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From Passenger to Driver: Strengthening Self-Efficacy  
in Finland's JOPO Class Students

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE COLLEGE  
OF EDUCATION, LEADERSHIP AND COUNSELING OF  
THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS  
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

By

Joyce Carol Bonafield-Pierce

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION


2018


UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS, MINNESOTA

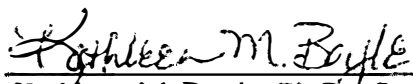
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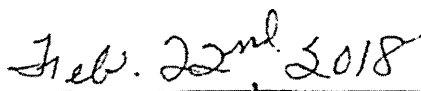
We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

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## Abstract

This qualitative case study examined how Finland's JOPO class, designed for 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade students who disengage from or drop out of their traditional class, helps students re-engage in school, discover a sense of belonging and motivation, and strengthen a sense of self-efficacy about successfully completing 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Called "the class of flexible learning," the JOPO class combines academic small-group learning with workplace on-the-job learning and learning camps, which take the students out of school for natural environment activities that build teamwork and enhance social and emotional learning. Eight schools in five parts of Finland participated in this study. Teachers, principals, guidance counselors, youth workers and former JOPO students who are now young adults shared their experiences about factors they felt were key to the program's success. Nearly all JOPO students in these schools not only completed the required 9<sup>th</sup> grade but continued on to a vocational or academic upper secondary school.

Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, Dweck's theory of growth mindset, Noddings' theory of caring education, and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences formed the framework for the study. JOPO teachers and students cited the emotionally safe learning community that evolved, the early sense of trust and belonging, on-the-job learning, and the teachers' positive 'noticing' and commitment to the students as key in developing academic self-efficacy. Students gained new motivation and strengthened self-efficacy beliefs about being able to complete school. Principals and teachers credited early intervention with students, learning camp experiences, and selection of appropriate students and teachers for the program as success factors. The JOPO class began in 2006 and was adopted nationwide in Finland in 2008. It serves approximately 1,850 students each year in middle schools throughout the nation.

*Keywords:* Self-efficacy; JOPO class; on-the-job learning; belonging; social-emotional learning; growth mindset; caring education; student motivation; at-risk students; flexible learning; whole-child learning.

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## Copyright

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

From caring comes courage.  
--Lao Tzu

When you realize someone believes in you, you begin to believe you can do just about anything.  
--Former student, Finland's JOPO class

This qualitative case study examines how Finland's JOPO (pronounced "YO-PO") class, a project launched by the Finnish Ministry of Education for struggling middle school students, helps them build their sense of self-efficacy about succeeding in school. Called the class of "flexible basic education," (*joustava perusopetus* in Finnish), this more experiential, hands-on version of Finland's required middle school curriculum has demonstrated remarkable success with the students who have participated in it: JOPO students almost universally proceed on to graduating from 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the completion of Finnish Basic Education. Completing 9<sup>th</sup> grade is the last year of compulsory education in Finland. Though upper secondary school is optional for Finns, about 95% of students continue into Grades 10 -12 or the optional 10<sup>th</sup> grade (Jahnukainen & Helander, 2007; Sahlberg, 2015). Nearly all JOPO class graduates are accepted for further education as well (Sarja & Jahnonen, 2014). Finnish upper secondary schools are separate entities and students usually apply to several of them, as is common in other countries when applying to college. Most JOPO class graduates enter a vocational high school, though some enter a more academic upper secondary school, or *lukio*.

JOPO classes are not special education. Housed in the main comprehensive school (or *peruskoulu*, Grades 1 - 9) in a self-contained classroom taught by two educators in a small group format, JOPO is an alternative pedagogical form of the required curriculum. The JOPO class is offered as an option to students who have disengaged from learning in their traditional class, or



who have stopped attending school altogether. The JOPO program began as a more experiential form of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but many locations now include 8<sup>th</sup> grade as well (School Education Gateway, 2012). The JOPO class aims to “build social skills, self-confidence and self-efficacy, develop one’s ability to reflect on learnings, maintain self-control, identify individual needs, personal and career interests, and find one’s next level of education” (A. Rousi, personal communication, September 26, 2016).

Students need to apply and interview for the JOPO class with their parent or guardian, thus requiring some initial motivation. A JOPO applicant also needs the recommendation of their teacher and a social worker or guidance counselor who has known the student (Sarja & Jahnonen, 2014). Students often see the JOPO class as a second chance at becoming successful in school. JOPO is offered to students who seek action learning—those who like to learn by doing and trying things out directly. Many JOPO students have experienced difficulty in forming friendships with peers or positive relationships with teachers. They may have felt on the outside of social life with classmates. These students have not shown serious behavioral or mental health problems, though they may be on the cusp of experimenting with chemicals or other counterproductive behaviors. They have not found success in the Finnish traditional education classroom.

Finnish educators, to best honor their commitment to support the well-being of each child, emphasize early identification and intervention with these students. Finland also places a high value on the inclusion of everyone in the society. Finnish educators created the JOPO class as an early intervention to help prevent “early school leaving” (Sarja & Jahnonen, 2014). JOPO serves as a major intervention toward continuing inclusion and re-engaging this student group.

JOPO teachers take extra training beyond their master's degree to work with these young teens—learning to facilitate small group learning, build safe emotional space for students, and to integrate workplace and social-emotional learning with coursework. The length and format of the training varies by municipality. Though JOPO is not considered special education, the JOPO teachers take their extra training in special education (K. Rajaorko, personal communication, February 7, 2017). JOPO teachers often think of their work as a vocation: to help each student find a successful way to learn. In Finland, it is said, “Finnish students don’t fail. We teach so that they learn. If they don’t learn, we change the way we teach.” (English, 2014, p. 1).

In concert with Finland’s commitment to offer each child an excellent education, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture created an ample set of support professionals—social workers, guidance counselors, psychologists, and various education specialists for each school—as well as special programming for certain kinds of students. JOPO is an early intervention effort aimed at helping a student get a new start—by revitalizing their interest in their own lives, in their education and in in the society around them—within a small group context and with extra support and feedback. The JOPO class experience takes students out of the classroom two days each week into on-the-job learning experiences at local workplaces. The JOPO class also takes out of town excursions to youth camps for outdoor activities like skiing, hiking, and game competitions, where teambuilding and social-emotional learning can also take root and grow.

The JOPO class evolved in the 1990s through the work of several Finnish teachers, and the Finnish Ministry of Education adopted it in 2006. A number of schools in urban, suburban, and small-town communities offered the JOPO class with students who had disengaged from their traditional classroom in middle school. In 2008, after assessing their ability to adequately

support this student population, the Finnish Ministry of Education formally made the JOPO class available nationwide. Throughout Finland, the JOPO class serves about 1,850 students each year (K. Rajaorko, personal communication, February 7, 2017).

### **Statement of the Problem**

No matter where the phenomenon is studied, by middle school, an increasing number of students begin to disengage from classroom learning, dropping off in their attendance at school or taking leave altogether. Finland is no exception. Upon closer examination, many of these students are not finding meaningful ways of learning, or they feel unable to meet the demands of their classroom academic requirements. They no longer believe they can succeed at the required tasks, whether in math, science, or a writing assignment, and they do not sustain their efforts when the going gets tougher. They begin to believe “I’m not a good student,” or “I’m not good at math,” or some other self-limiting belief.

Their sense of academic self-efficacy being marginal, these Finnish middle school students frequently begin to back off from demanding assignments. A next step is to attend class less often. There comes a point where the student’s self-talk becomes such a barrier that the student gives up, perhaps coming to believe, “Maybe I’m just not made for high school” or a similar variant. Students in this quandary do not want to be visible, called out, or teased (Rumberger, 2011). These students are too young to appreciate the lifelong ramifications of leaving school without any credential (certificate or diploma)—marginalization, few employment possibilities, few ways to meaningfully participate in society, and vulnerability to illegal behavior.

For Finland, there is the hefty economic cost of helping support the one who left school early. Sahlberg (2015) estimates the cost to the government for each student who drops out of the educational system before completing 9<sup>th</sup> grade to be about one million Euro. These early leavers experience great difficulty finding employment and usually experience marginalized lives. The challenge for teachers is how to identify these students early on this journey of withdrawal and offer another pathway into successful learning. Educators are challenged to discern what else to offer these students to help them believe they can learn and can succeed in school. When unaddressed, the problem leads to the failure of full human development in these students—in their cognitive and useful skills development, and in their social and emotional learning, including their self-efficacy beliefs in learning successfully, and their experience of belonging and meaningful participation in their society.

