

CULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE FINNISH NATIONAL CORE CURRICULUM FOR BASIC EDUCATION, 1985-2014



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Cultural Practices in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 1985–2014

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Abstract

The educational system is a key institution through which cultural reproduction operates and, therefore, is of great importance for cultural policies. Bourdieu argued that the school, with its pedagogical activities, imposes on students upper-class cultural practices and ideals, thus making them legitimate. This gives an advantage to those students already familiar with upper-class practices because of their family background. We apply this model to the case of Finnish basic education, internationally renowned for its relative equality. Analysing the Finnish national core curriculum for basic education from 1985 to 2014 by means of content analysis, we interpret them as representing crucial legitimizing authority: if some cultural practice is mentioned in these documents, it is considered so important that it should be taught to everybody in Finland. Thus, we ask whether and to what extent does the Finnish basic education impose, through its core curriculum, upper-class cultural practices on all students.

Keywords: cultural reproduction, core curriculum, basic education, cultural practices, Finland

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Introduction

Social reproduction – the intergenerational renewal of social relations by transferring them from one generation to the next – is a classical research area of sociology explaining why and how societies remain relatively stable over time. A voluminous body of research shows how class position, when operationalized through education or occupational status, is inherited from parents to their children (e.g., Pfeffer 2008; Hertz et al. 2007; Hout & DiPrete 2006; Breen & Luijkx 2004), and the Nordic welfare states like Finland are no exceptions in this (Karhunen & Uusitalo 2017; Erola et al. 2016; Kivinen et al. 2012; Härkönen 2010; Karhula & Sirniö 2019). Education is also the most central factor explaining the inheritance of occupational status (Hout & DiPrete 2006; Erola et al. 2016). Although not as strong in the Nordics as in many other countries, recent research shows that the inheritance of class position has begun to strengthen in Finland in the 2000s (Härkönen & Sirniö 2020; Erola 2009). As the inheritance of education is a key factor in explaining the inheritance of class inequalities across generations, examining the practices and mechanisms of the inheritance of educational credentials has become the core of social reproduction research.

Bourdieu explained social reproduction through education by developing a theory of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron 1979, 1990), which has become an influential explanatory model for intergenerational transmission of social inequalities (Jaeger & Breen 2016; Smilde & Zubrzycki 2016). Accordingly, the educational system, with its pedagogical activities, conveys – or imposes – to its students cultural content that is typical of the upper social classes and their ways of life. With the authority that inevitably belongs to pedagogical activity, students understand the transmitted culture – the culture chosen to be transmitted from all available culture in a society – as legitimate (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990:20–22), which masks the class-specificity of that culture. The impact and efficiency of the pedagogical activity is inversely proportional to the social distance between the culture imposed by the school and the culture the students have previously adopted (Bourdieu 1973:493; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990:43). Thus, children from the upper classes – already familiar with legitimate culture – are more ready than the children from the lower classes to absorb the culture pushed by the education system. Over time, systematic differences in assimilation efficiency accumulate, and the education system with its different degrees, sectors, and selection mechanisms for educational paths ultimately reproduces the cultural differences of social classes. The reproduction of cultural differences means, in practice, the reproduction of the power relations between social classes (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990:10–11, 54). Thus, the education system transforms social hierarchies between classes into legitimate academic hierarchies and thereby maintains the social order and its continuity in a

generally accepted and unobjectionable way (Bourdieu 1973:496; Bourdieu 1984:386–387; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990:194–210).

Could the theory of cultural reproduction be a useful tool to examine the inheritance of class positions through education also in a country such as Finland? Bourdieu developed his theory while studying the French education system in the 1960s, so one can ask in what sense the theory can be relevant to describe the Finnish education system, which has usually been considered in international comparisons both relatively effective (e.g., success in the PISA studies) and equal (e.g., the basic school model). However, the theory of cultural reproduction is closely linked to Bourdieu's (1984) work on social stratification of lifestyles, and research has shown that lifestyles in contemporary Finland follow by and large the same regularities as in Bourdieu's France (Purhonen et al. 2014). Thus, it is worthwhile to investigate whether also the theory of cultural reproduction could be fruitful in the Finnish context.

