

 Research Article

Exploring Finnish Education Through the Lens of Naturalistic Inquiry

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Abstract

Despite growing interest in qualitative research approaches, practitioner-scholars often lack accessible, field-based guidance for conducting naturalistic inquiry in authentic educational settings. This gap highlights the need for research that is both theoretically grounded and methodologically transparent. Grounded in naturalistic inquiry, this study investigates how such inquiry can be effectively designed and implemented within an international educational context through a qualitative case study conducted in Finland. Data were collected during a two-week immersive field experience and include field notes, reflective journals, informal conversations, practitioner presentations, focus group interviews with students, and photographic artifacts. Analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method alongside ongoing reflexive practices, with attention to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Findings address two research questions by illustrating both the implementation and outcomes of naturalistic inquiry. This study seeks to answer two main research questions: 1) How can naturalistic inquiry be practically designed and implemented by a practitioner-researcher in an international educational fieldwork context? and 2) What themes emerge from the implementation of naturalistic inquiry in an international educational fieldwork context, and how do they reflect key values and practices in Finnish education? To answer the research questions, first, the study outlines key methodological components, including site entry, prolonged engagement, emergent design, reflexivity, and triangulation of data sources. Second, three central themes emerged that reflect core features of Finnish education: (1) trust as a foundation of educational relationships and professional autonomy, (2) the integration of play and emotional development in early childhood education, and (3) structural supports that enable equity, adaptability, and teacher professionalism. This study contributes to the literature by offering a transparent, practice-oriented account of naturalistic inquiry in an international setting. It provides concrete methodological guidance for practitioner-researchers while also highlighting the cultural and systemic conditions that shape educational practice in Finland.

Keywords: Naturalistic Inquiry, Finnish Education, Practitioner-Scholar, Case Study

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1. INTRODUCTION

Naturalistic inquiry is a qualitative approach grounded in the belief that reality is constructed by individuals within specific social and cultural contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Naturalistic inquiry provides a distinctive approach to learning, allowing researchers and educators to gain valuable insight through reflective practices that deepen their understanding of educational contexts through immersive practices (Perry & Perry, 2017). Its value lies in its capacity to capture authentic, context-dependent understandings of human behavior, institutional dynamics, and meaning-making processes (Erlandson et al., 1995). Reflective practice allows the researcher to interpret data with sensitivity to the complexities and nuances of the setting.

A practitioner-researcher or practitioner-scholar can be a professional who reflects-in-action, questioning assumptions and generating knowledge within their own practice context (Schön, 1983; Schultz, 2010). Although many educational practitioners express interest in qualitative methods, they often lack practical, field-based examples that illustrate how to implement naturalistic inquiry in real-world educational settings (Agostinho, 2005; Olbertz-Siitonen, 2021). This gap presents a need for this study that is both theoretically sound and methodologically transparent. Our positionality as both qualitative researchers and visitor-participants (Patton, 2015) enables us to approach the study with an open mind, while remaining reflexive about how this dual role shapes data collection and interpretation, acknowledging our roles as outsiders while committed to deeply engaging with the educational settings to learn from others' lived experiences.

Guided by the principles of naturalistic inquiry, this study seeks to understand educational excellence in its real-world form. In this study, the Finnish educational system, globally recognized for its strong teacher preparation programs (Malinen, 2012), high levels of professional trust (Malinen, 2012; Mäkiharju & Smeds-Nylund, 2023), and consistently high student outcomes, including top performance on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Sahlberg, 2021; Aho et al., 2006), was selected for this study as we integrated naturalistic data collection methods to gather the valuable insights of educators in the system. Grounded in this stance, the purpose of the study is to explore how naturalistic inquiry can be practically designed and implemented in an international educational fieldwork context. In doing so, this study serves as a methodological resource for educators and emerging scholars seeking to conduct naturalistic inquiry in context-sensitive and ethically responsive qualitative research.

1.1. Literature Review

This naturalistic inquiry is a qualitative research approach rooted in constructivism, which posits that knowledge is socially constructed and context-dependent. Drawing from Lincoln and Guba (1985), naturalistic inquiry involves significant on-site fieldwork, prolonged engagement, data collection, emergent design, reflexivity, data analysis, and trustworthiness (Erlandson et al., 1995). Naturalistic inquiry seeks to understand how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences in natural settings (Erlandson et al., 1995). Erlandson and colleagues (1995) emphasize that “naturalistic inquiry is very dependent upon context” (p. 16), and its hallmark is responsiveness to the lived realities of participants rather than controlling for variables. Researchers in this tradition work to understand how meaning is negotiated within specific cultural, institutional, and interpersonal settings. Therefore, naturalistic inquiry-based research remains tentative until it is implemented. Erlandson and colleagues (1995) explain, “Even after the research has been initiated, the shape of subsequent phases of research will still be refined as additional information is learned from the social context itself” (p. 68). The naturalistic researcher typically selects a purposive sample to access those most deeply connected to the phenomenon of interest and plays an active interpretive role, bringing forward insights for readers.