Not every student thrives within the traditional class of 18 to 23 students. A student entering middle school classes at 7<sup>th</sup> grade leaves behind the nurturance of one main teacher over the year or multiple years as well as a cohort of familiar students. Now they meet multiple subject teachers with a different group of students in each class. Many students make this transition smoothly. But some are overwhelmed in trying to form a positive working relationship with each new teacher and configuration of students. This is often one of the challenges facing a JOPO student. The original document describing JOPO stated it was targeted to young people who: (a) have weak school motivation, (b) experience various problems relating to school and attendance, (c) exhibit difficulties in finishing school, (d) have a weak social background or no support from their families, and (e) are at-risk for being excluded from education and society (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2008).

A number of reasons may contribute to a JOPO student's struggle to succeed in the traditional Finnish classroom. There may be pressures, conflict, or lack of support at home. The student may need a different pedagogical approach. He or she may need more one-on-one help to break down learning tasks in order to gain mastery. There may be inadequate social skills or emotional development. The student's metacognition (Bandura, 1977) may not have become reflective in a way that can offer self-help in shifting one's attitude or perspective.

JOPO students tend to prefer hands-on learning, and to enjoy both the days spent in on-the-job learning at workplaces as well as the outdoor adventures of the learning camps, which tie learning in nature with science, math, writing, geography, and other subjects. Former JOPO students reflecting back on their experience with this class appreciated the social and emotional learning and confidence that built up through their 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade years in this class experience. Finnish educators realized this group of students needed something different—a way to succeed based on their unique needs, a way that would help them gain confidence and a stronger feeling of being able to succeed in their education.

### **Significance of the Study**

Many students who fail to succeed in traditional classrooms in other nations do not receive such outreach to re-engage them in learning. Finland's program offers another idea, another model of what kinds of approaches can support and help to re-engage these young people, sometimes in transformative ways. U.S. educators sometimes talk of "the school-to-prison pipeline" that develops for some of its students as if such a path were inevitable. Investing in a model similarly designed from the JOPO class but adapted to one's own cultural context offers an alternative, another chance at building the academic self-efficacy of a student

and further developing the nation's human capital. In fact, the JOPO class idea originated in a New York City school in the 1970s (M. Jahnukainen, personal communication, October 13, 2016).

Examining the elements of a program so successful with a challenging group of students will add to the research and our understanding of best practices. From the time I first observed the JOPO class program in Finland in 2015, I wanted to know more about it and how it helped these students to re-engage in their academic, social, and emotional development. As I searched the literature, I could find only two mentions by the Finnish Ministry of Education (2006, 2008), and one article (Rousi, 2008) describing JOPO. As I spoke with more Finnish educators over the next two years, many principals and JOPO teachers stated their support for a multi-school study that would look at how this program helped its students develop confidence, self-efficacy, and renewed motivation. The understandings gained from the JOPO class need to be added to the literature on students dropping out (in Finland, "*school leaving*") and programs attempting to creatively re-engage them.

Students who do not graduate from high school have a slim chance of fully participating in their society as they come of age, whether in Finland or elsewhere. I believe this study will offer helpful insights to educators dedicated to this population of students—those who fail to thrive in traditional classroom settings, but who can thrive in alternatively designed programs. This program seems to have had strong success for those students with some motivation (they applied and interviewed for this class), those who chose to respond to educators' outreach to them with something that might interest them in a new way.

We live in an era of old systems being phased out and new ones being constructed. This is visible in the worlds of both work and education. What will be the job skills needed in the

future? What will we most need to learn, and how can we best learn it? The PBS News Hour recently opened an education segment by stating, “We’re at the beginning of an apprenticeship renaissance” (PBS News Hour, August 29, 2017). Policy leaders talk of bringing education closer to the work world for the sake of students gaining experiences that build appropriate job skills, and for the workplaces that will need people with those skills in the coming years. A Finnish educator at the 2017 FinnFest (Hoffman, 2017) in Minneapolis told an audience of American educators:

We’re currently preparing students for jobs that don’t exist yet,  
for using technologies that haven’t been invented yet,  
in order to solve problems we don’t know are problems yet.

Finland has developed an approach that may become a trend in other places as the world of work evolves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially for students who prefer learning by doing and plan to attend a vocational senior high school or a technical college.

### **Research Questions**

This study seeks to understand how the JOPO class helps to empower its students to re-engage in their school and their life. The primary research question is:

How does Finland’s JOPO class help to strengthen struggling students’ sense of self-efficacy in learning—their belief that they can become successful in school?

Sub-questions are:

- (a) What kind of classroom culture invites a JOPO student’s re-engagement and interest in learning?
- (b) What helps JOPO students become responsible for their own learning?

### **Reflexive Statement**

I became interested in the concept of self-efficacy after visiting a number of primary and secondary classrooms in Finland in April, 2015. In each school I visited, students showed a self-reliance, self-trust, and strong self-initiative in their classrooms and with their teachers. They appeared comfortable collaborating in small groups, working at times with the teacher or on their own, and would frequently suggest ideas to the teacher about what they felt would work well. I began reading about self-reliance, self-confidence, self-trust, and shortly thereafter discovered the literature on self-efficacy and human agency. Not only did self-efficacy beliefs begin to explain more of what I noticed in Finnish children, but it also became a lens for revealing a deeper understanding of the Latino third grade students with whom I had worked as a literacy specialist since 2009. These students frequently struggled with motivation and self-confidence, and often a sense of self-efficacy eluded them. I began to wonder about our pedagogical methods, our curricular content, and about ways to help support and grow the natural ‘spark’ of these students.

My interest in finding ways to support struggling students and those leaving school before completing it began in my work with elementary students in Minneapolis. I worked primarily with minority and immigrant students, and some who came to school from shelters. I noticed that students began to flourish with the right combination of supports and structural adjustments in the classroom. Many students responded to individualized help in and out of the classroom and, at some point, developed a sense of self-efficacy in their learning. But I noticed other students as young as age eight begin to risk less in front of their peers and withdraw from applying themselves as the assignments in reading or writing became more rigorous. I listened to the self-talk they used to explain to themselves why they were not going to finish high school,



or why they did not really need an education. I heard them repeat lowered adult expectations for them, some coming from their families and some coming from school personnel.

I am also a social worker and earlier had been a psychotherapist for two decades. While some of my challenges to their lowered expectations may have had some impact, I also began to see the need for a programmatic response—offering a different kind of learning experience—one that refused to go along with their lowered self-expectations and would help them see that they could succeed at learning. This search brought me to the doctoral program in educational leadership at the University of St. Thomas.

When spending time in Finnish schools in 2015, I visited a school that held the JOPO class, and spent a morning with the JOPO staff while the students were out at their workplace internships. I immediately noticed the close collaboration of the teachers, youth work and social work staff, and felt their strong commitment to their students. I learned also that each school does its own evaluation of the program each year and submits it to their municipality, which coordinates with the larger education system of the area. Later I came to realize that neither these nor larger studies of the JOPO program are found in education journals, though two brief early assessments of JOPO were published in Finnish by the Finnish Ministry of Education. This realization made me want to study the JOPO class program in a more formal way.

### **Research Design and Procedures**

This qualitative case study included interviews with educators and former students in eight Finnish schools. Participants were recruited by an email letter of invitation to school JOPO coordinators and their principals in five metro regions of Finland. Becoming part of the study required the permission of the school's principal and the agreement of the JOPO teacher, and a

formal letter of invitation from the school. Other staff connected with the JOPO class could choose to join the study—JOPO youth workers, guidance counselors, psychologists, social workers. Nine of them did. Former students, now at least age 18, could also share their reflections on being a JOPO student years earlier. Seven of them did.

A total of thirty-five respondents completed an interview of approximately 40 minutes in length. The study allowed two respondents to interview together if they preferred, partly to allow for assistance with English when needed. This option was chosen by a principal and assistant principal, a psychologist and social worker, and two former students who had been in their JOPO class at the same time. In these instances, each person answered all of the questions, and more time was allowed. One respondent met me in person and offered a presentation on his JOPO class over breakfast. He then formally joined the study and completed the interview questions by emailing me his answers. I audiotaped each interview and once back in Minneapolis, had them transcribed by a professional service. I kept the research data in a password-protected computer and a locked file cabinet. The study guaranteed confidentiality to each participant, and all data remained in a locked file while traveling. Each participant had received a letter explaining the purpose and design of the study, its voluntary and confidential nature. I reviewed this process and allowed time for questions before beginning the interview with each participant. The interviews began in Finland the last week in September, 2016, and continued through the second week in October. The details of the research design and procedures are described further in Chapter Three.

