

TOWARDS PARTICIPATORY EDUCATION:

Student Involvement in
Curriculum Development
in Europe with a Focus on
Finland

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1.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of involving children and young people in the development of educational systems that affect their lives. This principle of student participation is grounded in international human rights frameworks such as Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which guarantees children's right to express their views on matters that affect them. It is increasingly reflected in educational discourse across Europe. However, although young people's views are often encouraged in extracurricular activities or civic education, their meaningful involvement in developing core curricula remains limited in many contexts.

This is particularly striking when considering the significant amount of time students spend in education. On average, students in Europe spend between 750 and 1,000 hours per year in compulsory education, depending on the country and age group (OECD, 2023). Given that young people dedicate such a substantial portion of their lives to school, it is crucial that they have a say in how learning is structured, what content is prioritised and which methods are used.

Without meaningful participation, schools risk becoming environments of passive compliance rather than spaces of active engagement and growth.

This article explores the role of student participation in curriculum development. It analyses emerging European trends and highlights how such involvement could address pressing educational challenges, such as absenteeism, disengagement and a perceived lack of relevance in learning.

Particular attention is paid to Finland, where the 2014–2016 national curriculum reform offers a notable example of embedding learner agency and participatory principles at the heart of educational design. Finland's approach provides valuable insights into how the voice of students can enhance not only learning outcomes and well-being, but also contribute to the creation of more democratic, responsive and equitable education systems.

By comparing Finland's practices with broader European developments, the article aims to shed light on the potential and limitations of student participation in curriculum development and to advocate for stronger systemic mechanisms that involve students as co-creators of their own learning.

2.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND CURRICULUM CO-CREATION

2.1 Child Rights and Democratic Education

The foundation for student participation in curriculum development lies in the recognition of children's rights to express their views and influence decisions that affect their lives. This is clearly articulated in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):



1. *States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*
2. *For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child...*

(United Nations, 1989)

As education is one of the key 'matters affecting the child', children's voices should be central to shaping the school environment and the curriculum itself. However, in many school systems, decisions about the curriculum are still dominated by adults, which limits the implementation of Article 12 in everyday educational practices.

The principle of participation is also emphasised at the European level. The EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027), adopted in 2018, aims to increase young people's engagement in democratic life and ensure they all have the opportunity to participate fully in society. It emphasises that youth policies should 'foster youth participation in democratic life' and 'support social and civic engagement' (Council of the EU, 2018). Curriculum development, which is central to educational policy, falls within this scope as it shapes what young people learn and how they are prepared for active citizenship.

2.2. Addressing Key Educational Challenges Through Student Participation



Involving young people in curriculum development should be considered a democratic principle and a practical response to persistent challenges in education systems. One of the most pressing issues is student absenteeism and disengagement. Across Europe, rising absenteeism rates signal a disconnection between students and their learning environments. When young people are given the opportunity to influence their learning, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership and belonging at school (Korpershoek et. al., 2019). This increased engagement can reduce absenteeism and improve attendance, as students begin to see their education as relevant and responsive to their needs.

Another significant problem is the growing concern about student mental health and emotional well-being. Feeling ignored or powerless within school structures can contribute to anxiety, stress and a lack of motivation. Conversely, research suggests that participation enhances students' sense of agency, inclusion, and emotional safety (Mitra, 2022). When students feel genuinely heard and their contributions are taken seriously, their psychological well-being improves and they develop stronger self-esteem and resilience.

A third challenge that participatory curriculum development can address is the perceived irrelevance of school content. Traditional curricula often fail to reflect students' interests, lived experiences or urgent global issues such as climate change, digital culture and mental health (UNESCO, 2021). Involving young people in curriculum design ensures that educational content evolves alongside societal changes and student realities. When learners contribute to shaping the topics and methods used in their classrooms, the curriculum becomes more meaningful and dynamic, thereby increasing motivation and facilitating deeper learning (Rudduck & Flutter, 2020).



Finally, educational inequality remains a pervasive issue in many European education systems, particularly for students from marginalised backgrounds. Without mechanisms for meaningful participation, dominant perspectives tend to dominate, often overlooking or minimising the needs of underrepresented groups (Gallagher, 2021). Inclusive participation enables a wider range of voices, particularly those of students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, to influence curriculum content and delivery (Arnot & Swartz, 2022). This can lead to a more culturally responsive education system and reduce disparities in engagement, achievement and access.