Despite its strengths, including deep contextualization and participant-centered meaning-making, naturalistic inquiry also presents practical challenges. A key barrier is time and cost. Olbertz-Siitonen (2021) emphasizes that “the biggest issue [in conducting naturalistic research] is related to time” (p. 71). Naturalistic inquiry demands extended fieldwork, careful observation, and adaptive research design. Moreover, many educational practitioners, while interested in qualitative inquiry, report a lack of practical, field-based examples that model how to carry out naturalistic research in complex educational settings (Agostinho, 2005; Moschkovich, 2019). While naturalistic inquiry has been applied in various educational contexts (Huber et al., 2013), few studies offer a step-by-step account of how researchers conduct such research in the field, covering site entry, data collection, analysis, and findings. We offer this study as a practitioner-oriented guide, framed in the Finnish education context.

1.2. Research Questions

This study seeks to answer two main research questions: 1) How can naturalistic inquiry be practically designed and implemented by a practitioner-researcher in an international educational fieldwork context?

and 2) What themes emerge from the implementation of naturalistic inquiry in an international educational fieldwork context, and how do they reflect key values and practices in Finnish education?

1.3. Theoretical Perspective: Applying Naturalistic Inquiry

This study is grounded in naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson et al., 1995) and follows a qualitative research design. The key components outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Erlandson et al. (1995) include getting started on the study, site selection and entry, data collection and analysis, emergent design and reflexivity, and prolonged engagement and trustworthiness (Table 1).

Table 1. Components in Naturalistic Inquiry

Components	Description
Getting Started on the Study	Identifies the researcher's passion for exploring participants' experiences in educational settings
Entry, Site Selection, and Key Members	Justifies the choice of the location and explains how access to participants and settings was gained.
Data Collection and Analysis	Outlines methods such as observations, field notes, informal conversations, and participant sessions; concurrent process of data collection and analysis
Emergent Design and Reflexivity	Explains how the study evolved in response to insights and unexpected moments during fieldwork; reflects on the researcher's positionality and how it influenced the research process and interpretation.
Prolonged Engagement: Trustworthiness	Summarizes how ongoing field engagement built trust and contextual understanding, and how trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Getting started on the study, Erlandson and his colleagues (1995) emphasized that the researcher needs to determine if they are passionate about getting “behind the mediation words that initially link the research with the context and to construct shared reality with the human being in that context” (p. 43). This perspective underscores that naturalistic inquiry begins with a sincere desire to move beyond surface-level descriptions and to engage deeply with lived realities, allowing the researcher(s) and participant(s) to co-create meaning within the setting.

Entry, site selection, and key members involve choosing a setting that is both natural and representative, with careful attention to how access is gained and trust is built with participants. Establishing strong relationships from the outset is essential.

Data collection relies on a range of qualitative methods, such as observations, informal conversations, interviews, document analysis, and field notes, with flexibility being a central feature to adapt to evolving field conditions. During *data analysis*, techniques such as the constant comparative method, thematic coding, and memoing are employed, often concurrently with data collection, to iteratively identify emerging patterns and categories.

An *emergent design* characterizes the study, allowing the research to evolve dynamically in response to new insights and unanticipated developments. Central to this process is *reflexivity*, wherein the researcher continuously examines how his/her own values, beliefs, and positionality shape the research process and interpretation. This reflective stance acknowledges that neutrality is unattainable and thus calls for transparency.

Prolonged engagement is critical as researchers spend extended time in the field to develop a deep cultural understanding and foster trust, thereby minimizing the risks of misinformation or misinterpretation. This naturally aligns with *trustworthiness*, the application of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria—credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability—using strategies such as triangulation and maintaining audit trails to enhance the integrity and transparency of the research.

2. METHODOLOGY

The core methodological approach is a qualitative case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which allows for an in-depth exploration of a bounded system—specifically, the international educational fieldwork context in which the practitioner-researcher operates, Finland in this study. Drawing on naturalistic inquiry, the study seeks to understand phenomena as they unfold in their natural settings, without manipulation or control (Erlandson et al., 1995). This study incorporates autoethnographic elements, which emphasize deep reflexivity, insider perspectives, and the researcher's embodied role within the cultural context being studied (Ellis et al., 2011), in order to document the researcher's reflexive engagement, subjective experience, and evolving understanding within educational settings in Finland. Autoethnography enables researchers to make meaning from their personal experience while situating it within broader social and educational structures (Barkhuizen, 2011). In tandem, naturalistic inquiry, in this study, offers a systematic approach to understanding phenomena in real-world settings, emphasizing prolonged engagement, contextual sensitivity, and emergent design (Erlandson et al., 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Together, these approaches enable a rigorous yet reflective exploration of fieldwork, where trustworthiness—achieved through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—is balanced with narrative depth and personal insight. The following section outlines the case context of this study, identifies the data sources collected, and explains the analytical approach of the data used to draw findings.

2.1. Case Context

This study was conducted during a two-week-long field visit to Finland in March 2025 as part of a research design course for graduate students from March 16 to 28, 2025, and included a range of formal and informal learning opportunities across multiple educational levels and institutions. Each component of the scheduled visits served as a naturalistic setting for observation, reflection, and documentation. Guided by naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson et al., 1995), the case focused on authentic educational settings, including visits to Finnish national education offices, a regional basic education school, an early childhood center, and a teacher training high school. These visits included classroom observations and lectures provided by educators in Finnish educational organizations on topics such as equity, teacher preparation, multilingual learners, and leadership. Cultural activities, such as a traditional sauna and museum tours, further provided additional contextual understanding to the researchers of this study.

