive nationwide models will be created to increase the effectiveness of nature and environmental education. The 59 outlets of the LYKE network all over Finland have diverse communication channels for teachers and educators, and more than 200,000 children and young people and their teachers visit them every year.

#### **Strengths/prospects**

- The curriculum provides guidelines and encourages sustainability education. Teachers can decide the methods independently
- Students’ enthusiasm to study with diverse learning methods and in learning environment
- The power of cooperation. For example, when teachers truly have time to plan together, there is a better chance on success of actions
- The municipality allows for independent support. Sometimes financial support, e.g. Green Flag (Eco school) participation fee
- Wonderful nature surroundings near the school

#### **Challenges**

- Teachers are burdened by the fragmentation of work
- Schools need the feedback on what they do for ESD. Otherwise, they can think of it as a burden and extra work. That is why sustainable development should also include administration as well as the field workers
- Engaging everybody with ESD is a challenge
- There is no time resourcing in schools. It is the biggest challenge to the work of ESD
- There isn’t enough time to work with the subjects the teachers would rather work with

Nature or environmental school activities refer to program services provided to groups of children and young people with the aim of promoting an ecologically sustainable future. Programs last at least an hour, usually several hours at a time.

Many other NGO’s also work with schools. The Finnish United Nations<sup>117</sup> organises supplement training for teachers in the SDG’s. Online and hybrid training can be arranged so that teachers can participate easily on them. Nature School in Terälahti co-operates with them. Nature Schools in Finland also regularly organise teacher training on various pedagogical themes in sustainable education or outdoor learning. Teachers can also train to be an environmental educator. The program is part of the training leading to a special vocational qualification in the field of environment. It takes place in the [Finnish Environmental College \(SYKLI\)](#)<sup>118</sup>, a nationwide vocational special education institution. Environmental training is suitable, for example, for those working in the field of education and counselling and training in the field of the environment.