## Definition of Terms

**At-risk students:** In this context, students exhibiting factors of lowered motivation, disengagement, and assessed to be vulnerable to dropping out of school prior to completion of 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the last year of Finland’s compulsory education. Finnish students normally then apply to general upper secondary or vocational high school to complete grades 10-12.

**Belonging:** to fit in a specified place or environment; have the right personal or social qualities to be a member of a particular group. Maslow (1943/2013) felt the need to belong is one of humankind’s primary needs and is of foundational importance in human motivation.

**Collective Efficacy Beliefs:** Commonly held beliefs – between a group of teachers, or a group of students—about what is possible to achieve. These beliefs shape the behavioral and normative environment of classrooms and schools. Such beliefs may be either positive (we can successfully teach these students) or negative (these students can’t handle a rigorous curriculum). Students in a group may likewise influence one another with positive self-efficacy beliefs or beliefs about not achieving (Goddard, 2001).

**Democratic classroom:** Learning environment where students actively contribute to the class design and social milieu, décor, curriculum, learning projects, and their preferred way of being evaluated (Dewey, 2004; Simola, 2015).

**Drop-out:** A student who drops out of school attendance before finishing 9<sup>th</sup> grade in the Finnish Compulsory Education system, encompassing grades 1 through 9. Finns use the term “*school leaving*.”

**Equality:** The ideal that people should have the same rights without consideration of their sex, status, or race. (Niemi, Toom, & Kallioniemi, 2012).

**Equity:** The quality of being fair and impartial. Referring to a just system while individual circumstances or needs may vary; a policy-making concept that embodies the quality of being fair and reasonable. (Niemi, Toom, & Kallioniemi, 2012).

**Ethic of Care:** Pertaining to education, learning grounded in respectful, supportive relationships; focus on growing the whole person, socially, emotionally, and academically. Methods include modeling, dialogue, confirmation, and practice, the foundation of caring communication. Classroom and school become the demonstration of a caring community, aiming to help create ethical, contributing citizens (Noddings, 1995). Further described in Theoretical Framework.

**Experiential Learning:** Carefully chosen experiences, supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis; learners engaged socially, emotionally, intellectually, soulfully, and/or physically. Develops and nurtures relationships: learner to self, learner to others and learner to the world at large (Association for Experiential Education, 2015).

**Finland Special Needs Education:** The third and most intensive of three levels of extra help offered to students in Grades 1- 9; can be part-time (i.e., math clinic) or full time. Levels one and two are considered student individualized support and are conducted in the regular classroom.

**Finland Compulsory Education (or *Peruskoulu*):** The joining together of primary and lower secondary schools into one seamless more discovery-oriented curriculum, begun in the 1970s.

Also referred to as **Finnish Basic Education**. It spans grades 1 through 9; students are ages 7 to 16 and includes both academic and hands-on skill-building classes (Sahlberg, 2015).

**Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture:** Major policy building and review group that also connects education and cultural issues with the national parliament, education providers, and municipalities.

**FNBE or Finnish National Board of Education:** Works in tandem with the Ministry of Education and state and regional organizations in formulating curriculum reform at the national level. The most recent reform, focusing on project-based learning, launched in August, 2016.

**Flexible Basic Education:** Another term for Finland's JOPO class, a more experiential version of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade middle school curriculum, held within the main school and not a part of Finnish special education.

**Growth mindset:** A core belief that one's personal qualities and intellect can be cultivated and developed through meeting challenges with effort and persistence; the sense that one is a 'life under ongoing construction.' This contrasts with those living in a **fixed mindset**, who believe that intelligence and abilities are given in a fixed, unalterable amount (Dweck, 2006). One in a **growth mindset** experiences greater motivation to try, and persistence in the face of challenge.

**Human agency:** *The self-perception* of being able to act on one's environment in various contexts (Bandura, 1986, 1989). While self-efficacy refers to a specific task, one's sense of agency, or feeling able to act in one's situation, points to a feeling of empowered choice-making *in a more general way*.

**Interest:** The immediate reaction to a new learning task, is an affective state that involves feelings of arousal, alertness, attention, and concentration and is a key variable in the motivation of learning (Ainley, 2006).

**JOPO Class:** Class for students needing re-motivation, experiential learning, and career choice planning, in grades 8 or 9; taught within regular public school, using a self-contained classroom with visits to workplaces, a mentorship/apprenticeship at several of those work sites; class trips out of town for social emotional learning and community building. Ordinarily it is a one year program for a student, but can be a two year process, if both teacher and student agree. Most schools do not offer this class to students in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, though a few have done so.

**Koulu:** Finnish word for **elementary or middle school**.

**Low SES:** Low socioeconomic status.

**Lukio:** Finnish word for **academic high school**, referring to grades 10 through 12, also termed Upper Secondary school. These contrast with Finland's many vocational high schools.

**Metacognition:** Being aware of one's own cognitive processes, and in so observing, regulate and become more strategic with them (Bandura, 1977; Flavell, 1979).

**Model Similarity:** Observing similar others succeed can raise observers' self-efficacy and motivate them to perform the task if they believe that they, too, will be successful. Conversely, observing similar others fail can lead students to believe that they lack the competence to succeed and dissuade them from attempting the task. This model similarity is a potent force among children and adolescents, since they are similar in many ways and at these developmental levels, are unfamiliar with many tasks (Schunk, 1987).

**Multiple intelligences:** Howard Gardner articulates eight intelligences, fully developed and tested learning capacities that we all possess; he believes most people can develop all of these to a relatively acceptable level of mastery. They include: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligences (Gardner, 2006); a ninth, or existential intelligence, is sometimes acknowledged. Finnish schools work diligently to incorporate all of these into their teaching and allow students to use their “strong suits” to help grow their less developed intelligences.

**OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.** Launched in the 1960s, international group that initiates policies to improve both economic and social well-being of its 35 member-states around the world. Includes the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, China, Japan, and most European nations. OECD administers the PISA international assessment among its member nations every third year, comparing educational systems globally (OECD, 2011, 2013).

**Peruskoulu:** Meaning “Grammar School” in English. Refers to the combined elementary and middle school, grades 1 through 9, or Finland’s Compulsory Education. Students begin first grade at age 7, and finish 9<sup>th</sup> grade at 16 (Sahlberg, 2015).

**PISA:** Program for International Student Assessment, administered by the OECD. Administered every three years in reading, science and math in over 60 nations, it also measures equity between students and between schools in its 35 member nations. Finland has ranked at or near the top in this test since 2000 (reported in 2001) and has the highest equity between students and between schools of any participating nation (OECD, 2011).

**Polytechnic:** A Finnish technical college or university that can be selected after high school.

Most students come to a polytechnic through completing a vocational high school, but graduates of academic high schools may also attend. Students completing vocational high schools may also attend a research-based university by taking the entrance exam.

**Project-focused thematic learning:** An alternative to “subject learning,” and a primary pedagogical approach to Finnish classroom learning. Students can work on projects which draw on understandings from several subject areas, either individually and/or collaboratively; stresses critical reflection, problem-solving, and innovative thinking (FNBE, 2016).

**Prosocial Behavior:** The phenomenon of people helping each other with no thought of reward or compensation. Prosocial behaviors are actions or patterns of behavior rather than motivations, contrasting with altruism, the motivation to do charitable acts (Bandura, 1997).

**Resilience:** In the education context, children in high-risk environments, who despite adverse circumstances, achieve positive outcomes developmentally. Resilience research is the “study of developmental processes under extraordinary circumstances” (Yates & Masten, 2004, p. 522).

**Self-efficacy:** Belief in one’s ability to achieve, accomplish, or succeed at a thing in a particular domain, e.g., believing one can run a mile. Answers the question, “Can I do this task in this situation?” Both academic self-efficacy and empathic self-efficacy have been studied (Bandura, 1997, 2005).