2.2. Data Sources and Data Analysis

The data for this study were collected during a structured, immersive international fieldwork experience in Finland. Data sources included daily journals, field notes, presentation materials provided by Finnish educators, two informal focus groups with a total of 20 secondary students, photographic artifacts, and informal conversations with teachers, administrators, pre-service educators, and agency leaders. Students for the focus groups were selected by the lead administrator in an upper secondary school in Helsinki. These students met with researchers for approximately 90 minutes for each session to answer questions about the Finnish education system. These students were senior male students who were anticipating graduation from their secondary school that spring. The first focus group included 12 students, and the second focus group included eight students. Teachers included in this study were 15 classroom teachers, seven male and eight female, teaching a variety of grade levels from early childhood through upper secondary. Informal conversations occurred after researchers toured classrooms and were provided an opportunity to ask questions about what they had observed during classroom instruction. Two pre-service teachers, one from the Viikki Teacher Training School, which focuses on the development of practical skills through immersive experiences, and one from the teacher education program at Helsinki University, which focuses on theoretical knowledge and methodologies, were included as participants in this study. Each of these pre-service teachers provided information about their training and answered questions during a question-and-answer session that lasted approximately one hour each. Agency leaders included the Counselor of Education at the Finnish National Agency for Education and a member of the Education and Culture Committee from the Finnish Parliament, both female.

An additional data source included one member of the Board from the University of Helsinki, the largest university in Finland. A female librarian from the Oodi Library was also a participant due to the fact that this library serves as a major educational and community hub and promotes itself as a “library of a new era” (Oodi Helsinki Central Library Website, 2025) with a strong emphasis on learning, creativity, and skill-sharing. One regional representative who had previously served as a primary school principal for over two decades was also a participant. This representative provided a tour of a Finnish basic education school, presented information about the Finnish education system, and engaged in an interview that lasted about one hour. In addition, two early childhood administrators one male and one female (students age nine months to seven years), two male pre-primary school administrators (student age six), one male parent liaison at the basic education level (students age seven to 16), two basic education administrators (students age seven to 16) one male and one female, and two female upper secondary administrators (students age 16-19) were included as participants. Key data collection activities are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Key Data Collection Activities

Data Collected from	Description
Scheduled visits to educational institutions	Including the National Agency for Education, one early childhood center, a pre-primary school (kindergarten), a basic comprehensive school, an upper-secondary school, and two programs in the University of Helsinki teacher education program. These visits featured classroom observations, interviews, lectures, and discussions with Finnish educators and school leaders.
Engagements with educational leaders and policymakers	Lectures and conversations on topics such as national educational frameworks, school governance, curriculum priorities, and teacher autonomy.
Researchers’ cultural and social immersion	Visits to local traditions (e.g., library, museum, church, sauna, and sea dipping) and informal conversations during meals and site visits, which provided rich contextual insights into the broader educational culture.
Reflective notes	Recorded by researchers each day, including the pictures they took during each visit.

Observations were conducted at all levels of education, from early childhood through upper secondary. Observations of classroom instruction lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour each. Early childhood observations included play groups and nature experiences. During these observations, children engaged with multi-sensory classroom resources and were taken outside to “play” in the forest. Pre-primary observations included classrooms and playground settings. Observations in basic education classrooms included instruction in math, science, language, life skills, music, and woodworking. Upper secondary observations occurred in math, science, and English language upper secondary classrooms. In addition, observations were conducted during lunchtime at the pre-primary, basic education, and upper-secondary levels. Extensive field notes were captured during each observation. Each researcher also captured photographs of notable and impressive movements during the observations.

Data analysis followed an inductive, iterative process consistent with qualitative case study and naturalistic inquiry (Erlandson et al., 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An iterative analysis process suggested by Erlandson and colleagues (1995) was used to analyze the data during and after the trip using the constant comparative method. This process enabled the researchers to engage in a naturalistic, multilayered analysis, capturing Finnish educational practices within their authentic social and institutional contexts. In addition, the research team participated in analytic discussions through debriefing to share interpretations and reflections on the data. Initial coding employed In Vivo coding (Saldana, 2016) to remain close to participants’ language. Through constant comparison, codes were refined and grouped into broader categories, which were then synthesized into themes. As patterns became clearer, data were further organized across key components of the case, including getting started on the study; entry, setting, and key members; data collection and analysis in the international context; emergent design and reflexivity; and prolonged engagement and trustworthiness. These components served as an organizing framework to present findings while remaining grounded in inductively developed themes. All data sources, including interview transcripts, field notes, and reflective journals, were then triangulated (Erlandson et al., 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to enhance the credibility of the findings. This process involved multiple readings, annotation, and coding to identify emerging patterns and themes such as trust, play, and emotional focus in early education, and structural support in Finnish education.