In the Finnish education system, the most important factor differentiating the educational paths of individuals according to their social background – and thus determining their later educational and professional careers – is the transition from primary to secondary education, both historically and during the basic school system (Härkönen & Sirniö 2020). Since the 1980s, the basic school has included a common curriculum for all students and guaranteed all those who have completed it the eligibility to enter the secondary level. Basic school, in other words, in principle guarantees the same conditions for everyone, but still selection for the secondary level differs according to social class and, especially, parental education. Thus, the Finnish basic school is an interesting object for the study of cultural reproduction. In this case study we ask whether and to what extent does the basic school impose cultural practices of the upper social classes in Finland? This question is relevant also for cultural policies, insofar as we agree that the education system is a central institution through which cultural inequality is produced and reproduced.

Cultural practices of the Finnish upper and middle classes

To find out whether the basic school imposes upper-class cultural practices in Finland, it is first necessary to know what those practices are. The differentiation of cultural practices and lifestyles by social class in Finland has been studied in a sufficient manner to answer this question, even if there is no research into a strictly defined elite culture (e.g., Friedman & Reeves 2020; Daloz 2010) in Finland.

Already Eskola (1976) studied the prevalence and distribution of participation in various cultural practices in different population groups and found large differences in participation according to education and occupational class. Her findings were essentially similar to Liikkanen and colleagues some 30 years later using comprehensive survey data from 1982, 1991 and 2002 (Liikkanen et al. 2005): activities such as reading books and visiting libraries, theatre, art exhibitions, concerts and movies are strongly associated with high education and class position. The amount of reading newspapers or watching television, the amount of listening to the radio or music, or engaging in crafts or exercise do not vary significantly according to education or occupational class. However, what is actually watched on television varies, so even if the amount of participation in cultural practices does not vary by class, the

cultural taste in terms of cultural content consumed may do so. Similarly, even if practicing something does not vary by social class, the reasons behind engaging in the practice may be different. For example, cooking in higher socioeconomic positions compared to lower ones is clearly more often also a “fun and hobby”, not just a “routine and duty” (Liikkanen et al. 2005:278–281).

Most recent studies mapping cultural tastes and participation in Finland show, in a similar vein, that the number of books read, the frequency of visiting theatre, art exhibitions, museums, movies, classical music concerts, and the opera associate with high education and occupational class, while practices such as going to nightclubs, rock concerts or liking rock music or hip-hop are not clearly associated with these background factors (e.g., Purhonen et al. 2014; Heikkilä 2022). Doing sports and exercise are still common among all classes, but sport choices are differentiated by social class (e.g., running, skiing and gym are associated with highly educated, while pole walking, cycling, and dancing do not differ according to education; Kahma 2010). Television watching has changed in such a way that the highly educated and those in higher class positions no longer watch television to the same extent as other groups (Kahma 2011; Purhonen et al. 2011, 2014).

In sum, in Finland, there is a fairly clearly defined culture of the upper social classes, which includes involvement in literary culture as well as participating in institutional cultural activities (such as going to concerts) and appreciating music genres like classical. To put it simply, the cultural practices and lifestyles of the Finnish upper and middle classes have a certain time-lasting “highbrow culture” feature that distinguishes it from the practices and lifestyles of the lower social classes. The so-called popular cultural practices, such as watching television, liking popular music (rock, pop, schlager), listening to the radio, and engaging in physical exercise or handicrafts, on the other hand, are not clearly differentiated by social class. These cultural practices are engaged by all social classes almost equally, although, of course, the actual contents of the practices and the motives of engagement may be class-dependent. Moreover, it seems that while the overall popularity of different cultural practices varies over time, the patterns of differentiation mostly remain stable. Thus, as the cultural characteristics of the Finnish upper classes seem to exist, it can be investigated whether the basic school imposes such cultural practices by its curriculum.