**Self-esteem:** “What I believe about myself, and how I feel about what I believe about myself” (Maddux, 2000).



**Self-reflection:** One makes sense and meaning via self-reflections; explores one's own thoughts, feelings, and self-beliefs; engages in self-evaluation; and can alter one's thinking and behavior accordingly. Considered by Bandura (1986) as the most distinctly human capability.

**Social Cognitive Theory:** Postulates that human achievement depends on interactions between one's behaviors, one's personal factors (thoughts, beliefs), and environmental conditions (Bandura, 1986).

**Social Emotional Learning (SEL):** A person's development in five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective and behavioral competencies. These include: (1) **Self-awareness** (accurately recognizing one's emotions and thoughts; assessing one's strengths and limitations; developing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism); (2) **Self-management** (regulating one's emotions, thoughts, behaviors in various situations; managing stress; controlling impulses; motivating oneself; setting and working toward personal and academic goals); (3) **Social awareness** (taking the perspective of and empathizing with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures; understanding social and ethical norms; recognizing family, school and community resources and supports); (4) **Relationship skills** (establishing healthy rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups; communicating clearly, listening actively, negotiating conflict constructively; resisting inappropriate social pressure; seeking and offering help when needed); and (5) **Responsible decision-making** (making constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions; considering ethical standards, safety, social norms, likely consequences, and well-being of self and others). Evolved from work at Yale Child Study Center, now the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 1997).

**SES:** Acronym for socioeconomic status.

**Social Soil:** Like plants requiring biotic communities of soil, water, air, and sun, people are born into communities and traditions; each new generation must be replanted in this social soil (John Dewey, in Fesmire, 2003, p. 26). Dewey, Noddings, Gardner and others remind educators to be cognizant of the ‘social soil’ we intentionally create in our classrooms and schools.

**Vocational Upper Secondary School:** Finland’s vocational Grades 10-12, primarily focusing on hands-on and technical skill development; includes computer sciences and ITC, wood and metal working, film-making, clay and pottery, textiles and clothing design, whole foods nutrition and cooking, and others.

### **Overview of the Chapters**

Chapter One introduced this qualitative case study and delineated its framework and background. It stated the problem addressed by the study, the purpose of the study, and its significance for education practitioners and researchers. It set forth the research questions explored and briefly described the qualitative research design employed in the study. A definition of terms section specifically described the terms used throughout the text of the dissertation.

Chapter Two reviews the literature pertinent to the study: the concept of self-efficacy, studies on motivation, one’s mindset, and studies of programs for youth that focus on building one’s self-confidence, resilience, or academic self-efficacy. The early part of the chapter offers a discussion of how Finland transformed its education system from 1960 to the present day to bring the reader into today’s Finnish educational context. The chapter then further develops the

theoretical framework that supports this case study: Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, Dweck's theory of mindset, Noddings' ethic of care in education, and Gardner's multiple intelligences.

Chapter Three presents the methodology employed in the study in greater detail. While preserving confidentiality, it describes the settings of the schools that participated in the study, details the types of participants who interviewed in the study, and delineates the process of building this research study from Minnesota, connecting with Finnish educators by email letters of invitation.

Chapter Four discusses the findings of the study. Findings grouped into three larger sections: societal and community supporting structures, teaching and learning strategies, and social-emotional learning. The chapter includes a discussion of the responses of former JOPO students now between age 18 and 26 who participated in the study.

Chapter Five offers an in-depth discussion and reflection on the study findings. It reflects on the synergy of the three pillars of the JOPO class: small group learning, workplace on-the-job learning with a mentor/supervisor, and out-of-school learning camps that add to experiential and social-emotional learning. It considers what kind of school culture can most strongly support a student's re-engagement in school, and what factors help students take responsibility for their own learning (go from 'passenger' to 'driver.')

The chapter spells out the limitations of this study and considers areas for future research, including suggestions from study participants.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

An educated nation cannot be created by force.  
We are creating a new culture of education and there is no way back.

--Dr. Vilho Hirvi, Finnish National Board of Education

If you believe you can, you can.

--Henry Ford

In this chapter I review the relevant literature on the four-decade transformation of Finland's system of education from 1960 to 2000, and briefly describe that system's efforts since then to keep current with changes in Finland and global realities as they relate to education. I then review the literature on the concept of self-efficacy: what it is, where it comes from, and forces that influence it. I review related concepts, such as Dweck's work with helping students develop a *growth mindset* and its correlation with student motivation and resilience. I also review studies that have attempted to measure the impact of various youth programs on students' self-efficacy, self-confidence, mindset, resilience, and engagement in school. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is briefly reviewed as well, owing to its importance in Finnish education.

The theoretical framework of the study is grounded in the work of social psychologist Albert Bandura, whose work in developing social cognitive theory led to a three-decade focus on how self-efficacy develops, and forces that can influence one's sense of self-efficacy. Carol Dweck's growth mindset theory adds a second dimension to considering how beliefs form, how they can change, and how one may consciously work with them. Just as important is education philosopher Nel Noddings' ethic of care theory as it relates to teaching the whole child, which

forms the third lens of the study's theoretical framework. These three theories are discussed in greater depth later in this chapter and will be revisited in Chapter Five.

### **Transforming Finland's Education System, 1960 -- Present**

Sahlberg (2015) states, "Finland's people remained rather poorly educated until the 1960s" (p. 58). In the late 1950s and 1960s, Finland conducted a process of self-assessment and re-visioning of their education system. As a part of this process, they studied the United States education system—from visiting our classrooms to meeting with principals and superintendents, reviewing our research, and interviewing policy-makers (Sahlberg, 2015). The Finnish educators engaged in this same way with Canada and the UK. During this period, Finland found itself in transition from a rural to an industrialized nation. Lacking many natural resources found in neighboring countries, Finland realized that their human capital proved their most important resource and developing it to full capacity its brightest hope for building a strong, competitive, and equitable society.

#### **1960s—Research, Visioning and Planning the Transition**

Until the early 1970s, Finland operated with a parallel education system, dividing students by age 11 or 12 into one of two separated streams (Sahlberg, 2015). Once a student made a decision on the grammar school (academic) or civic school (vocational), there was practically no way to move between these streams. The new idea emerging in Finland during the 1960s was that of a common unified public school for all children. This was a turbulent period, both in education and in the economic sector, and developing a consensus on the best way forward took time (Sahlberg, 2015). During this decade, Finnish educators also sent teams to several nations with strong education systems, identifying many 'best practices' to see how they could work into Finland's system. It was an era of exploration and creating a new vision.

Creating the *peruskoulu* (Grades 1—9) also represented bringing together two Finnish paradigms of education: the *oppikoulu* (traditional academic) and the *kansakoulu* (arts/crafts). Anna Liisa Karikoski Vuori was serving on Finland’s Ministry of Education when the major design of the *peruskoulu* was being debated. Vuori served (1959-1960) on the committee which created the new curriculum for the Finnish language (Bonafield-Pierce, 2015). The more practical pedagogical style of Uno Cygnaeus (*kansakoulu* or folk school—working with handicrafts, apparel arts, woodworking and other practical skills)—influenced the committee’s curriculum reformulation. Similar to John Dewey in later decades, Cygnaeus, Finland’s ‘father of holistic education’ teaching and writing in the 1860s, believed that students should practice democracy in the classroom, ideally speak more often than the teacher, and have a hand in decision-making regarding their lives and their schooling (Sahlberg, 2015).

Many committees crafted the new curriculum in each subject, and a number of these educators looked in the other direction, toward extending the *oppikoulu* curriculum—the traditional approach of rote memorizing and rather harsh behavioral practices—as the pedagogical preference. Vuori believed that the existing *oppikoulu* culture contributed to the low self-esteem and undue modesty of the Finnish character. She held to her conviction that education should create a culture of trust, support, nurture, discovery, and delight in learning (Bonafield-Pierce, 2015).

The *peruskoulu* emerged as a child-centered curriculum, balancing content to be mastered with student initiative, responsibility, and discovery. It represented a blend of the *oppikoulu*—devoid of its more strict behavioral mores—and the *kansakoulu*, and a new flexibility between the two former streams of education (Bonafield-Pierce, 2015; Sahlberg, 2015). The National Board of General Education further developed the work of the School Program Committee’s

work in the early 1960s, and the Finnish Parliament voted its approval on *peruskoulu*—the new model of Basic Education in Finland—on November 22, 1963 (Sahlberg, 2015).