3. FINDINGS

Findings address two research questions that guided this study. The first part describes how naturalistic inquiry was designed and implemented by the practitioner-researcher in the international fieldwork context. This section explains how naturalistic inquiry was conducted in an international setting, outlining key components such as *Getting Started on the Study, Entry, Setting, and Key Members, Data Collection & Analysis in the International Context, Emergent Design & Reflexivity, and Prolonged Engagement & Trustworthiness*. The second part of the findings presents the themes that emerged— respect and trust, play and emotional focus in early education, and structural elements and change preparation in Finnish education— from the data, highlighting how these reflect values and practices characteristic of Finnish education.

Research Question 1. How can naturalistic inquiry be practically designed and implemented by a practitioner-researcher in an international educational fieldwork context?

3.1. Getting Started on the Study

We, the researchers, had a genuine interest in improving educational practice in our context, which is among the lower-performing states in the United States. Some members of the research team had visited Finland previously, returning to the same schools to build on their earlier observations, which provided additional understanding of the schools we visited. All of the researchers approached the Finnish educational setting with openness and curiosity, actively seeking to learn from best practices. All researchers had prior experiences teaching in K-12 and were engaged in educational research, which shaped our observations and reflections. Spending extended time in classrooms allowed us to capture both systemic features and nuanced details of practice, committed to learning and adapting insights to our own educational environments.

3.2. Entry, Setting, and Key Members

Entry into the research setting was made possible through a two-week-long field visit to Finland as part of a qualitative research course. This opportunity served as a culturally appropriate and ethically sound pathway into the Finnish education system. The course structure, which included school site visits, educator-led presentations, and informal interactions, supported an immersive experience grounded in naturalistic inquiry. Research access was facilitated through the hosting university's permissions and further strengthened by the relationships course instructors had with schools and educational institutions in Finland. A key contributor to our entry and engagement was a local expert, *referred to by the pseudonym Rin*, who had previously served as a teacher in Finland. Her active involvement throughout the visit provided not only logistical support but also cultural translation and contextual insight. From morning to evening, she accompanied us, offering rich interpretations of observed practices and helping to gain additional data when needed, such as presentation documents. Her position as a trusted insider enabled entry into schools and learning environments that might otherwise have remained inaccessible in an international research context. This relationship significantly enhanced the depth and authenticity of our engagement at each site.

The research settings included a diverse array of educational spaces such as kindergartens, comprehensive schools, teacher education institutions, and local attractions, including churches, libraries, and museums. These environments offered a natural context for exploring how qualitative research methods are embedded within Finnish educational culture. Interactions with key members of the system, including principals, teachers, students, and faculty, revealed a deep commitment to equity, decentralized leadership, and trust-based educational relationships. The learning environments we observed reflected broader national values: a strong respect for the teaching profession, high levels of autonomy at the school level, and an emphasis on social cohesion and community responsibility. As we adopted dual roles as guests and researchers, our presence was not only permitted but welcomed within Finnish education. This entry experience underscored the importance of trust, relationships, and contextual sensitivity in conducting naturalistic research across international settings.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis in the International Context

Non-participatory extended observations allowed researchers to become somewhat “invisible” in the educational setting so that we could experience Finnish education without disturbing the environment and to observe people and their interactions (Erlandson et al., 1995) in their natural setting. Each visit was scheduled in advance; the research team was immersed in typical “day-to-day” activities; we, as observant participants, engaged in context-rich, immersive observations and dialogues across educational settings, and we were able to record natural interactions among students and between students and teachers in their classrooms. In this study trip, there were some moments of participatory engagement, such as a focus group interview with students and speaking with educators informally, fostering rich data collection while remaining mindful of ethical boundaries and positionality, enabling the researchers to maintain an active but non-intrusive presence. Multiple data sources, including observational/field notes, a daily journal as reflective notes, photographic artifacts, practitioner presentations, and focus group interviews, were collected, and all of the data resources were triangulated, which enhances credibility and trustworthiness (Erlandson et al., 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following presents pieces of the data from each source.

3.3.1. Observational/Field Notes

Descriptive notes were taken during classroom visits in kindergarten, comprehensive schools, and upper secondary levels. Observations included instructional techniques, physical and learning environments, teacher-student dynamics, and daily routines. Most of our observations were conducted by observant participants, allowing us to experience the setting in its natural context. The students and teachers were accustomed to hosting visitors from around the world, which contributed to a smooth and natural interaction. One particularly meaningful moment was when we observed a kindergarten class (Figure 1) spending the entire morning together, and one of the teachers kindly invited us to join during game time. We had the opportunity to play a game with the very young Finnish students, creating a joyful and memorable experience, which was possible through naturalistic research, as we followed the natural environment and interactions as they unfolded.