Core Curriculum for Basic Education as a research object

The Finnish basic school was built in the 1960s and 1970s as a compromise of political interests. The basic school replaced the parallel school system that preceded it, and one of the main motives for the reform of primary education was to narrow the differences in participation in primary education based on social background. Basic school became a nine-year uniform, compulsory school for the entire age group, from which one cannot be exempted. The level courses that were included in the initial stages in basic school were removed in the curriculum reform of 1985, after which completion of basic school has given the general eligibility for studies in secondary education. Administratively, the control of basic schools was initially centralized to the state, but with the decentralization of public administration in the 1980s, the power regarding basic schools was transferred to the

municipalities, and the school choice made possible in the 1990s also shared decision-making power with families. (Silvennoinen et al. 2012; Kettunen et al. 2012; Simola et al. 2017.) Overall, the basic school enjoys broad legitimacy in the Finnish society as a promoter of social equality (Simola et al. 2017:34–47; Kauko 2019).

The central steering document and management tool for basic school operations is national core curriculum (POPS). POPS defines the teaching given in basic school – its goals and content, the amount of time available for different subjects, and student evaluation principles (Rokka 2011; Siekkinen 2017; Kauko 2019; Varjo et al. 2020). The preparation of POPS is a political process, in which not only the views of party politicians and experts are coordinated, but also the views of various interest groups and organizations are heard (Rokka 2011; Siekkinen 2017). However, ultimately the central state administration decides the content of POPS, so it can be said that POPS “contains the state’s vision of what every individual and future citizen should know and be able to do” (Antikainen et al. 2006:175). The decentralization of the administration in the 1980s meant at the curriculum level that the municipalities became responsible for preparing municipal curricula, and schools still prepare their own curricula. These local plans are, however, prepared within the framework of POPS. POPS can therefore be characterized as a regulation drawn up by officials of the central government regulating municipalities, municipal officials (especially teachers) and their work – and the municipal officials must comply with it due to duty of care. However, municipalities and teachers have relatively wide autonomy in the application of POPS and there are no school inspectors (Kauko 2019; Sääntti & Kauko 2019). Therefore, there are differences in the local curricula across the municipalities (Holappa 2007; Palsa & Mertala 2019), and teachers apply the curriculum in their classroom routine according to their needs and to the best of their ability (Korkeamäki & Dreher 2011). This difference between the official, written curriculum and the implemented curriculum is a basic problem in curriculum research (Rinne 1984; Antikainen et al. 2006).

When studying POPS from the perspective of cultural reproduction, it is necessary to make some remarks before the analysis. The key is that the school legitimizes what it teaches: the content of instruction is automatically legitimate (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990:20–22), especially in relation to the culture that is left out of the content. Thus, if POPS mentions, for example, visiting the theatre or the opera as part of the education, this is interpreted as legitimizing the cultural forms in question, namely valuing and presenting them as so important that knowing them is a general educational obligation of every citizen (Antikainen et al. 2006). Similarly, the absence of pop music from the curriculum (Rokka 2011) would be interpreted as meaning that this music is not that important or valuable. The effect of such legitimization can be thought of as follows: POPS legitimizes reading literature, and Finns generally value reading literature, regardless of social class, even later in life (Purhonen et al. 2014). This can be considered an example of how the school produces a disposition (or “cultural goodwill”) to appreciate and participate in legitimate culture (Bourdieu 1984:22–28). However, Bourdieu warns that the school does not necessarily officially teach the same culture that it requires from students and for which it rewards them (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990:41, 99–100). The official curriculum therefore does not necessarily contain very much of the cultural practices related to the lifestyle of the upper social classes and their inculcation;

instead, imposing the cultural content can mostly happen through the school’s everyday practices (the “hidden curriculum”).