Addressing these interrelated challenges through student participation in curriculum development offers a pathway to more democratic, effective and equitable learning environments that are centred around the needs of students.

2.3. Curriculum Co-Creation in Theory

Traditionally, curriculum has been understood as a top-down instrument developed by policymakers and delivered by educators, with limited input from students. This conventional model positions students as passive recipients of predefined knowledge, reinforcing hierarchical power structures in education. However, recent educational paradigms advocate for a shift toward curriculum co-creation, where students are recognized as active contributors to their own learning. Theoretical frameworks such as constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1950), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and learner-centered education (Dewey, 1938) challenge the passive role of learners and argue for collaborative processes that consider students' experiences, voices, and agency.



Constructivism posits that knowledge is not simply transmitted but actively constructed by learners through interaction with their environment and social discourse. In this framework, curriculum co-creation aligns with the idea that learning is most meaningful when students engage in sense-making processes, integrating new knowledge with their prior experiences. Similarly, critical pedagogy, as articulated by Freire (1970), critiques the "banking model" of education, where knowledge is deposited into passive learners. Instead, it promotes dialogic education, where teachers and students collaborate in knowledge production, fostering critical consciousness and empowerment.

Moreover, learner-centered education emphasizes the importance of tailoring curricula to students' needs, interests, and cultural backgrounds. Dewey's (1938) progressive education principles highlight that learning should be experiential and connected to real-world contexts, suggesting that curricula should evolve through continuous negotiation between educators and learners. This perspective shifts the curriculum from a rigid, standardized structure to a living document that adapts to the evolving dynamics of the classroom.

In this view, the curriculum is not a static document but a dynamic and context-sensitive process. Learners and teachers co-construct knowledge, reflecting not only institutional goals but also the real-life concerns and aspirations of the student body. This approach encourages dialogue, relevance, and adaptability, making education more responsive to the complex realities of a diverse student population.

Additionally, student agency becomes central in curriculum co-creation, as learners are invited to contribute to decision-making regarding content, pedagogy, and assessment. This democratization of curriculum design fosters greater engagement, ownership, and motivation among students, as they see their identities and lived experiences reflected in their education.



3.

FINLAND AS A CASE STUDY

Finland's national curriculum reform (2014-2017) stands as a landmark example of democratic, student-centered educational transformation. Unlike traditional top-down reforms, Finland's process engaged multiple stakeholders to create a curriculum for early childhood through upper secondary education. The phased implementation (grades 1-6 in 2016, grades 7-9 between 2017-2019) ensured structured adaptation while maintaining flexibility for local innovation. This approach was rooted in Finland's educational philosophy that equity, wellbeing, and meaningful learning are interconnected pillars of a sustainable society (Halinen et al., 2013; Pietarinen et al., 2017).

3.1 A Collaborative and Transparent Reform Process

The reform's success stemmed from its inclusive design, which brought together policymakers, teachers, students, parents, and researchers. Teachers played a central role as co-creators, ensuring that pedagogical realities informed policy decisions. However, what set Finland's process apart was its systematic integration of student voices. Before drafting the curriculum, the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE) conducted a nationwide survey of 60,000 students (26% of the target age group), gathering insights on school culture, learning relevance, and desired improvements. Municipalities and schools further deepened participation by hosting student forums, such as Helsinki's city-wide discussion with 550 pupils, where themes like trust, equality, and collaborative learning emerged as priorities.



3.2 Student Influence on Curriculum Content and Pedagogy

The reform explicitly incorporated student perspectives into the curriculum framework. Its four foundational pillars – respect for individuality, democratic citizenship, cultural diversity and sustainable living – reflect values expressed by young people themselves. To enhance engagement and real-world relevance, pedagogical innovations such as phenomenon-based learning (PhBL), which involves interdisciplinary, student-driven projects, were introduced. To support the implementation of these changes, Helsinki's education department developed tools in collaboration with teachers and students. These tools include specially designed planning card decks to help teachers and students structure and assess PhBL processes, and have been used across schools since 2020. Assessment practices have also shifted towards providing formative feedback and encouraging self-evaluation, thereby reducing reliance on standardised testing. This change has been made in response to students' calls for more meaningful learning experiences. National guidance emphasises self-assessment in basic education, providing assessment criteria and encouraging practices that help pupils develop the ability to evaluate their own learning. In this context, learning diaries, particularly digital ones, are widely used in Finnish schools and higher education institutions to encourage reflection, self-evaluation and metacognition.

