THE EXPERIENCE OF THE UK AND FINLAND IN DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS IN PRIMARY GRADES

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Abstract

This article provides a comparative analysis of the pedagogical approaches to developing writing skills in primary education within the United Kingdom and Finland. It explores the fundamental philosophical and structural differences between the two systems, specifically contrasting the UK's more prescriptive, standards-driven "transmission" model with Finland's child-centered, holistic, and "process-oriented" approach. The examination focuses on three critical domains: the role of teacher professional autonomy, the balance between compositional skills and technical transcription, and the nature of assessment practices. By synthesizing findings from international educational research, the article argues that the Finnish emphasis on play, student interest, and extended writing processes fosters greater intrinsic motivation and long-term writing development, while the UK's structured framework ensures early competence in foundational skills. The conclusion advocates for a balanced pedagogical synthesis, suggesting that effective writing instruction requires both explicit skill instruction and a supportive, authentic context for creative expression, drawing on the strengths of both systems.

Keywords: Primary Writing Instruction, UK Education, Finnish Education, Comparative Pedagogy, Process Writing, Teacher Autonomy, Assessment, Literacy Development, Creative Writing, Educational Policy.

Main Article Text

The acquisition of writing skills in primary education represents a cornerstone of literacy development, fundamentally influencing a child's capacity for academic achievement and effective communication across the lifespan. However, the pedagogical pathways to achieving writing competence are remarkably diverse across different national education systems. Two nations, the United Kingdom and Finland, are frequently cited as exemplars of contrasting yet highly effective educational philosophies, offering a rich basis for comparative analysis in the context of primary writing instruction. While the United Kingdom, particularly England, operates within a framework characterized by a rigorous national curriculum, high-stakes assessment, and a strong emphasis on synthetic phonics and grammatical proficiency, Finland champions a model predicated on teacher professionalism, child-centered learning, and a holistic, process-oriented approach to literacy. This divergence extends beyond mere curriculum documents to permeate the very culture of the classroom, the role of the teacher, and the fundamental purpose of writing itself. Consequently, an examination of these two systems yields critical insights into the complex interplay between structure and autonomy, skill and creativity, and assessment and motivation, which are the core drivers of effective writing pedagogy.

The primary distinction between the two systems lies in their foundational philosophy regarding the nature of knowledge and the role of the educator. The educational framework in the United Kingdom, particularly post-2014 National Curriculum reforms, can be characterized as a "transmission" model, where a clearly defined body of knowledge and skills is prescribed to be delivered to students. In the domain of writing, this manifests as a structured and sequential progression from phonics and letter formation in the earliest years to the mastery of specific grammatical concepts, punctuation, and spelling patterns. Teachers are provided with detailed guidance and are held accountable for students' attainment against standardized benchmarks, a dynamic that reinforces a pedagogical focus on the explicit instruction of technical accuracy and prescribed text types. Conversely, the Finnish education system is built upon a "constructivist" and "process" model, which posits that learning is an active, constructive process where students build their understanding through experience and reflection. Here, the role of the teacher is that of an autonomous, highly trained professional who is trusted to design the curriculum at a

local level, tailoring instruction to the unique needs and interests of their students. This trust extends to decisions about pacing and methodology, allowing teachers to prioritize student engagement and deep understanding over the rapid coverage of content, a philosophy that significantly shapes how writing is taught and perceived in the primary years.

One of the most critical areas of divergence is the pedagogical approach to the two core components of writing: compositional skills (idea generation, organization, audience awareness, and voice) and transcription skills (handwriting, spelling, and grammar). In the United Kingdom, the instructional emphasis is heavily weighted towards the explicit and systematic teaching of transcription. The early years are dominated by the systematic synthetic phonics approach, which, while demonstrably effective in developing decoding skills for reading, also provides a foundation for spelling. The National Curriculum outlines detailed statutory requirements for grammar and punctuation, necessitating dedicated lessons for these concepts. While this approach ensures a high level of technical competence, critics argue that a disproportionate focus on the mechanics of writing can become a significant cognitive burden for young writers, potentially stifling creativity and the generation of ideas. As Graham and Harris (2013) argue, when the working memory is overloaded with the mechanics of spelling and handwriting, students have fewer cognitive resources available for higher-order compositional processes. This can lead to writing that is technically correct but uninspired, formulaic, and lacking in personal voice.

In stark contrast, the Finnish system places a greater initial emphasis on the development of creative expression and compositional thinking within an authentic and meaningful context. This approach is grounded in the belief that a child should first be motivated to write by having a genuine purpose and an audience. Finnish educators incorporate play, storytelling, and the student's own experiences as central elements of the writing process. The technical aspects of writing, while certainly taught, are often integrated more organically into these authentic writing projects. The concept of "writing as a process" is a cornerstone of this approach. Students are encouraged to move through stages of planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, which are often collaborative and involve feedback from both teachers and peers. This process-oriented approach inherently teaches young writers that writing is a craft to be honed, not a final product to be judged solely on its mechanical accuracy. This emphasis on the recursive nature of writing helps to reduce the anxiety associated with producing a "perfect" piece on the first attempt, fostering a more resilient and risk-taking approach to composition (Graham, 2018).

