

**Finland's School Year Through Arnove's Scientific,
Pragmatic, and Global Dimensions**

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Timothy D. Walker's account of how Finnish schools begin the academic year describes classrooms that open with belonging, social-emotional learning, and gradual re-entry rather than immediate academic content (Walker, 2022). This essay examines that practice using the three dimensions Robert Arnove identifies in the field of comparative education: the scientific or theoretical, the pragmatic or ameliorative, and the global or international (Arnove, 2007).

It is important to be precise about what these dimensions are. They are not criteria that a school system passes or fails, and they are not qualities that make a reform successful. They are the purposes for which comparative study is undertaken and, in practice, three lenses through which any educational approach can be examined. Arnove (2007) presents them as the reasons the field exists: to build theory, to improve practice, and to promote international understanding. Because they are lenses rather than standards, they can reveal that a practice is thoughtful and transferable, and they can equally reveal that a practice is context-bound, misunderstood, or harmful when lifted out of the setting that produced it.

This essay therefore does not use the three dimensions to argue that Finland is exemplary. It uses them to analyze what the Finnish school-year opening actually shows, what a reader elsewhere could reasonably take from it, and where that transfer would break down.

The Scientific Dimension

The scientific or theoretical dimension concerns the use of comparison as a method. Arnove (2007) describes it as the construction of theory, in which comparison across cases is necessary to establish what relationships hold between education and society and under what conditions those relationships hold. Its purpose is explanatory: a single national system cannot

tell a researcher which of its features are causal and which are incidental, but systematic comparison across systems can begin to separate the two.

Applied to the Finnish case, this lens asks what claim the practice is actually testing. Finland's opening weeks rest on a proposition that can be examined empirically, namely that students who feel emotionally secure and socially connected engage more effectively with academic work. That proposition is supported by evidence beyond Finland, including international measures of school climate and student well-being (OECD, 2019), which is precisely what makes it a candidate for comparative analysis rather than a national curiosity.

The scientific lens also imposes discipline on the argument. Finland performs well on international assessments, but the country differs from many others in teacher preparation, funding equity, child poverty rates, and social provision. Attributing Finnish outcomes to the opening weeks of the school year would confuse correlation with cause. Used carefully, this dimension does not confirm that the practice works; it clarifies what would have to be shown for that claim to hold.

The Pragmatic Dimension

The pragmatic or ameliorative dimension concerns improvement. Its central question is what one educational system can learn from another, and it operates in two directions: examining practices elsewhere that might be adopted or adapted, and using that examination to reflect critically on assumptions in one's own system that would otherwise go unexamined.

Finland's opening weeks offer material for both. The specific practices are modest and portable, including team-building activities, structured reflection, and discussion sessions used to re-establish relationships before academic demands resume. A school elsewhere could adopt these without legislative change or significant expense. Finland's protection of teacher

autonomy, which allows educators to adjust pacing and schedule in response to what a particular group of students needs, is similarly an object lesson rather than a national peculiarity.

The reflective half of this dimension is the more demanding one. Reading Walker's account should prompt a reader to ask why the opposite assumption, that instructional time is lost when the first days are not academic, is treated as self-evident in many systems. The comparison's value lies less in the borrowing than in the question it raises about practices at home that have never been justified so much as inherited.

This dimension also carries the clearest warning. Policy borrowing that extracts a practice from the conditions that sustain it, sometimes described as educational tourism, is a recurring failure in comparative work. Finland's opening weeks function within a system of highly selective teacher preparation, professional trust, and comparatively low child poverty. Transplanting the activities into a system with none of those supports would likely produce the appearance of the reform without its substance, which is exactly the kind of harm this lens is meant to surface rather than conceal.

The Global Dimension

The global or international dimension situates education within international forces and treats the promotion of cross-national understanding as a purpose of the field in its own right. It asks how national systems are shaped by conditions that cross borders and how education prepares students for interdependence.

Finland's practice is legible through this lens in two ways. Substantively, the competencies its opening weeks develop, including empathy, collaboration, communication, and self-awareness, are the competencies most often named as necessary for participation in a world facing migration, climate change, and intercultural conflict. Structurally, Finland has become a

reference point in global education discourse largely because of its results on international assessments, which is itself an example of how transnational measurement shapes what national systems are praised for and what other countries attempt to copy.

That second observation is not entirely favorable, and the global lens is what makes it visible. International rankings direct attention toward what they happen to measure, and a country's reputation can come to rest on a narrow set of indicators. The same dimension that explains Finland's international influence also explains why that influence may be disproportionate to the evidence.

Conclusion

Read through Arnone's three dimensions, Finland's approach to the start of the school year looks different under each lens. The scientific dimension identifies a testable proposition about emotional security and engagement while cautioning against attributing national outcomes to a single practice. The pragmatic dimension identifies specific practices that could be adapted elsewhere, and, more valuably, prompts reflection on assumptions about instructional time that are rarely defended. The global dimension situates the competencies Finland cultivates within genuinely international demands while showing how transnational assessment shapes which systems become models.

Taken together, the dimensions do not deliver a verdict on Finland. They demonstrate what comparative analysis is for: not ranking systems, but understanding what a practice rests on, what it might teach, and what would be lost if it were moved.

References

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