By 1970, the best educational practices gleaned from the international explorations by Finnish educators contributed to a uniquely Finnish vision for transforming their entire system of education, poised on a commitment to make every school in Finland a center of learning excellence, and offering every Finnish child a quality education (Sahlberg, 2015). Over the next three decades, Finland constructed a wholly new education system.

### **1970s—Implementing the Peruskoulu**

The 1970s initiated the first great task of Finnish education reform: weaving each elementary and middle school (Grades 1 – 9) into one seamless nine-year educational curriculum, which both met national standards yet also had the ability to flex to meet individual students’ interests, abilities, and needs (Sahlberg, 2015). The ‘comprehensive school’ or *peruskoulu* became the basic education school required by Finland. This integrative process began in the northern regions of Finland, and by the late 1970s had worked its way down to the cities in the southern regions, including Helsinki (Sahlberg, 2015). The comprehensive schools were either joined together in one building or occasionally occupied a common campus in two buildings next to each other. Sahlberg (2015) stated the key question was: “Is it possible, in principle, that all children can be educated and can achieve similar learning goals?” (p.24).

Teachers from very different schools—the academic grammar schools and the work-oriented civic schools—needed to begin working in the same schools with students of diverse abilities. This paradigmatic change represented more than just an organizational change, but a new philosophy of education for Finland (Valijarvi et al., 2007). Sahlberg (2015) elaborated:

This philosophy included the beliefs that all pupils can learn if they are given proper opportunities and support, that understanding and learning through human diversity is an important educational goal, and that schools should function as small-scale democracies, just as John Dewey had insisted decades before. The new *peruskoulu*, therefore, required teachers to employ alternative instructional methods, design learning environments that enable differentiated learning for different pupils, and perceive teaching as a high-status profession. (p. 30)

The convergence of these changes led to wide-scale teacher education reform and a new law on teacher education, as well as a rapid expansion of upper-secondary (Grades 10-12) education throughout Finland (Aho, Pitkanen, & Sahlberg, 2006). The individual's potential for growth became a new theme in educational policy in Finland, and *peruskoulu* (Grades 1-9) enrollment expanded nearly ten-fold between the mid-1950s and 1970 (Sahlberg, 2015).

### **1980s—Re-conceptualizing Foundations of Schooling and Teaching**

During the 1980s, the focus shifted to examining the ways of knowing in greater depth—exploring *what is learning* and *how we learn* (Sahlberg, 2015). This led to the exploring and adopting of new pedagogies—and greater involvement of students in their own learning process (Niemi et al., 2012). Arguably the most important change throughout this decade, however, was the transfer of teacher education to research universities from the many *seminaari* for teacher training throughout Finland (Sahlberg, 2015; Simola, 2015). This change launched a new era of requiring teachers to complete a five-year, research-based master's degree to become a classroom teacher, and additional practice teaching experience (Niemi et al., 2012; Sahlberg, 2015). The change in the education design and requirements of new teachers inspired teachers to lead their students in inquiry-based education—teaching the same research-oriented way that they had been taught (Niemi et al., 2012). Sahlberg (2015) noted:

Finland has built world-class teacher education program. And Finland pays its teachers well. But the true Finnish difference is that teachers in Finland are expected to exercise their full professional knowledge and judgment both independently and collectively in



their schools. They control curriculum, student assessment, school improvement, and community involvement. This is called teacher professionalism. (p.9)

This new teacher was as fully professional as a doctor, lawyer, or engineer (Niemi et al., 2012). Since the 1980s, only one in ten applicants to teacher education programs are selected for the rigorous five-year program (Taylor, 2012). By the mid-1980s, all streaming and tracking of students ended, and Howard Gardner's idea of children having various kinds of intelligence became a prime mover in turning education policy into the practice of supporting each child in their best ways of learning (Sahlberg, 2015).

### **1990s—Improvement through Networking and Self-Regulated Change**

The 1990s saw the Finnish education system on the brink of fruition. This next phase grew out of the liberalizing of Finnish education governance toward the municipal and local levels (Aho et al., 2006; Sahlberg, 2015). The National Curriculum Reform of 1994 provided the other book-end to the Comprehensive School Reform of the 1970s. Schools were:

...encouraged to collaborate with other schools and to network with parents, businesses, and nongovernmental organizations. At the level of central administration, this new collaborative and self-directed movement culminated in the Aquarium Project, a national school improvement initiative enabling all Finnish schools, principals, and teachers to network with one another. The aim... was to transform schools into active learning communities...As a form of practice, this was previously unheard of in Finnish educational administration, and only rarely found elsewhere. (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 45)

This increased networking of schools and collaboration among educators became the hallmark of the 1990s. The former hierarchical administration of education throughout the nation became much flatter and more democratic. Finnish municipalities and their local schools gained primary control over curriculum development, hiring, school assessment, and policy implementation (Niemi et al., 2012; Sahlberg, 2015). One began to hear of Finland's education as a trust-based system (Niemi et al., 2012). Kauppinen (2016), director of the Finnish National Board of

Education, states that an ethos of trust underlies the Finnish education system. The new professional training of teachers helped this shift become possible, and teachers are now in charge of their own assessment, just as their students are in charge of assessing their own learning as a part of every assignment or project (Bonafield-Pierce, 2015; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012).

During the 1990s, Finnish vocational education received a make-over as well. First, curriculum became more closely adjusted to the standards of academic high schools. Second, more courses and types of learning gave students more flexibility and choice (Rubin, 2013). Third, the structures of higher education gained greater flexibility, so that a vocational high school graduate could now attend a liberal arts university, and vice versa (Sahlberg, 2015). Finally, vocational higher education took on a new name as these institutions developed: the *polytechnic institute*, and students from either type of high school, academic or vocational, were now able to attend a polytechnic college level program. (Niemi et al., 2012; Sahlberg, 2015). Today, between 42 and 45 percent of Finnish 16-year-olds choose a vocational high school, and about 50 percent choose an academic high school (Rubin, 2013). About three to four percent of comprehensive basic school graduates elect other training or education programs (Sahlberg, 2015). All-together, 93-95 percent of Finnish students complete one or the other 12<sup>th</sup> grade upper secondary school (Stat.fi, 2012; FNBE, 2015).

### **2000s—Efficiency of Structures and Administration**

Finnish educators were as surprised as many others when the first PISA examination announced its results in December, 2001. This first international examination, sponsored by the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) measured student

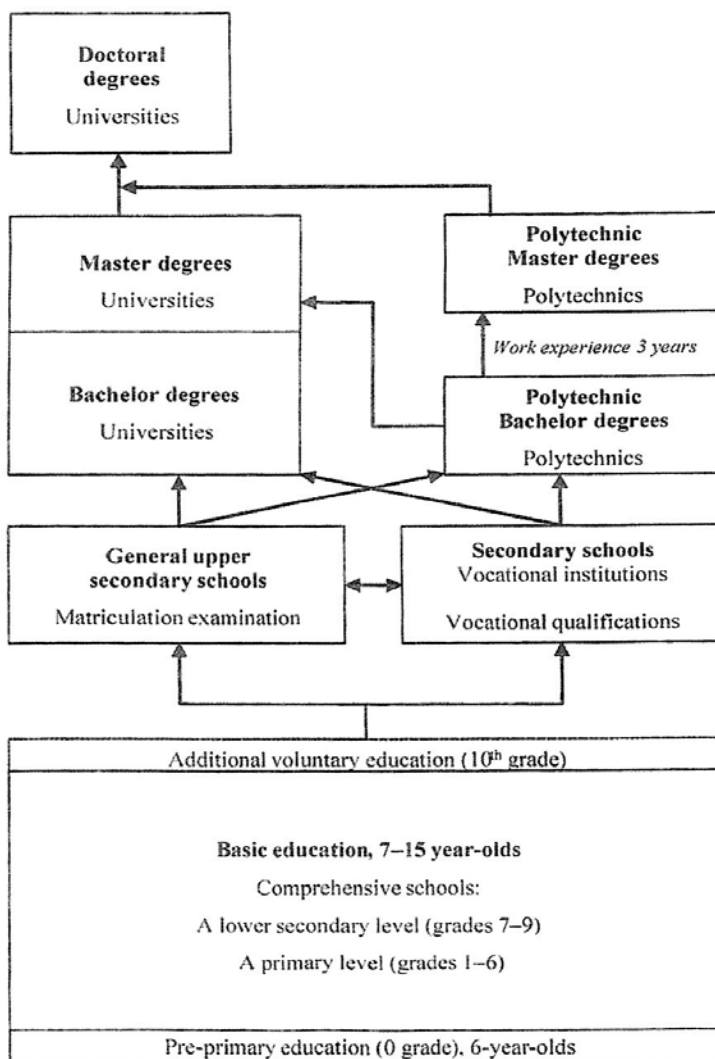
achievement in the areas of reading, math, and science. Finnish students placed first in all three of these areas (OECD, 2011; Sahlberg, 2015). Finland had been aiming to create excellent schools throughout the nation, not to win an international competition (Sahlberg, 2015). Further, when measuring the range between highest and lowest achievers, Finland showed the smallest gap between schools and individual test-takers—just one-tenth of the OECD average of any of the 35 OECD member nations (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; OECD, 2011). As this new identity set in over the next two PISA exam periods (2003 and 2006) with Finnish students remaining at or near the top in the three measured areas, educators turned their attention to the refinement of the new education structures and its effective administration (Niemi et al., 2012; Sahlberg, 2015). Sahlberg (2015) also noted the irony of Finnish students outperforming all others while its education system since the 1970s offered “as strong a focus to music, arts, crafts, social studies and life skills” to balance its academic preparation (p. 47).