3.3 Impacts and Ongoing Challenges

Early evidence suggests the reform has bolstered student engagement and teacher collaboration while preserving Finland's strong equity outcomes (OECD, 2019; Sahlberg, 2018). However, challenges remain,



including uneven implementation of phenomenon-based learning and disparities in participation between urban and rural schools. The phased rollout also required significant professional development to ensure consistency.

Thus, the Finnish example demonstrates that curriculum co-creation is not only theoretically sound but practically achievable, offering a model of how national policy can align with international human rights commitments and progressive pedagogical theories. This model reinforces the idea that participatory curriculum development is both a democratic imperative and an educational opportunity.

4.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT: A EUROPEAN OVERVIEW

Student participation in curriculum development is gaining momentum across Europe as educators recognize its potential to increase engagement and relevance. This overview examines how different European education systems integrate student voices in curriculum design, drawing on national policies and academic research.



Ireland

In Ireland, the development of the Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC) has advanced student participation in curriculum design, moving beyond tokenistic approaches to student voice. Traditional models often confined student participation to school councils, limiting their ability to influence what is taught and how learning occurs (O'Reilly & O'Grady, 2024). In contrast, the NIC framework involves students in the co-construction of the curriculum through a structured ten-step process. This begins with identifying personal and global concerns, voting on shared themes, generating questions and co-planning learning activities with teachers (O'Reilly, 2020). This participatory model emphasises agentic engagement, whereby students direct their own learning, collaborate critically with peers, and witness the realisation of their ideas in meaningful ways. Research has shown that the NIC fosters greater motivation and engagement, as well as strengthening wellbeing, democratic participation and mutual respect between students and teachers. This challenges traditional power dynamics in Irish classrooms (O'Reilly & O'Grady, 2024; O'Reilly, 2020).

Portugal

In Portugal, students' participation in the curriculum has been strengthened through the Project for Autonomy and Curriculum Flexibility (OECD, 2018). This initiative encourages schools to adapt national guidelines to local needs and involves students in the learning process. This reform recognises students as active contributors to the education process, giving them the opportunity to express their interests and influence their learning pathways. The framework of curriculum autonomy and flexibility enables schools to design interdisciplinary projects, integrate real-world challenges and value student input when shaping content and methods. In this way, student participation becomes a



cornerstone of a more democratic and personalised education system, aligning national goals with local realities and individual aspirations.

Estonia

The Estonian education system strongly emphasises student participation in the curriculum, having moved away from rigid structures to allow greater flexibility in teaching and learning. Rather than following a strictly standardised curriculum, teachers are given autonomy to adapt their classes according to their students' needs and interests, thereby creating more opportunities for dialogue and collaboration in the classroom (Education Estonia, n.d.). This approach enhances student engagement and ensures that learning feels meaningful and relevant. In line with the Estonian Education Strategy 2035, a key objective is to enable every learner to customise their learning journey, thereby fostering a sense of agency, motivation and equity in education (Republic of Estonia, Ministry of Education and Research, 2021). By prioritising flexibility and responsiveness, Estonia's system demonstrates how student voices and interests can directly influence the curriculum.



5.

CONCLUSION

The growing movement towards involving students in curriculum development represents a significant shift in educational paradigms, aligning with democratic principles, pedagogical theory and practical needs. Finland's national curriculum reform is an example of how systemic student involvement can enhance engagement, relevance, and equity, while also addressing challenges such as disengagement, mental health issues, and educational inequality. Across Europe, countries such as Ireland, Portugal and Estonia are experimenting with various co-creation models, though disparities in implementation persist.

These efforts highlight that curriculum development is a democratic and pedagogical process, not just a technical one. When students are recognised as active co-creators, grounded in frameworks such as constructivism, critical pedagogy and learner-centred education, schools become more responsive, inclusive and meaningful. However, achieving this vision requires overcoming structural barriers, ensuring equitable participation, and investing in the capacity of teachers and students.

The Finnish case, alongside emerging European practices, offers a compelling blueprint for integrating student voices into curriculum design. By embracing participatory approaches, education systems can evolve from tokenistic consultation to genuine partnership, thus realising the potential of transformative learning and fulfilling the promise of child rights.



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