Figure 1. A Kindergarten Classroom

3.3.2. Reflective Notes

Informal conversations (Figure 1) were conducted with teachers, administrators, principals, and students at each educational site as part of the data collection process by the research team. As qualitative data analysis is an ongoing and iterative process rather than a single, fixed stage, data collection and analysis involve continuous reflection and refinement throughout the study (Erlandson et al., 1995). In a naturalistic inquiry study, data analysis begins on the first day the researcher arrives at the setting (Erlandson et al., 1995, p. 111); in this study, data were collected and analyzed beginning on the day of arrival in Finland even at the airport, through taking pictures, observations, and dialogues—both with the driver who transported us to the hotel and with a leading local expert, referred to as Rin. All data sources, including photographs, observations, and conversations, were utilized in the analysis. Among these, personal journals and field

notes played a central role. For example, the journals from the first days of the visit served as early reflections and were especially important in the naturalistic inquiry process, where data collection and analysis are ongoing, iterative, and deeply intertwined through reflective practice.



Figure 2. Informal Conversations Place

Below is an excerpt from one of the researchers' journals on the first day:

The kind driver came to pick us up and shared brief information about Finland. As we looked out the window, everything appeared so clean. She pointed out schools and playgrounds and mentioned that on Sundays, parents often take their children to the park. I was able to see all the young kids and parents walk around the city on Sunday afternoon... That's when my excitement began!... When we gathered for dinner, I met one lady. Rin seemed like an energetic and enthusiastic woman. She explained our schedule for the week, shared detailed documents, and appeared very knowledgeable about her work. She told us we would begin by visiting the National Agency for Education to learn more about the Finnish education system, followed by a tour of the city. Everything felt exciting and full of promise.

The data collection and analysis on the first day included reflective notes. All the data collected throughout the trip was. As the trip began by visiting the sites, taking detailed notes, and repeatedly reviewing the data was a deeply engaging and reflective process—much like revisiting photos or reading a personal travel journal to recall meaningful moments. This ongoing reflexive engagement was central to the naturalistic inquiry approach in this study and took place both during the field visits and throughout the post-study period.

Informal conversation was essential to collect data. Our researchers utilized devotional and personal journals to identify and deepen their understanding of the data collected. Erlandson and his colleagues (1995) mentioned, “analysis is never really complete...It celebrates the link between the researcher and the setting being studied (p. 131).” One of the standout thoughts during the field trip was the remarkable cleanliness of Finnish schools and public spaces. Everything appeared consistently well-maintained (Figure 3), and the level of order reflected not only physical tidiness but also a cultural value placed on well-being, respect for shared environments, and community responsibility. As researchers, experiencing this environment firsthand shaped how we interpreted daily school life—not just as observers, but as guests immersed in a system that clearly values respect. The clean and peaceful surroundings became part of our data, influencing the way we understood Finnish education as both an academic and a deeply cultural experience.



Figure 3. School Environment: Hanging Clothes and a Clean Classroom

3.3.3. Photographic Artifacts

Visual data were collected using the researchers' phone cameras from various locations, including school buildings, sightseeing spots such as a museum, public library, and classrooms—for example, bulletin boards, student work, and learning spaces—to support triangulation of the findings. During this process, researchers were careful to ensure that no identifiable images of students were captured. One particularly enjoyable aspect of the research process for our team was gathering photographic artifacts. In an international context, everything becomes a tool for learning—an experience we, as researchers, deeply value. Capturing moment-to-moment experiences is one of the most rewarding aspects of conducting naturalistic inquiry in international settings. There is so much to collect, reflect on, and learn from.

3.3.4. Practitioner Presentations

A significant portion of the data emerged from formal presentations delivered by Finnish educators—kindergarten teachers, school principals, administrators, and policymakers. These sessions were structured but interactive, allowing researchers to pose questions and engage in follow-up discussions. Responses offered nuanced insights into professional values, system-wide equity strategies, and trusted leadership practices. This first presentation was scheduled with the Finnish National Agency for Education as the initial formal visit for our research team. As visitors in an international setting, it was crucial for researchers to gain a broad overview of the education system. The information provided during this session served as valuable background knowledge that guided our understanding throughout the subsequent school visits.

3.3.5. Focus Group Interviews

Two focus group interviews with students were conducted with seven and twelve secondary school students for each interview. Researchers asked questions such as: *How do your teachers or your school support you in your learning or personal growth?* and *what influenced your decision to attend this school?* Students voluntarily shared their thoughts in English. The conversation explored their perceptions of autonomy, school climate, and how they view their own learning processes and the choice of their schools. This was also one of the most exciting moments of our visit, as it made the abstract ideas we had read about in Finnish education feel personal and real.

3.4. Emergent Design and Reflexivity

According to Erlandson and his colleagues (1995), emergent design is one of the main elements of naturalistic inquiry-based study, highlighting the researcher's positionality and how it influenced the research process. Originally, the researchers focused on student motivations, examining the Finnish

education system. During the fieldwork, we were deeply engaged in data collection, observation, and analysis aligned with this focus, complemented by member checking and debriefing meetings in-person and online. After we returned home and began to engage more deeply with the data and relevant literature, we became increasingly aware of a gap: there was little guidance available on how practitioner-researchers could conduct naturalistic inquiry in international educational settings. This realization prompted the development of the current study—not as a continuation of the original, but as a new, practitioner-oriented inquiry that grew out of the field experience and subsequent reflection.