Finally, to specify the task of our case study, we can distinguish between trivial and non-trivial cultural reproduction. The trivial reproduction means that POPS is prepared by the state officials with the political elite and special experts in the field of education, in consultation with the power holders of society’s interest groups. Those working in these positions are typically university-educated and in upper-middle-class professions. Thus, from the perspective of class structure, representatives of the upper-middle class decide what culture POPS imposes. Furthermore, POPS is implemented by university-educated full-time teachers, who in the Finnish professional and salary hierarchy usually rank at least in the middle class. These implementation mechanisms of POPS are thus “trivial reproduction”, which mostly corresponds with the idea that “education tends to always also represent the ideological and hegemonic view of the desired future of the society’s social elite” (Rinne 1987:103). However, here we focus on the non-trivial side of reproduction: whether the cultural practices typical to the lifestyles of the upper classes are included in POPS and thus legitimized while imposed on all students.

Methodology

The material of the study consists of the Finnish national core curricula for basic school from 1985 to 2014 (four documents; see Table 1). Thus, the first, committee-prepared POPS from 1970, which contains level courses and does not guarantee eligibility for further study, was not included in the material. Following Varjo et al. (2020:7), POPS are considered administrative documents that define the goals, contents, time use and student evaluation of basic school education. In this way, POPS is “authoritative expert speech” (Simola 1995) which produces what it talks about – as it obligates education authorities with official responsibility, it is thus “serious speech that cannot be ignored” in the context of the Finnish basic school (Varjo 2007:36). As such, POPS have the legitimizing authority in Bourdieu’s sense: if a cultural practice is included in such an authoritative document, it means it should be taught to every child in Finland.

Table 1. Research material: Four volumes of Core Curriculum of the Basic Education

Publication year	Title	Abbreviation
1985	Peruskoulun opetussuunnitelman perusteet 1985. (2.p.)	P1985
1994	Peruskoulun opetussuunnitelman perusteet.	P1994
2004	Peruskoulun opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2004.	P2004
2014	Peruskoulun opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014. (4.p.)	P2014

The material is analysed with a theory-based content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon 2005:1281–1283): based on the theory, an analysis frame is built, which is used to sift out observational units from the material for analysis and interpretation. Here, the analysis frame (see Table 2)

is built to reflect the social class differentiation of cultural practices presented above, so that on one side of the frame there are practices that are more typically part of the upper- or middle-class lifestyle, and on the other side, practices of popular culture that cannot be said to be differentiated by social class.

The material was analysed in such a way that each POPS was read through using the analysis frame, and the points where the cultural practices presented in the analysis frame were discussed were marked. Next, we looked at the contexts in which the practices were discussed (e.g., general justifications, instructions for organizing schoolwork, subject, student assessment), for what purpose (e.g., whether they were considered desirable or criticized), and what the teaching of cultural practice is possibly aiming for. Since the study is focused on the compulsory basic education, voluntary forms – preschool education, additional education, preparatory education, and special education – were excluded from the analysis.

Table 2. Framework of the analysis: Highbrow culture and popular culture in Finland

Highbrow culture	Popular culture
(Cultural practices that are more common to upper and middle classes)	(Cultural practices that are not clearly dependent on social class)
Reading books (potentially: genre differences)	Reading newspapers (potentially: different papers)
Visiting libraries	Sports and exercise (potentially: different sports)
Visiting cinema	Watching television
Visiting theatres	Listening to radio
Visiting museums	Doing handicrafts
Visiting art gallery	
Visiting concerts (incl. opera)	Listening to music (potentially: genre differences)
Music genres: classical music, symphonies	Music genres: rock, schlagers

