Constructivism in Early Childhood Social Studies
in the United States and Finland

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A comparison is presented here of national mandates and standards in Finland and the United States. The comparison specifically focuses on the extent to which constructivist thought in early childhood development is evident in social studies standards and mandates in both countries. The study includes an examination of the early childhood ideals present in the United States and Finland. In this analysis, the data sources were from the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (NCSS, 2010) in the early grades (kindergarten – 4) and the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood and Care in Finland (STAKES, 2003). This assessment of early childhood standards in both countries examined what evidence, if any, existed in both documents to suggest the usage of social constructivist practices and/or what emphasis is given to the usage of practices of social constructivism through the impetus placed upon its innate qualities.

In examining the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (NCSS, 2010) and the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood and Care in Finland (STAKES, 2003), a content analysis was conducted. The purpose was to identify embedded implications of both countries’ educational mandates. This examination of implications was specifically carried out with regard to the use of constructivist thought in early childhood education. The analysis further considered how both countries were reflective of Goodson’s (1987) views on evolving world standards. The presence of a focus on education of the masses within a broader understanding of the learning of children was noted and an emphasis on the building of knowledge was examined. This assessment of an emphasis on knowledge was situated in opposition to the strict attainment of facts. The importance placed on the needs of children to work with and among each other in the dynamic of building knowledge also was investigated.
For the purpose of this investigation, “constructivist thought” was defined as active teaching and learning, centered on social interactions with an emphasis on relevancy. Such thought is achieved when the purpose of obtaining full understanding and integration of ideas into the students’ schema from first-hand interactions with the environment and phenomena occurs. In constructivist teaching and learning, the emphasis is on the learner.

**Related Literature**

Constructivism is a research-based theory with an extensive background in research theory and efforts at implementation into practice over many decades. The implications are far reaching and have been studied by many. Jean Piaget’s (1947/1972) inquiries into learning and human behaviorism with cognitive studies and cognitive theories formed one foundation for the theory. Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivism focused also on cognition but expanded the perspective to include the interaction between learners and its resultant effects on cognition. Both Piagetian cognitive constructivism and Vygotskyan social constructivism are referred to here with the labels “constructivist thought”, “constructivist philosophy”, “constructivism”, and/or “constructivist teaching.”

Constructivist teaching is typified by the implementation of learning opportunities that are student-directed and student-centered. These types of opportunities often are characterized by social activities and inquiry-based assignments. Constructivist teaching practices seek to promote problem-solving and higher levels of thinking, often involving a collective working together for a common goal. According to Powell and Kalina (2008), “When students master completion of projects or activities in a group, the internalization of knowledge occurs for each individual at a different rate according to their own experience” (p. 244).

Constructivism, though easily integrated into the social studies curriculum, continues to be tossed aside within the social studies in favor of teaching using rote methods. In using rote learning methods, social studies teaching provides for less student interaction, content interrogation, and cooperative learning. The “nonconceptual, technical view of social studies teaching” is rampant and prevalent in United States social studies practices (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 19). Overuse of rote memorization of dates and facts has become synonymous with the subject area. The substance of social studies curricula most often mirrors traditional values not aligned with our own thoughts and those of our students, but nonetheless, traditional curricula weaves throughout our practice (Meuwissen, 2006). Social studies education still is very much a transmission form of teaching. Lessons are largely filled with teacher-talk while students sit and listen. Ali Khali stated that, “Students are viewed as empty vessels that we must fill with content knowledge. We then expect them to memorize all they’ve learnt and write it down in exams” (2008, cover page).

According to Blaik-Hourani (2011), “Constructivist social studies curriculum needs to recognize the child as an active constructor of his/her own meaning within a community of others who provide a forum for the social negotiation of shared meanings” (p. 239).
This is the very definition of constructivism. The benefits of such teaching are important in the many areas, but certainly in the social studies. Educators wishing to make a true and lasting impact on their students could incorporate these active learning social studies lessons within their teaching while still maintaining the integrity of required or strongly promoted national mandates. Any subject area can serve as the context for constructivist instruction of its curriculum when the tenets of the theory are in place behind the lessons planned.

Because of the nature of constructivism, there is an innate link with developmentally appropriate practice, which also holds value when discussing early childhood education. According to Nelson (2000), “Unlike traditional practice, developmentally appropriate practice has positive effects on children's social and emotional development. Children in developmentally appropriate programs are more confident about their skills and motivated to learn than children in traditional programs” (p. 95). This motivation plays its own part in the value of using constructivism in the early childhood years. Research also shows the benefits of motivation to be linked to teacher effectiveness (Bright, 2011).