This emergent design process during the naturalistic inquiry-based study raised an important question regarding how researchers can successfully implement naturalistic inquiry studies in international settings: implementing naturalistic inquiry in international contexts requires more than methodological precision. With this reflection, we began to understand qualitative inquiry not merely as a methodological approach, but as a relational encounter between the practitioner and the context, wherein the researcher's presence holds significance (Erlandson et al., 1995). Ultimately, these reflections shaped this study's contribution. In response to the identified gap, this new study evolved into a practitioner-oriented guide grounded in the Finnish education context by sharing our experiences. It offers practical insight for educator-researchers navigating the complexity, uncertainty, and opportunity that come with conducting naturalistic inquiry across cultural boundaries.

Further, reflexivity is a central part of this naturalistic inquiry, guiding how we as researchers engaged with the Finnish education system and interpreted our observations. Throughout the fieldwork, we maintained reflexive journals and reflective memos to document evolving insights, personal assumptions, and emotional responses. This ongoing self-awareness helped us recognize how our own backgrounds, roles, and biases influenced the research process. One of the researchers, who grew up in South Korea, brought a unique dual perspective to the study—both as an insider familiar with Asian educational contexts and as an outsider entering the Finnish system. The other two researchers, both from the United States, contributed valuable perspectives shaped by their experiences in American education—one as an educational leader and the other with a background in teaching. Together, the diverse positionalities of the research team enriched the inquiry, allowing for layered interpretations of the findings collected across cultural and institutional contexts. As positionality shaped interpretations of teacher value and educational dynamics during our research, one researcher realized that both South Korea and Finland share strong social values around respect for teachers and trust in schools' decisions. For example, in South Korea, parents are often seen as “good followers” of teachers and educational leaders, upholding established social and cultural expectations rooted in historical trust and respect for educators. Also, when students mentioned during the focus interview the trust their parents have in those teachers,

“My parents are interested in my education. They have both a legal and moral responsibility, and they also support their child's autonomy. Because of the strong trust in teachers, parents don't feel the need to contact teachers directly.”

This comment from a student prompted one of the researchers to write a reflective note, highlighting the deep trust placed in teachers. It resonated personally, reminding the researcher of what might have been common in their parents' generation in South Korea, where families also tended to trust educators and refrained from frequent, direct involvement in school affairs. An additional note described,

“Finland appears to embody a more genuine and systemic trust, not only between teachers and school leaders but also across administrative levels, fostering a collaborative environment that may not be as prevalent in South Korea. Additionally, both countries face challenges with population decline, which has resulted in school closures in South Korea over recent years. Finland's approach to this issue includes actively inviting and integrating immigrant populations into schools, reflecting a distinct strategy compared to South Korea. This prompted me to wonder how the Korean and American education systems are currently addressing the integration of immigrant students.”

All the data from the conversations, presentations, and interviews enriched the researchers' understanding and highlighted both shared values and some distinctions between educational systems. Another key reflection that emerged during our visits was the recognition that Finnish schools provide free, healthy lunches to all students—meals that were consistently described by both students and staff as nutritious and delicious, a sentiment we also shared (Figure 4). This practice reflects a strong national

commitment to student well-being and equity, supporting holistic development beyond academics. As practitioner-researchers, this prompted reflection on how systemic support for physical health could contribute to a positive learning environment where intellectual growth and student care are equally valued.



Figure 4. One of the Healthy Lunch Meals at School

We concluded our research trip with a dinner gathering to share key learning points. One of our final and most significant insights was the power of trust and collaboration among Finnish educators. We initially assumed that standardized testing would dominate Finnish classrooms; however, it was not that way; rather, we were able to learn and observe an emphasis on student and teacher autonomy, which challenged our preconceptions, prompting deeper reflection on our biases. The supportive professional relationships challenged us—researchers—to consider how such systemic trust could be nurtured within our own institutions—genuine trust and respect. This peaceful and intentional culture refreshed our commitment to students and collaborative professional growth.

Finally, during this naturalistic approach, what became crystal clear is that thorough preparation and nurturing trust with participants are essential pillars that cannot be overlooked. The more researchers know about the context before entering the field, the more they will be able to notice and interpret during their research. Embracing reflexivity—acknowledging their multiple roles as a visitor, a learner, and a researcher—and maintaining reflexive journaling throughout the process are essential. Entering with an open, respectful stance allows for building trust and navigating cultural differences thoughtfully.

3.5. Prolonged Engagement & Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is key in naturalistic inquiry-based research (Erlandson et al., 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), constructing four key components: truth value (credibility), applicability (transferability), consistency (dependability), and neutrality (confirmability) (Guba, 1981). To strengthen these elements, one such technique is prolonged engagement, which allows researchers to build trust and develop rapport with participants (Erlandson et al., 1995). The field engagement in this study took place during March 2025 for two weeks. Because the study was held internationally, data collection required intensive and dedicated time in the field. Therefore, the schedule was carefully structured in advance in order for researchers to allow engagement across multiple levels of education—from early childhood to upper secondary and higher education—through site visits, observations, lectures, and informal interactions.