### **2016-2020—The Joy of Learning and Project-based Curriculum**

In March of 2016, Mr. Jorma Kauppinen, Director of the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE), delivered a speech to international educators in Lisbon, updating them on Finnish education reform (Kauppinen, 2016). He mentioned that:

- The world has changed since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, requiring new competencies and skills
- We need skills to build a sustainable future and new competencies needed by society and work life –and
- We need to rethink the roles, goals and content of school subjects toward transversal (interdisciplinary) competences to support identity development and the ability to live in a sustainable way. (pp. 15-16)

In August 2016, Finland moved into a new phase of curriculum renewal, emphasizing both the joy of teaching and learning and moving toward interdisciplinary and project-based work with student input. In terms of pedagogy, the shift is from WHAT to learn to HOW to learn, and in terms of enhancing the integrity of basic education, the focus is on developing broad competences, school culture, and collaboration between subjects. Digital web-based tools will expand online functions to complement project learning (Kauppinen, 2016). All teachers in Finland are undergoing approximately a year of in-service training on how to bring these new approaches into their classrooms in a more action-learning environment (K. Rajaorko, personal communication, August 12, 2017).



*Figure 1.* The flexible structure of Finland's education system. Source: *Miracle of Education*, by H. Niemi, A. Toom, and A. Kallioniemi (Eds.). p. 26. Copyright 2012 by Sense Publishers.

*Figure 1* diagrams the educational system in Finland today. Pre-primary education, offered without charge to all families, is optional. Students become eligible in the year of their fourth birthday. Basic education begins with first grade, when students are seven, and goes through 9<sup>th</sup> grade, when they reach age 16. Grades 10 – 12 are offered at the upper secondary and vocational secondary schools. One can see the cross-over flexibility now built into the

system, a distinct difference from the era of two separate tracks of education. Students can move from vocational to academic pathways, or vice versa, from the high school (upper secondary) level through all levels of higher education.

Vocational high schools and polytechnic bachelor's degree programs are highly developed and popular among students. The diagram shows the ability of a student to move from a vocational high school to a university bachelor's degree program, or for an academic general upper secondary graduate to seek a degree at a polytechnic institute. General (more academic) high school students take a matriculation exam upon finishing high school for entrance into tertiary education programs, while vocational high school students complete their qualifications in various skill areas before entering tertiary education. If one is admitted to any educational program beyond 9<sup>th</sup> grade—when one needs to apply—there is no charge to the student.

### **Review of Relevant Literature on Self-Efficacy**

The following section examines the concept of self-efficacy, what it is, the sources of self-efficacy, and factors that influence one's self-efficacy beliefs. I review several studies of interventions aimed at strengthening the self-efficacy of students, with varied results. Other studies focus on how self-efficacy can influence motivation and engagement in a positive or a negative cycle.

#### **The Concept of Self-Efficacy**

The concept of *self-efficacy* evolved from social psychologist Albert Bandura's seminal work on social cognitive theory, first published in 1977 (Bandura, 1977). His work to fully develop both social cognitive theory (described in Theoretical Frameworks) and the concept of self-efficacy -- one's *belief in one's ability to act* in a particular domain of life -- became the

focus of Bandura's research career. This self-belief of "I can do it" contributes powerfully to one's identity development, motivation, and behavior. According to Bandura's social cognitive theory, one's self-efficacy beliefs help determine the choices people make, the effort they put forth, the persistence in their tasks in the face of difficulty, and the degree of anxiety or serenity they experience in engaging in life tasks (Bandura, 1986, 1993; Usher & Pajares, 2008).

### **What is Self-Efficacy?**

Self-efficacy beliefs belong to the domain of metacognition—the awareness and understanding of one's own mental or cognitive processes—and along with self-esteem and self-confidence, is grounded in studies of self-perception. If a teacher can help students shift out of a negative stream of self-talk, their behavior can begin to flow in a new direction; moreover, they can then learn to reflect on their own thoughts, assess them, and re-decide from a more self-informed lens. Knowing one can choose one's responses also affords a greater sense of self-control (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003).

In a cyclical fashion, one's strong sense of self-efficacy leads to motivation and engagement and learning, which reinforces one's self-efficacy beliefs, and one's motivation to try similar new things (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). The cycle can also work in the other direction: one struggles to succeed or experiences failure at a task, which leads to lower motivation to try again, lower persistence when the going gets tough, and less learning (Klassen, 2007). Thus, helping to strengthen a student's sense of self-efficacy can be to help a child into whole-hearted engagement in learning that then becomes self-regulating (Rumberger, 2012). Self-efficacy is often confused with self-confidence, as both refer to a belief in oneself and one's ability. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) clarified that self-efficacy refers to the belief that one can achieve a goal or task; it is specific. Self-confidence encompasses a more

global perception of one's having capability. Self-efficacy answers the question: "Can I do this task in this situation?" (p. 121). Self-efficacy can also be confused with self-esteem. Self-esteem is: "What I believe about myself, and how I feel about what I believe about myself" Maddux, 2000, p. 281). Self-efficacy beliefs in a given domain can contribute to my self-esteem, but only to the degree I place importance on that domain (Maddux, 2000).

Bandura's early research revealed an important and surprising finding: that *one's belief* in one's ability to accomplish or achieve a thing is a more powerful force in its coming to be than is one's ability or talent (Bandura, 1977). Much subsequent research on self-efficacy beliefs has focused on just how this psychological process operates and impacts human motivation to achieve (Mercer, Nellis, Martinez, & Kirk, 2011; Willis, 2012; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992), goal-setting (Mann, Smith, & Kristjansson, 2015), and resilience in the face of set-backs, and persistence in the face of challenge (Butkowsky & Willows, 1980; Usher & Pajares, 2008; Yeager & Dweck, 2012; Zepke & Leach, 2010). Other studies have examined links between self-efficacy and confidence (Morony, 2013), interest (Ainley, 2006), hope (Ciarrochi, Heaven & Davies, 2007; Idan & Margalit, 2014), optimism (Kao & Tienda, 1995), student engagement (Zepke & Leach, 2010), resilience (Beardslee, 1989; Luthar, 1991; Sosa, 2012; Yates & Masten, 2002), and self-control (Bandura, 1991, 1997; Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). Students with higher self-efficacy tend to demonstrate higher academic performance, engage in more self-regulatory strategies, evaluate their progress more frequently, work harder, show greater persistence and more efficient problem-solving, and have lower anxiety than students of equal ability but lower self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Schunk and Pajares, 2002). Those with stronger self-efficacy operate with greater optimism and stronger hope, and their personal interests motivate them to explore.