Findings

The term “culture” appears frequently in all basic education curricula, but the occurrences are typically of a general nature: what is meant by culture at any given time is not specified. Culture occurs in such general contexts as defining the school’s tasks and goals (“The task of the school is not only to transmit but also to develop culture”; P1985:10); when dealing with the education of cultural minorities (P1994:14; P2004:34–36; P2014:86–88); or in the definition of general education (P1994:11). The general usage of culture is structured to a large extent through the concept of cultural identity (P1994:13; P2004:14; P2014:18): the

school educates students in the cultures and cultural identities of their own reference groups, which variously means Finnish national culture (P1985:12; P1994:13–14; P2004:14; P2014:16), local culture (P1985:19; P2004:38–39) or minority culture (P1994:14; P2004:34–36; P2014:86–88). To Rokka's (2011:124–126) finding that in the core curricula, the student is located in their home region and immediate community, we may add that it includes also the culture of that immediate community. However, social class is not recognized such an immediate community in any of the core curricula, and none of the curricula deal with students' social class in general.

When culture is concretized into the practices of highbrow culture and popular culture (Table 2) and the core curricula are screened with the help of the analysis framework, the occurrences of cultural practices are located primarily in certain subjects (although the library, museum, theatre, and sports and art centres are also listed as the school's general cooperation partners; P1985:42; P2014:29). The most extensively cultural practices are included in mother tongue and literature, music, visual arts, physical education, and crafts. Therefore, below the mother tongue and literature, music and visual arts are discussed in more detail than the other subjects, while illustrating the application of the framework of analysis. In physical education and crafts the results turned out to be quite straightforward, so they are discussed only very briefly. Discussion on other subjects that produced fewer and more unsystematic observations are excluded from this paper for brevity.

POPS documents contain a growing number of mother tongue and literature syllabi (one in 1985; five in 1994; eleven in 2004; and twelve in 2014), covering not only Finnish, Swedish and Sami but also, for instance, curricula for sign language, Romani and various immigrant languages. Here we focus on Finnish language and literature syllabus. Mother tongue and literature is a "knowledge, skill and art subject" (P2004:46), which trains students not only in language and communication skills but also especially in the knowledge, appreciation, and consumption of highbrow culture. Getting familiar with literature and its genres and getting excited about the hobby of reading are widely on the subject's goal and content list, but so are systematically and continuously encouraging the use of the library, theatre and cinema. Reading literature is valuable in itself (P2004:49), and self-motivated reading is an important goal of teaching (P2014:161). In 1985, it was explicitly stated that it is necessary to "keep an eye on the artistic level of the [read] fiction" (P1985:67). Literary genres are not discussed in the curricula, but all kinds of reading appear to be appreciated as in principle. Teaching and encouraging the use of the library is included in all core curricula, as well as getting to know "theatre as an art form and the means of theatrical expression" (P2014:291). Plays are "perhaps the richest form of integrative teaching" (P1985:74). Literature's connections to other arts and more general guidance on the consumption of cultural offerings continue to strengthen the lean of mother tongue and literature toward highbrow culture. Popular culture is discussed substantially less under mother tongue and literature. Basically, it is only the media which is mentioned (supposedly referring to newspapers, television and radio, although usually "media" is not specified). In summary, it can be said that mother tongue and literature as a subject imposes clearly more highbrow than popular culture.

Music in the core curricula appears rather popular culture inclined, even if music is also articulated as an art subject. A large part of the syllabi deals with the training of practical music skills (singing, playing, listening) and conceptualization abilities (terminology, concepts). Music curricula include a versatile introduction to musical cultures and a broad repertoire, and the students are encouraged to be curious and guided to a lifelong musical hobby (e.g., P1985:191; P2004:232; P2014:142). “[Syllabi] must cover as widely as possible different areas of music culture” (P1994:97), which refer not only to different music genres but also “music from Finland and other countries and cultures, and from different eras” (P2004:233). The emphasis on variety makes music as a subject clearly more leaned towards popular than highbrow culture, even though there are also some references to music as a high art (e.g., P2014:423). However, the application of the framework of analysis to music is hampered by the absence of clearly defined musical genres from the core curricula after 1985 (see also Salonen 2021): this decentralization of curriculum guidance frees up the power of decision and emphasis regarding genres to the municipal, school and teacher levels, enabling greater variation in practical teaching content. Thus, even if one can say the core curricula impose broad, or even omnivorous, music consumption, there may be differences in genre emphasis between schools. The existence of such differences and their possible connection to the socioeconomic differentiation of schools are questions that would merit research. However, in terms of music, the core curricula can be considered imposing mostly a wide variety and, if anything, popular culture.