A school or classroom employing constructivist theory and implied practices should be prepared to use formative means of assessment. A key component of constructivist teaching and learning requires the teacher to understand the background knowledge of the students in the classroom and also the amount of growth that is occurring from their understanding or lack thereof. Powell and Kalina (2009) discussed the necessity of frequent checks on students’ progress when stating formative assessment is the “allowing of students to discover knowledge, including question and answer periods after significant topics, as well as having the teacher be able to assess where students are formally through testing and informally through discussion or dialoguing” (p. 248).

The construction of relationships is another key component of constructivist thought and one with relevance for the teaching of students in early childhood. Rheta DeVries (2004) indicated the importance in planning activities that not only foster knowledge, but also relationships when she stated “The child’s construction of relationships is fundamentally important to constructivist teachers because relationships constitute the intelligence and underlie the construction of knowledge” (p. 422-423). The making of meaningful relationships and maintaining them through cooperative, empathetic partnerships is one that will benefit the early childhood student in the present and in the future within the constructivist classroom and beyond.

Method

The specific indicators identified within the U.S. and Finnish content standards as reflecting constructivist teaching practices were active learning, cooperative learning, inquiry-based lessons, student-choice, relevancy, curriculum integration, and student-directed activities. The United States was chosen because of its reputation as being heavily reliant on standardized testing measures and its stress on teaching in a manner that emphasizes students’ demonstration of knowledge to others through those tests. Such testing is referred to in Heafner and Fitchett’s (2012) study where they found
large-scale evidence of the declining role of social studies in an era in which testing is clearly linked to subject-area importance” within United States curriculum (p. 67). Finland was chosen because of its reputation as having an emphasis on the importance of teaching and learning and its status as having a more holistic understanding of both students’ and teachers’ social role in the educational process (Sahlberg, 2011; Sparks, 2012).

Three main curriculum documents were utilized from Finland in order to provide an accurate portrayal of its standards of education for early childhood students. The analysis of Finland’s mandates indicates an environment conducive to constructivist theory and practice. The Ministry of Education calls for “pre-primary teaching groups that only include 13 children, but if there is another trained adult in addition to the teacher it may have up to 20 children” (Finland Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.), as explicitly stated in the general guidelines for the primary grades. As shown in Table 1, this focus differs from that identified for early childhood classrooms in the United States, where most classrooms have no aides and generally enroll 15 to 25 children per class, dependent upon budgets available for teaching and teaching aides’ positions. The primary criterion determining the number of children in the United States’ classrooms is in contrast to Finland where the national commitment to a philosophy of teaching and learning leads to a decision to enroll fewer children per classroom. Standards in Finland were not established across the board until mandated core standards were implemented in 2000 as an attempt to ensure purposeful education was taking place within early childhood programs. Unlike in the United States, Finnish standards were not created with mastery aimed at achievement on standardized testing or with norm-referenced comparisons in mind.

The following phrases were some identified and coded from the mandates as being tied to “constructivist thought” and explicitly encouraged in the standards from Finland by government resolution (STAKES, 2003, p. 13-27):

giving due weight to the views of the child, secured growth development and learning, teaching as an integrated whole, joy of learning, interacting in their own environment, active and interested, allowing children to express their thoughts, give opportunities to make initiatives, learning from communication models, stimulating and activating environment, meaningful experiences with other children, indirect guiding from observations of students’ initiatives, importance of play in terms of learning, importance of art, self-expression, spontaneous learning, children’s age and stages of development are important considerations for planning, child’s meaningful experiences, physical movement and room to explore, freely explore, offering a wide variety of materials, selection and modification of content dependent upon the learning situation, concrete experiences so children are able to make observations and form their own views.
Table 1

Comparisons of Early Childhood Social Studies in U.S. and Finland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Social Studies Standards for Early Elementary Grades</th>
<th>Finland Standards for Pre-Primary Instruction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About 10%, or somewhat less, of class time is spent on social studies.</td>
<td>Time is less structured and centered on students’ interests, interactions, and needs, which can largely be considered social studies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>No national early childhood program</td>
<td>Complete government funded early childhood care and education program</td>
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<td>Classroom size largely dependent on budgeting and finances. Often early childhood classes are 15 to 25 students without an aide.</td>
<td>Classrooms of 13 students, 20 students if another adult is present with the teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Specific targets for curricular mastery</td>
<td>Standards are outlined in broad, themes, and goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Few areas where implications in mandates encouraged constructivism in early childhood instruction</td>
<td>Multiple and varied implications for the philosophy of constructivism within the early childhood classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>11</strong> explicit phrases linked to constructivist teaching</td>
<td><strong>21+</strong> explicit phrases linked to constructivist teaching</td>
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The list of examples of constructivist thought employed in the standards from Finland is far too extensive to encapsulate in this short paper, so those given here were chosen from STAKES (2003) as set examples from the many discussed.