Self-efficacy, as a key self-perception concept, has demonstrated the strongest predictive correlations with student school engagement, persistence at more difficult tasks, and school achievement than several related concepts studied: self-esteem, self-confidence, or self-concept (Bandura, 1986; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007). It is powerful because it is specific. One carries self-efficacy beliefs in many domains; further, the average person is fairly accurate in perceiving what s/he can or cannot do. If a child believes she can successfully perform a certain task, it will likely influence her will and motivation, her willingness to attempt that task. *The Little Engine that Could* said, “I think I can, I think I can,” conveying the notion of self-efficacy to young children (Piper, 1954). The poet Virgil noted, “They succeed, because they think they can” (Virgil, 19 B.C.E.). Bandura brought this profound insight into 20<sup>th</sup> century social psychology scholarship, allowing us to research ways that help more people to “think they can.”

### **Sources of Self-Efficacy**

Questions of how one perceives oneself—one’s skills and abilities, strengths and limitations as well as how accurate these perceptions may be—sit at the heart of self-efficacy research. In developing a sense of self-efficacy, Bandura hypothesized four sources of self-efficacy which carry the greatest influence: (1) one’s *perceived mastery experience* – realizing that you have in fact achieved this task, or one very similar; (2) *vicarious experience* —by observing others perform the task; (3) *social persuasion* -- feedback received from others, including their verbal judgments; and (4) *physiological and emotional states* – such as stress, arousal, anxiety, and other mood states (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007).

Research over the past three decades has demonstrated the strongest impact on developing self-

efficacy as coming from one's *perceived mastery experience*. These sources are spelled out in greater detail in the Theoretical Framework of this dissertation.

As this research progressed from the late 1970s – an estimated 2500 research articles had been published in journals by the year 2000 – studies examined in greater depth how a child develops both academic and social self-efficacy (Schunk, 1991; Schunk & Pajares, 2002); how parenting and parental involvement in school affect a child's self-efficacy (Gonzales De-Hass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005; Schunk & Pajares, 2002; Spera, 2005); how self-efficacy operates in special (learning disabled, low SES) populations (Hampton & Mason, 2003; Klassen, 2007); how gender differences impact self-efficacy (Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007); how self-efficacy works in other countries and in ethnic groups of students (Morony et al., 2013); and how mood states (depression, anxiety) interact with self-efficacy beliefs (Luthar, 1991).

In the last decade or so, more studies have emerged detailing programs designed to help restore or enhance students' self-efficacy beliefs – in schools, youth programs, counseling, and mental health settings. Many have reaped findings that help refine our understandings of what tends to augment or enhance, restore or develop, self-efficacy in students (Harpine, 2013; Mann et al., 2015; Willis, 2012). Teachers, parents, and peers impact one's self-efficacy beliefs.

**Teachers' influence on student self-efficacy.** Teachers exert a powerful influence on the development of their students' self-efficacy beliefs. Madewell and Shaughnessy (2003) interviewed Frank Pajares, Emory University professor of teachers, toward the end of his career. He reflected on why nurturing academic confidence in the student by the teacher is critically important:

At a particularly difficult juncture in her dissertation process, one of my doctoral students turned to me and said, 'You know, Professor, I've come to the realization that, although it is important for me to believe that I can do this, it seems equally important for me to *believe that you believe* that I can do this. As so many of us have experienced, the actions

of significant individuals—perhaps a teacher who came our way at just the right time—helped instill self-beliefs that influence the course and direction our lives take. (p. 377)

Other researchers noted the importance of teachers' influence on students' self-efficacy. Mercer, Nellis, Martinez, and Kirk (2011) reported that third grade students with higher emotional support from teachers performed better on standardized reading and math tests than students of the same ability not receiving such help; Al-Yagon and Mikulincer (2006) discussed the teacher as a "secure base" for developing students' trust, security, and risk-taking to explore the environment.

Engel (2015), in her recent study on childhood curiosity, noted that teachers can be looking for those special moments when a child's curiosity brings out a question that can be seized upon for the student and the whole class, following the child's question with further questions to the students. Yet, in hours of taped classroom time, students' natural curiosity questions might be passed over, due to the teacher wanting to keep the group on task or because the student's question didn't relate to the content at hand in the class. When the child's line of thinking was followed, children in the class engaged more fully with their imagination and in putting heads together to problem-solve (Engel, 2015). Similarly, Hampton and Mason (2003) found that teachers working with learning disabled (LD) students may inadvertently contribute to their lower exposure to verbal persuasion, and offer less encouragement for success, thus leading to lower self-efficacy.

Some researchers argued for creating the appropriate space and/or emotional climate in which to invite students to engage and learn. Attempting to bring some of Piaget's ideas into an elementary science classroom, though no definitive pedagogy flows from his work, Duckworth (1972) promoted the idea of setting the classroom up for discovery, with the teacher supporting students' explorations. She stated:

The process of the child's testing out of ideas that s/he finds significant is critical for the child's cognitive growth. Accept the child's perspective as the legitimate framework for generating ideas—allowing the child to work out her own questions and answers. (p. 217)

The teacher supported the students in making sense of complex relationships by letting them reason it out and ask their questions. As cognitive development and achievement of tasks progresses, so do self-confidence beliefs build in these arenas (Duckworth, 1972).

In a similar vein, Bergman (2004), describing Noddings' ethic of caring as the foundation of education, called for teachers to be a demonstration of care (with students and other teachers), and to encourage children's creativity, invention, cooperation, and democratic participation in their own education. Be caring with students, and they will begin to learn about being caring people. Al-Yagon and Mikulincer (2006), studying children's appraisals of their teacher as a secure base, found that the children's expectations of another's availability and responsiveness in times of stress led to comfort and relief, as well as increased trust and feelings of security. Teachers functioning as a kind of home base also led to students' greater exploring of their environment and risk-taking. Goddard (2001) noted how the collective efficacy beliefs of teachers helped shape the behavioral and normative environment of schools:

If most teachers in a school believe the faculty can successfully teach students, the normative and behavioral environment will press teachers to persist in their educational efforts so that students achieve to high levels. There is a significant correlation between teacher collective efficacy and student achievement. (p. 469)

Goddard (2001) also recommended giving faculties useful performance feedback to help keep strong their collective efficacy, to empower them to continue to teach a challenging student population over time.

Sosa (2012) in a study reporting the stories of students of Mexican descent, learned that while they used their resilience to assess their needs and garner needed resources at school, these

students, including some who were high performers, also felt unsupported by many of their teachers, sometimes feeling blamed for their lack of effort, motivation, and inability. Finally, in a study of adult-child interaction and its impact on children's curiosity, Moore and Bulbulian (1976) found that a supportive and accepting atmosphere by adults, including teachers, predicted early competence in general and curiosity and exploratory behavior in particular. Children who spent time with aloof, critical adults took less risks, hesitated to explore their environment, and were less inclined to venture guesses than children in the presence of a friendly and supportive adult. Supportive, accepting environments can also be provided by mentors and other adults.

**Parental influences on children's self-efficacy.** A number of authors focus on the impact of both parenting and parental involvement in school in the development of children's self-efficacy. Schunk and Pajares (2002) afforded a solid starting point in this regard. A child's earliest experiences that begin to build self-efficacy come from caregivers within the family, starting in infancy. These family influences are bidirectional: parents who provide an environment that invites a child's curiosity and imagination affords mastery experiences which help develop the child's self-efficacy. And reciprocally, children who display greater curiosity and exploration behavior promote their caregivers' responsiveness.

Environments rich in activities invite children's motivation to explore and learn new information and skills (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). Home environments vary greatly, both in terms of tools available for learning (books, toys, computers), and parents' time spent with their young children in learning activities. Children's intellectual development accelerates when parents encourage exploring, stimulate curiosity, and offer a warm, responsive home atmosphere (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). Bandura (1997) adds that parents who arrange for varied new

experience opportunities develop more self-efficacious children than do parents who arrange fewer or less novel activities.

Gonzales-DeHass et al. (2005) developed a synthesis of the parent involvement and motivation literature. Parent involvement included such things as: (a) participating in parent-teacher conferences and/or interactions; (b) participating in school activities and functions; (c) engaging in homework and other activities at home; (d) keeping abreast of student's academic progress; and (e) imparting parental attitudes about the value of effort and academic success. At the elementary level, parent involvement positively affected academic achievement, one's sense of well-being, attendance, student attitude, homework readiness, grades, and educational aspirations. At the high school level, parent involvement positively related to academic achievement, time spent on homework, favorable attitudes toward school, and reduced levels of high school dropout. From the students' perspective, perceptions of their parents' values about learning and achievement most strongly correlated with both their motivation and competence at school.