Visual arts syllabi, like music, include teaching a wide range of technical skills and practice as well as encouragement for outside-school involvement: the goal is for the student to develop “a personal” (P2004:236) and “living” (P1994:99) relationship with art. Visual art includes both the training of student’s own pictorial expression and generally receiving (and perceiving) art. The learning contents include both art history and contemporary art, knowledge of artists and their biographies, understanding of visual art processes, and becoming familiar with examining and evaluating art. The contents are selected from different cultures, environments and eras, and art is examined in a versatile way from the perspectives of the recipient, the author, the artwork, and society and culture (e.g., P2014:268). Visiting art exhibitions and museums and getting to know architecture are permanently part of the visual arts curriculum. As in the subject of mother tongue and literature, visual arts also encourage artistic “interdisciplinarity”. Overall, there seems to be a strong emphasis on highbrow culture in the core curricula of visual arts. Popular culture is channelled to the visual arts syllabi only via “media” – explicitly television (P1985; P2004), but presumably also the newspapers – albeit with less weight than highbrow culture. Indeed, the context in which the media is mentioned aims to foster capacity to “critically examine visual signs” in the media and advertisements (P2004:237). Thus, visual arts can be considered primarily as a subject imposing highbrow culture.

A special feature of visual arts is the repeatedly occurring education of students to perform “aesthetic valuation” of things, objects and environments (P1994:100; P2004:240; P2014:144). This kind of everyday aestheticization was, according to Bourdieu (1984:18–63), a key characteristic of the taste (or the “aesthetic disposition”) among the French upper class in the 1960s. Insofar as the Finnish cultural space of the early 2000s followed similar

organization principles as Bourdieu's (Purhonen et al. 2014), it is not impossible that aesthetic valuation in Finland, too, is socially differentiated and more characteristic of the upper classes. If so, the principles such as "the task of basic school aesthetic education is to create the foundations for the student's aesthetic attitude to reality" (P1985:201) would quite strongly impose upper-class goals in the core curricula. This kind of manifestation of aestheticization should then be analysed also elsewhere in the curricula, such as in the educational task of the basic school (P1994:11; P2004:38; P2014:15–16), or even in the natural science curricula (P1994:74, 78, 83).

Among the other subjects, physical education and crafts are quite clearly containing mostly popular culture. The task of physical education is training for an active lifestyle and continuous spontaneous exercise (P1985:175; P1994:107; P2004:248; P2014:148). Based on the wide range of sports mentioned – e.g., swimming, ball games, gymnastics, dance, and outdoor sports (e.g., P2014:274) – physical education is not focused on either highbrow or popular culture. Therefore, as a subject that encourages physical activity in general, physical education can be considered popular culture: high culture is indicated only by occasional mentions of aesthetic experiences (P1994:107; P2014:435). Similarly, the "task of crafts is to guide the students in managing the entire handicraft process" (P2014:146), and most crafts syllabi consist of training in handicraft processes. The learning contents cover product ideation, selection and processing of materials, work tools, and work methods, and work safety. However, the goal is to systematically "develop the students' ability to combine functionality and aesthetics" (P1985:214), and in the production of products, the goal is that the student "masters basic techniques so that the product becomes appropriate, finished, ecological and aesthetic" (P2004:246; also, P1994:104; P2014:433). Aesthetics is more connected to textile work than to technical work. Nevertheless, crafts as a subject is more clearly popular culture than high culture imposing subject, although not perhaps as clearly as physical education. If it is assumed that among the upper social class crafts are practiced more for fun and for one's own pleasure than as obligatory housework, even this assumption does not strengthen the high culture leaning of the crafts, because the syllabi mention crafts as a hobby only in passing (see P1994:105; P2004:244).