While the engagement was time-bound in this study, the depth and continuity of interactions—such as full-day discussions, lesson observations, and shared meals and coffee with educators—facilitated meaningful rapport building and enhanced contextual understanding. These immersive experiences yielded insights that might otherwise have taken years to develop (Erlandson et al., 1995). Although this study took place for two weeks, the pre-established relationship with Rin played a key role in facilitating access and trust. This connection enabled the researchers to engage naturally within educational settings and to hold meaningful dialogues with teachers, administrators, and students, thus enhancing the credibility and depth

of the findings. Besides, using multiple data sources gathered to enhance trustworthiness (Erlandson et al., 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) verified data and findings. Finally, the research team collaboratively collected and analyzed data, employing member checks and triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to enhance trustworthiness and reach consensus in interpreting the findings.

4. THEMES: REFLECTIONS OF FINNISH EDUCATIONAL VALUES AND PRACTICES

The emerging themes from the data analysis included *trust, play, and emotional focus in early education, and structural support in Finnish education*. This section addresses the second research question:

Research Question 2. What themes emerge from the implementation of naturalistic inquiry in an international educational fieldwork context, and how do they reflect key values and practices in Finnish education?

4.1. Trust

Respect and trust emerged as foundational elements in Finnish education, particularly within early childhood and secondary settings. Across all data sources—including teacher presentations, informal conversations with teachers, focus group interviews with students, and observations—trust was consistently identified as a key factor in fostering collaborative and healthy educational environments. One kindergarten teacher, with two years of experience, shared that having trust and strong connections with families enables educators to set healthy boundaries: *“When parents are demanding, I can say no because they trust that I’m doing what’s best for the child. That helps me take care of myself, too.”* This statement reflects how professional trust that teachers own empowers them to exercise judgment and preserve well-being.



Figure 5. Educational Tools

During the observation in an elementary classroom, we also noted strong trust demonstrated through the use of real tools (Figure 5) in the learning environment. This approach reflects administrators’ trust in their teachers, who in turn trust their students, potentially increasing the students’ confidence in their abilities. By allowing students to handle actual tools—such as hammers, screwdrivers, and other equipment—they gained practical experience that bridged the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. In secondary education, trust is equally valued. During a lecture session, one instructor stated, “Teachers are recognized as keys to quality in education... Teachers in Finland are very autonomous professionally.” She emphasized that educators have “pedagogical autonomy, so they can decide for themselves the methods of teaching as well as the textbooks and materials.” This autonomy is both socially accepted and professionally respected (Alho et al., 2024), illustrating how trust and respect are deeply embedded in Finland’s educational culture. One notable highlight was that teacher evaluations are not mandated by the Ministry of Education or individual schools in Finland.

4.2. Play and Emotional Focus in Early Education

Play and emotional development were emphasized as central components of early childhood education in Finland. Classrooms featured various visual aids—such as illustrated emotion charts—to help children recognize and express their feelings. Teachers intentionally incorporated these tools to support the development of both emotional literacy and social skills. One early childhood educator noted, “*Teaching kids different emotions helps them understand how others feel.*” She also shared, “*If I have 20 students, I may need to create 20 different relationships,*” highlighting a commitment to knowing each child individually beyond academic content. This personalized approach underscores the teacher’s role in fostering not only cognitive but also emotional and relational growth.

In early education, play and emotional development emerge most clearly through children’s friendships and sense of social belonging. During one of the professional workshops, one teacher shared, “*In Helsinki, everyone has one friend.*” She also added, “*Having a friend is something that we try to ensure for every child.*” Teachers actively facilitate this goal by ensuring that each child has a peer connection, particularly in kindergarten settings. Through games, students not only learn about emotions but also form connections and friendships in the process. For example, a typical kindergarten day was described as being filled with various forms of play—free play, paired play, outdoor activities, drawing, puzzles, and teacher-led structured games. Through play, children learn important social rules, how to resolve conflicts, and how to collaborate and support one another. Teachers play a key role in guiding these experiences, helping children practice concentration and interpersonal problem-solving through developmentally appropriate, play-based interactions.

4.3. Structural Support in Finnish Education

This theme presents how systemic structures and intentional preparation for change shape educational practices in Finland. Evidence of these elements was observed across all levels of the educational system. During the presentations (Figure 6), school principals and government administrators openly brought up the issues of Finland’s declining population and the government’s proactive response, including efforts to welcome immigrants to help address demographic challenges. Additional efforts made were that schools have implemented targeted supports, such as specialized teachers and tailored curricula, to meet the diverse needs of immigrant students and their families.



Figure 6. Presentation Delivered by a Government Administrator

Finland’s approach to educational structure combines centralized vision with localized autonomy. According to the government administrator, who previously worked as a teacher, “*the Ministry of Education provides broad curriculum frameworks and sets national educational goals, while individual teachers are trusted to decide how to implement these goals in their own classrooms.*” This also reflects a deep respect for teachers’ professional expertise, which is a critical form of structural support, and fosters innovation at the school level. Notably, it was found that all teachers in Finland hold a master’s degree, and many actively participate in educational

research, further reinforcing the professional status of teaching. Additionally, Finland distinguishes between private and independent schools. Independent schools, though not publicly run, are not created for profit but for specific educational purposes, aligning with national educational values. Overall, these structural elements reflect a forward-thinking system designed to adapt to societal shifts while maintaining educational equity and teacher professionalism.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings should be interpreted with attention to their context. This study was conducted in Finland and is grounded in the specific cultural, institutional, and educational context of Finnish educational systems. Therefore, the study aims to provide practice-oriented insights and enhance transferability across contexts (Patton, 2015) as a qualitative study, particularly naturalistic inquiry, rather than to claim broad generalization of the processes of the inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Nevertheless, it is critical to acknowledge that enactment of naturalistic inquiry may look different across cultural and regional contexts. For example, cultural expectations in Africa, America, and Asia may look different, which also may influence how naturalistic inquiry may be carried out in practice. Accordingly, future research should examine how naturalistic inquiry is carried out across diverse global contexts in order to better understand both its applicability and its variation within international educational settings, particularly for practitioners-scholars.