In the United States, there were far fewer examples identified from the National Curriculum Standard for Social Studies (2010, p. 14-23), but some were indicated that aligned with constructivist thought and practice:

> through experience, observation, reflection, interact with class members, young learners can explore, reconstruct and interpret, collaborate with peers and with others, give opportunities to examine institutions that affect their lives and
influence their thinking, varied experiences, thinking analytically, examine and explore (NCSS, 2010).

Early childhood education is highly valued in Finland. Parents have access to free child care and education from the age of eight months to five years prior to entering formal schooling (see Table 1). The mandated age for public schools in the United States, in contrast, is age five or six with relatively few public and free pre-schools available before age five. Similarly, Finnish students begin kindergarten at age six. The national Finnish standards explicitly state that teachers are to employ a “child-focused approach, which lays emphasis on each child’s subject, status, and individuality as well as on the peer group as an important initiator of the child’s growth process” (OCED, 2000, p. 29).

**Results**

The views of a more liberal conception of children (Goodson, 1987) were implicitly found in Finland’s standards as opposed to the lack of this conception in the United States’ standards. Finland’s commitment to early childhood education exemplifies an evolving world curriculum with student-centered instruction at the core of its instructional principles. Incorporating a greater view of knowledge as constructed by individuals rather than a sum total of rote memorized information is evident throughout Finnish standards for early childhood students. Also evident is an understanding, and facilitation of, appropriate structures within the educational system to promote such growth. The standards for Finland further acknowledge teaching and learning as a partnership working toward the ultimate purpose of enriching students’ learning with the students at the helm. Finnish conceptions of the social world, and of the active role of citizens in it, in the mandates were far more constructivist in theory and practice than was the framework currently in place for students in early elementary social studies curriculum in the United States.

The United States’ time allotment for social studies education is far less than the amount of time allowed for those studies in Finland (see Table 1). There is a clear commitment in Finland to an early childhood curriculum that is holistic and integrated, where standards are not isolated to a subject area’s specific and generic mandates. The United States, in contrast, has specific targets for curriculum mastery, while Finland’s are much broader in nature (see Table 1). Also noted in Table 1 are the implications found in the outlined curriculum of both the United States and Finland with regard to the teaching ideals emphasized and the standards explicitly stated.

The United States prides itself on innovation and commonly states the need for higher standards of innovative teaching in its classrooms. The U.S. Department of Education (2010) suggested a new model of learning where it is, “to provide engaging and powerful learning experiences and content, as well as resources and assessments that measure student achievement in more complete, authentic, and meaningful ways” (p. iv). This is a continual and perpetual myth when framed within the context of the standards outlined within our educational system. There has been a call for more relevant, hands-on, activity-centered, and integrated study. In the United States Department of Education’s
Transforming American Education: Learning Powered by Technology, the United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, (2010) wrote an open letter to Congress where he called for “engaging and personalized learning experiences for learners of all ages” (p. v). Upon examination of the current national standards, however, there is not a firm basis in the standards to support the enactment of a call for active learning. We are in a difficult position as educators, when we are taught in our preparation programs the research that supports the constructivist framework. We are shown ways to incorporate the theory and implied practices within our teaching in our professional development, and we see the success in our own classrooms when working from this framework; yet, we are pressured by mandates to teach what is written in our standards.

Future research could consider isolating the skills taught through early childhood education programs in Finland as compared to those taught through the early childhood programs within the United States. The brief content analysis presented here is hypothesis generating. There may be differences in deep understanding between students in both countries depending on the level of the constructivist emphasis shown within their standards. Possible differences in deliberate care to focus on constructivist practices and the research supporting them, within the national educational mandates might also be explored. Researchers might investigate the extent to which Finnish early childhood students are motivated to attend school and compare such motivation to that of U.S. students. Investigators also might examine the level of pride students describe in regard to their own understanding and learning and consider its link to student motivation. The amount of autonomy and cooperative learning permeating Finnish standards and the amount of time identified for socialization and dramatic play in early childhood classrooms suggests a hypothesis that students might be more enthusiastic about their own learning. Increased enthusiasm, in turn, may relate to increases self-concept and willingness to attempt new areas of learning beyond the early childhood years.

Author Biography

Holly Hilboldt Swain is pursuing a Ph.D in Curriculum and Instruction in Elementary Education. She earned an Ed.S. from the University of West Alabama, an M.A. from Troy University, and a B.S. from the University of Alabama, all in Elementary Education, Kindergarten-6. Prior to her doctoral studies, she was an elementary and early childhood teacher.

References

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