

EDUCATION

The Joyful, Illiterate Kindergartners of Finland

Forget the Common Core, Finland's youngsters are in charge of determining what happens in the classroom. grade—that's what my 5-year-old

The difference between a first grader in the mid-90s doesn't match the kind of three and a half hours of daily literacy (officially, by law, no more than 20 minutes) standardized tests in literacy and

That American friend—who teaches for eight to integrate the 30 minutes of letter stamps to practice words. But here's the real reason: the state's distribution of money to kindergartners

A working paper, "Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?" confirms what many experts have suspected for years: The American kindergarten experience has become much more academic—and at the expense of play. The late psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim, even raised an article for The Atlantic in 1987.

Researchers at the University of Virginia, led by the education-policy researcher Daphna Bassok, analyzed survey responses from American kindergarten teachers between 1998 and 2010. “Almost every dimension that we examined,” noted Bassok, “had major shifts over this period towards a heightened focus on academics, and particularly a heightened focus on literacy, and within literacy, a focus on more advanced skills than what had been taught before.”

In the study, the percentage of kindergarten teachers who reported that they agreed (or strongly agreed) that children should learn to read in kindergarten greatly increased from 30 percent in 1998 to 80 percent in 2010.

Bassok and her colleagues found that while time spent on literacy in American kindergarten classrooms went up, time spent on arts, music, and child-selected activities (like station time) significantly dropped. Teacher-directed instruction also increased, revealing what Bassok described as “striking increases in the use of textbooks and worksheets... and very large increases in the use of assessments.”

But Finland—a Nordic nation of 5.5 million people, where I’ve lived and taught fifth and sixth grade (x t (s)-h(s)-h(s)-.(s)-1.1 (i)-4 (x (er)-1.1 (s)-11 (w)-1

Approaching the school's playground that morning, I watched as an

counselor for the Finnish National Board of Education. What's more, Holappa, who also leads the development of the country's preprimary core curriculum, said that play is being emphasized more than ever in latest version of that curriculum, which goes into effect in kindergartens next fall.

"Play is a very efficient way of learning for children," she told me. "And we can use it in a way that children will learn with joy."

The word "joy" caught me off guard—I'm certainly not used to hearing the word in conversations about education in America, where I received my training and taught for several years. But Holappa, detecting my surprise, reiterated that the country's early-childhood education program indeed places a heavy emphasis on "joy," which along with play is explicitly written into the curriculum as a learning concept. "There's an old Finnish saying," Holappa said. "Those things you learn without joy (g)-6 (s)-3 ()-2 (e)JTJ -0)-3 ((y)-7)-6 (s)-3 (i)-1 (t)3 (e-2 (ed)-

kindergarten. Ultimately, they're expected to, at the very least, be able to decode basic texts without the support of a teacher.

“But there isn't any solid evidence that shows that children who are taught to read in kindergarten have any long-term benefit from it,” Nancy Carlsson-Paige, a professor emeritus of early childhood education at Lesley University, explained in a video published by the advocacy group Defending the Early Years

Research by Sebastian Suggate, a former Ph.D. candidate at New Zealand's University of Otago studying educational psychology, confirms Carlsson-Paige's findings. One of Suggate's studies compared children from Rudolf Steiner schools—who typically begin to read at the age of seven—with children at state-run schools in New Zealand, who start reading at the age of five. By age 11, students from the former group caught up with their peers in the latter, demonstrating equivalent reading skills.

“This research then raises the question,” he said in an interview published by the University of Otago. “If there aren't advantages to learning to read from the age of five, could there be disadvantages to starting teaching children to read earlier?”

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Once the song was complete, the little postman took out a card and handed it to his classmate. “Would you like me to help you read this?” one of the birthday boy’s teachers asked. “You help,” he responded, a hint that hadn’t quite mastered the skill yet. I watched his face carefully, searching for any hint of shame. I found none—but then again, why should he have felt embarrassed?

The flickering six candles reminded me he’s only a little kid.

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