5.1. Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

The findings offer several practical implications across stakeholder groups, particularly when interpreted as context-sensitive insights rather than prescriptions for direct replication. For teachers, particularly in the United States, where systemic trust may be more constrained than in Finland, the study highlights the value of pedagogical autonomy as it is enacted in everyday practice. Rather than large-scale structural change, the findings suggest that teachers may gradually expand their autonomy within existing systems through bounded, actionable strategies. For example, teachers may exercise professional judgment in areas such as pacing, formative assessment, classroom culture, and instructional design, or engage more intentionally in collaborative decision-making within their local contexts. These forms of incremental, practice-based autonomy were reflected in observations of Finnish classrooms, where teacher discretion operated within broadly defined national frameworks. As such, small, contextually responsive shifts may be more feasible and sustainable than attempts to replicate system-level features of Finnish education.

In addition, advocacy may be understood as a professional responsibility grounded in context. The findings suggest that teachers can play meaningful roles in advancing instructional improvement by engaging in site-based leadership, contributing to professional dialogue, and advocating for practices that align with student needs, even within constrained policy environments. This perspective reframes advocacy as embedded within daily professional practice rather than as large-scale systemic reform.

For school leaders, this study highlights the importance of structural trust as a reciprocal and capacity-dependent relationship. The findings suggest that increased autonomy is most effective when paired with intentional investment in teacher development and organizational coherence. Leaders may operationalize trust through strategies such as reducing excessive surveillance, creating flexible instructional frameworks, and protecting space for teacher decision-making, while simultaneously strengthening professional learning systems. Observations from Finnish schools indicated that trust was not unstructured but supported by strong preparation, shared norms, and clear expectations, suggesting that trust and accountability are not mutually exclusive but interdependent.

For policymakers, the findings suggest the importance of creating policy conditions that enable, rather than constrain, professional trust. This may include greater stability in standards, reduced policy volatility, and stronger alignment between accountability systems and professional expertise. Rather than prescribing wholesale reform, the study suggests that policy efforts may be more effective when focused on coherence, capacity-building, and long-term system stability. The Finnish context, as reflected in this study, illustrates how sustained investment in rigorous teacher preparation and professionalization may contribute to conditions in which trust can be enacted at scale.

Finally, for researchers, this study underscores the need for more cross-cultural, practice-based research that moves beyond descriptive accounts toward implementation-oriented inquiry. Future studies may examine how elements of high-trust systems can be adapted, rather than replicated, within different sociopolitical and institutional contexts. In particular, research that traces how practitioner-level adaptations unfold over time may offer valuable insight into the conditions under which trust-based practices can be meaningfully integrated into diverse educational systems. These implications further demonstrate the value of naturalistic inquiry as a method for generating contextually grounded, practice-oriented insights that are responsive to the complexity of educational systems.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how naturalistic inquiry can be practically designed and implemented by a practitioner-researcher in an international educational fieldwork context and presents its step-by-step process in the first research question. In addition, this study showed what themes emerge from the implementation of naturalistic inquiry in Finland, and how they reflect key values and practices in Finnish education as the second research question. Key themes, such as trust, play, and emotional focus in early education, and structural support in Finnish education, demonstrate how culturally embedded practices foster respectful learning environments. By applying a naturalistic lens to one of the world's most successful education systems, this research offers both methodological guidance and meaningful reflections for educational leaders engaged in global, context-sensitive inquiry. Further, respecting teachers' professional expertise is a powerful form of structural support that education in Finland is currently implementing.

This study confirmed that when teachers are empowered to lead, they can serve as integral actors in school improvement and student achievement (Olmo-Extremiera et al., 2024); the educational system in Finland demonstrates how entrusting teachers with professional autonomy contributes to high levels of student learning and school success. This study further demonstrates that naturalistic inquiry serves as a powerful tool for practitioner-researchers, with their roles—participant, observer, and reflective practitioner—enabling richer data collection and interpretation at both the broader systemic features and the finer classroom details. The process of the research, along with the quality of the engagement with study participants, is strengthened when a strong relationship between researchers and a local leading expert is built. This study contributes to the field by demonstrating how naturalistic inquiry can be effectively applied in international settings, offering guidance for researchers and educators interested in reflective, context-sensitive qualitative methods. Finally, the commitment of the research team to learn from best practices and to engage deeply with the Finnish educational context allowed for meaningful, contextually grounded insights that can inform improvement in their own educational settings.

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