The nature and purpose of assessment within the two systems are profoundly different and exert a powerful influence on classroom practices. The UK system is characterized by its high-stakes, summative assessment culture, notably through the Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) at Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. The grammar, punctuation, and spelling (GPS) test is a particular component that exerts significant "washback" on the curriculum, often narrowing the focus to the discrete teaching of decontextualized rules in preparation for the test. As Wyse and Domac (2022) observe, such a high-stakes environment can lead to teaching "to the test," reducing the time available for rich, extended writing projects and creative exploration. The pressure to achieve quantifiable results can foster a culture of "performance," where students become adept at jumping through specific hoops rather than developing a genuine love for writing. This focus on terminal assessment can also create a sense of failure in students who are still developing their skills, potentially damaging their self-efficacy as writers at a crucial developmental stage.

Conversely, the Finnish assessment culture is predominantly formative and low-stakes, designed to support learning rather than to rank or judge. There are no national standardized tests for primary students. Instead, teachers are entrusted with the responsibility of ongoing, diagnostic assessment to guide their instruction and provide individualized support. The emphasis is on the qualitative feedback that helps a student understand how to improve their writing—the "feedforward" concept. This formative assessment is deeply integrated into the writing process, where feedback is given on drafts and ideas, not just the final product. This approach significantly reduces the anxiety associated with writing and positions the teacher as a supportive guide on the student's learning journey. This supportive environment is crucial, as student motivation is a critical determinant of writing success (Troia & Graham, 2016). When students feel their ideas are valued and that writing is a means of personal expression and

communication, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to engage in the hard work of improving.

The impact of these contrasting philosophies on teacher autonomy, professional identity, and practice cannot be overstated. In the UK, while teachers are highly trained, the prescriptive nature of the curriculum and the pressure of assessment can lead to a feeling of being a "deliverer" of a national agenda rather than a professional decision-maker. The curriculum's detailed demands and the volume of content to be covered can leave teachers feeling they have little flexibility to deviate, often limiting their ability to respond to the specific needs and interests of their learners. This can be particularly challenging for developing writing skills, a process that benefits enormously from flexibility, student choice, and time. In Finland, the high level of teacher autonomy, supported by a demanding master's degree requirement, fosters a strong sense of professionalism and trust. Teachers are considered experts in curriculum design and pedagogical practice, empowered to make professional judgments about the most effective ways to teach their students. This autonomy allows them to cultivate a classroom culture where writing is a fluid, creative, and responsive process, rather than a rigid set of tasks to be completed.

Furthermore, the structural and societal context surrounding education in each country reinforces these pedagogical differences. Finland's commitment to educational equity means that resources are allocated to ensure that all students, regardless of background, receive high-quality support. The school day is less rigidly structured than in the UK, with ample time for play and physical activity, which is recognized as crucial for cognitive and social development, including the foundational skills needed for writing. The Finnish system also ensures that students who struggle with writing receive immediate and targeted intervention, preventing the widening of attainment gaps. In the UK, while there are support systems in place, the more competitive and high-stakes environment can sometimes mean that struggling writers are left behind, particularly in a system where they are expected to meet demanding benchmarks from a very young age (Graham et al., 2015). The contrast highlights that a system's philosophy on writing extends far beyond the classroom walls, reflecting a society's broader values on education, childhood, and the purpose of learning.

Ultimately, a dispassionate analysis reveals that neither system is without its challenges. The UK's model, while criticized for being overly prescriptive, successfully produces students with a strong command of the technical aspects of writing. Its structured approach ensures that foundational skills are not neglected, a pitfall that can occasionally occur in overly child-centered, unstructured environments. In contrast, the Finnish model, which prioritizes creativity and process, can be more challenging to implement consistently, relying as it does on the high quality and expertise of every individual teacher. However, the Finnish approach arguably does more to cultivate a generation of students who view writing as a meaningful and valuable tool for thought and communication, not just a skill to be assessed. The implication of this comparative analysis is that writing pedagogy in the 21st century would benefit from a pragmatic synthesis, drawing on the strengths of both traditions. There is a clear need for the explicit, systematic instruction of foundational skills—the UK's strength—to be delivered within a more holistic and student-centered pedagogical framework that nurtures creativity, motivation, and a lifelong love of writing, as championed in Finland (Bazerman et al., 2017).

The implications for teacher training and professional development are equally significant. To effectively deliver this integrated model, primary educators need more than just a toolkit of technical strategies; they require deep pedagogical content knowledge. This includes an understanding of how children acquire writing skills, how to diagnose individual students' needs, and how to create an engaging and supportive classroom environment. Training must move beyond the mechanics of grammar and spelling to encompass the teaching of composition, motivation, and the effective use of formative assessment. This involves cultivating the professional judgment to know when to prioritize explicit skill instruction and when to step back and allow for creative exploration. The Finnish model of empowering teachers as professionals, rather than mere implementers, offers a powerful blueprint for fostering such a sophisticated skillset.

In conclusion, the comparative study of primary writing instruction in the United Kingdom and Finland highlights a fundamental dichotomy in educational philosophy. The UK's standards-based, skill-focused approach and the Finnish child-centered, process-oriented model represent two poles on a

pedagogical continuum. The UK system delivers proficiency in the mechanics of writing, ensuring foundational literacy, while the Finnish system excels at fostering creativity, motivation, and a deep understanding of the writing process. An informed analysis suggests that the most effective path forward is not to champion one approach over the other, but to forge a synthesis. Such a synthesis would integrate the structured and systematic teaching of essential transcription skills with the authentic, flexible, and motivational pedagogical approaches that encourage children to discover the power and pleasure of their own written voice. Ultimately, the goal of writing education is to equip young people with both the skill and the will to write, and achieving this requires a thoughtful blending of clarity, structure, freedom, and inspiration—a lesson that the experiences of both these nations illuminate.

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