The analysis can be summarized as follows: The term culture appears a lot in the core curricula, but usually without specifying explicitly its meaning. When culture is concretized on a theoretical basis into cultural practices differentiated by social class – as highbrow and popular culture –, the inculcation of culture is mostly located in subjects, and even in them primarily mother tongue and literature, music, visual arts, sports, and handicrafts. Highbrow culture is primarily imposed on students by the subjects of mother tongue and literature, and visual arts. Popular culture is imposed by syllabi in music, physical education, and crafts.

Conclusions

In this case study, cultural reproduction in Finland was investigated by asking to what extent the basic school imposes on students the cultural practices of the upper social classes. To address this question, an analysis framework was built based on the theory and previous research on class-based nature of cultural practices. With the framework, the core curricula

of basic education were explored to detect cultural practices for analysis and interpretation. According to the results, mother tongue and literature and visual arts impose upper-class cultural practices, while music, sports, and crafts impose popular cultural practices not clearly leaning toward the lifestyles of any specific social class. These five subjects are assigned a reasonably large share of the number of hours in basic school, especially in the lower grades, and the effect of the mother tongue and literature is strengthened by the fact that it “is not only the object of teaching but also a tool for studying other subjects” (P2014:106).

Thus, viewed through core curricula in Finland, basic education includes, at least to some extent, the inculcation of cultural practices that are part of the lifestyle of the upper social classes. However, the core curricula documents do not recognize or acknowledge the dependence of these practices on social class. Thus, it can be interpreted that the Finnish basic school also imposes cultural practices connected to social power relations as legitimate and disinterested and thus reproduces the cultural dominance of the upper social classes. We must leave it to future studies to find out what kind of effects this imposing possibly has on unequal chances between the children from the upper and lower social classes to succeed in the educational competition towards and beyond secondary education (for example, by creating a sense of familiarity versus a feeling of alienation with schoolwork). We have only provided the first steps in showing that such a practice of imposing class-specific cultural practices via the learning contents in basic school core curricula exists, and the perspective of Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction based on the French education system of the 1960s may be useful as one of the explanations for social reproduction also in countries such as Finland.

Without a doubt, cultural reproduction that manifests itself in the curriculum is only one mechanism of social reproduction taking place through education: social class is also linked to, for example, school choice and parents’ abilities to get along with the school (Silvennoinen et al. 2012; Silvennoinen et al. 2015) and the middle-class behaviour expected by the school from the students and their families (Huilla et al. 2021). Furthermore, even though the core curriculum is a nationally binding, regulatory document, it is still a framework program, and the officials have considerable autonomy in its local and practical implementation (Kauko 2019). A study of local level curricula (e.g. Palsa & Mertala 2019) from the point of view of reproduction would be an important counterweight to the analysis presented here; it would be equally important to continue the tradition of school ethnography in order to find out how the imposing prescribed by the curriculum is realized in practice in classrooms and school practices – if it is realized.

Finally, returning to Bourdieu’s idea that the school legitimizes what it teaches (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990), our analysis shows that the core curricula in Finland have systematically legitimized broad familiarity with literature, extensive (crossing genre boundaries) knowledge of music and visual arts, as well as physical activity through a wide selection of sports, since the mid-1980s onwards. This kind of extensive involvement in many kinds of cultural practices has been called “cultural omnivorousness” in cultural sociology, which is allegedly said to replace traditional “high culture snobbery” as a new form of elite distinction (Peterson 1992; for the case of Finland, see Purhonen et al. 2014; Lindblom 2022). An alternative theoretical framework for the present study would thus ask whether it is omnivorousness rather than

highbrow culture (or both) that is imposed by school curricula on the students as the culture of the upper classes and a potential tool for cultural domination.

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