Parenting style also influences one's self-efficacy. Spera (2005) noted how parenting styles moderate the relationship between parenting practices and adolescent outcomes. For example, parents exhibiting a warm vs. critical style while doing homework with their child led to different outcomes. Spera also reported that both nonminority and minority parents highly value school and hold high aspirations for their children, and found that African American parents reported stronger achievement values and educational aspirations for their children than did Caucasian parents. This study also noted that low SES parents, though they have similar goals for their children, often find themselves juggling multiple jobs and thus might not have the time or resources to be as fully involved in parenting support practices. Several studies report a

decline in parental involvement during the middle school years, a time when children are seeking greater autonomy (Schunk & Pajares, 2002; Spera, 2005) yet may need adult availability as they work through new life questions and issues.

**Peer influences on self-efficacy.** Peer influences increase significantly in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and key years of peer pressure occur between ages 12 and 16 (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). One way peers influence children's self-efficacy is through *model similarity* – observing similar others succeed or fail at a task. Seeing someone similar in age and ability succeed can raise observers' self-efficacy and motivate them to try—if they believe that they also will be successful; likewise, observing similar others' failure can dissuade a child from attempting a task (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). *Peer networks* also exert influences by helping to define students' opportunities and their access to activities. Over time, members of peer networks become more similar to one another, and discussions between friends influence choice of activities (Berndt & Keefe, 1992).

### **Motivation, Engagement and Academic Self-Efficacy**

A majority of research on student self-efficacy focused on how it is related to motivation, engagement with school and learning, and achievement. Several studies focused on related concepts, such as vulnerability, resilience, and expectations. Dweck (1975) conducted a study of 12 “learned helpless” students who experienced serious reactions after failure at school tasks. She wondered if she attributed responsibility for the student's failure to another source –the student's effort—whether these helpless children could take responsibility for failure and not give up in future assignments. The control group received “success only tasks,” from which they could not fail (p.674). Because children experiencing learned helplessness see themselves as less empowered in determining outcomes, they would be less likely to view their situation as

surmountable. The students in the first group, when realizing they could affect the outcome by their effort and persistence, learned in time to do so. The ‘success only’ students remained feeling helpless, as they had not come to see that their effort could impact the outcome.

Dweck’s later work, *Mindset* (2006), further explored this phenomenon—that one living in a “growth mindset” believes s/he can grow and develop one’s intellect and abilities, in contrast to the person in a “fixed mindset.” She found that those who believe they can influence their own growth and development, make the effort and do so. Those living in a “fixed mindset” do not try, for they believe intelligence and abilities are given in a fixed, unalterable amount. Knowing one can act to influence their environment for the better carries a galvanizing motivation to act on one’s behalf. Operating with a growth mindset opens the door to strengthening one’s self-efficacy beliefs.

Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) saw self-efficacy as one key to student motivation, engagement and learning. Strong self-efficacy affects behavior, cognition, and motivational engagement positively, which in turn positively affects learning and achievement, which again strengthens one’s self-efficacy. They reported that three aspects of motivational engagement are important to students from grade five and beyond: first, having *personal interest* (reflecting the student’s intrinsic interest in the content, materials, or task); second, its *utility value* (how useful the students believe the content is to them); and third, the *value beliefs* they have about the importance of the content or task, given their general goals in life. They added that affect played a crucial role in children’s motivational engagement:

Positive emotions, such as pride in one’s work and happiness, are often thought to contribute to students’ motivational engagement; in the same way, negative emotions, like frustration, anger, and anxiety are seen as detracting from students’ motivational engagement in the classroom. (p. 126)



I did not find the impact of *affect* on self-efficacy as frequently as other motivational constructs in the literature, yet this relationship appears to be of foundational importance.

**Early warning signs to dropping out.** A discussion of intervention programs can be better understood by considering some key factors that lead students to drop out of school as early as eighth grade. Lane, Menzies, Munton, Von Duering, and English (2005) in a case study of an early literacy program for a five-year-old student at risk, advocated for early intervention with kindergarten through third graders to help counter these students' poor problem-solving and social skills, high levels of aggressiveness, and academic underachievement, particularly in reading. Intervening early can help allay the stabilizing of this pattern into antisocial behavior; attempts to intervene successfully and longer term with older students with this pattern have frequently met with stubborn resistance. Lane et al. (2005) stated that if children have not learned to read by the fourth grade, they have an 88% probability of never learning to read, even if a later intervention is implemented.

Rumberger (1995, 2011) examined the process of students dropping out of middle school, citing both family impacts and school experience factors that influence a student's decision, with grade retention in an earlier grade being the single most powerful predictor of dropping out of school. In examining individual attributes, he found that students from low SES families were twice as likely to drop out as students from middle social class families, even when controlling for numerous other factors. Yet some factors predicted drop-out rates for some groups, but not others. Socioeconomic status (SES), for example, significantly predicted drop-out rates for Hispanics and Whites, but not Blacks. Misbehavior, changing schools, and low grades all increased the odds of dropping out for Blacks and Whites, but not Hispanics. Absenteeism,

however, increased the odds of dropping out in all student groups. He described dropping out of school more as a process of cumulative experiences than an event (Rumberger, 1995).

Willis (2012) studied young Black men growing up in Cleveland, Ohio. She examined the barriers that need to be overcome in order to gain a sense of personal self-efficacy in school and self-confidence in life. She concluded that, “poverty, underinvestment in public schools, low expectations, deficient parenting practices, zero tolerance, lack of exposure to learning experiences, and disengagement are a few of the variables pushing and pulling our Black males out of school” (p. 32).

In examining school-related factors, Rumberger (1995) found that students attending schools with high concentrations of minorities had much higher odds of dropping out, even controlling for personal factors. Students attending schools with fair discipline policies of all SES groups had much lower odds of dropping out. Though high school drop-out rates differed, this study found that between 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, students attending a religious middle school were less likely than public school students to drop out during these school years.

**Interventions to strengthen self-efficacy.** Several studies detailed a particular intervention aimed at improving students’ self-efficacy, self-confidence, motivation, and engagement. Some of these studies focused more on re-engagement and school achievement outcomes, while others included the well-being and social skill-building of the participants. The following studies illustrate the variety of interventions being conducted to help strengthen students’ self-efficacy, with the aim of increasing student motivation, engagement, and achievement.

Mann et al. (2015) described a quasi-experimental study of the REAL Girls program designed to help delinquent, at-risk middle-school girls develop resilience, and particularly

academic self-efficacy, school connectedness, and identity development. This gender-specific wilderness adventure program employed 12 core strategies in a school-based program. Basing the program on resiliency theory which states that young people who “beat the odds” are able to a) retain reasonable levels of self-esteem and self-confidence, b) maintain supportive relationships; and c) develop an “authentic sense of self” (p. 117), the program aimed to strengthen critical developmental characteristics (self-esteem, self-confidence, identity) that relate to positive life outcomes. They provided attentive adult women university students to be “big sisters,” and interspersed with outdoor activities, girls were given time for individual and collective reflection. Activities also aimed to foster respect, trust, and building positive relationships. The self-report scores from participants demonstrated increases in self-esteem, self-confidence, and gains in dealing with stress, problem-solving, goal setting, and feeling closer to adults at their school, though the authors wondered how long these gains would last without further supports (Mann et al., 2015).

Christensen, Evelo, Hurley, and Sinclair (1998) led an experimental study of 94 students with learning and emotional/behavioral challenges who received interventions in Grades 7 and 8; half of these (treatment group) continued to receive the intervention through Grade 9. The intervention, known as *Check and Connect*, assigned monitors to the students and parents over long periods of time (more than a year) to help reduce and prevent absenteeism, suspensions, failing grades, and other warning signs of school withdrawal. The monitors included teachers, special education resource staff, and graduate students in psychology and education. Results showed that youth who participated in the *Check and Connect* program were more likely to be engaged in school, and on track to graduate. But a second finding showed behaviors and school performance in 9<sup>th</sup> grade for both groups were only low to moderate relative to the range of

scores. Christensen and colleagues concluded that (a) this intervention helped students with engagement, but was “not sufficient to substantially improve student performance,” and (b) students with learning and emotional/behavioral disabilities “are at moderate to high risk for dropping out of school” (p. 12).

Lane et al. (2005) conducted a case study of one kindergarten student at risk for showing similar emotional/behavioral issues and who did not respond to a school-wide primary intervention program. A supplemental early literacy program was designed for this child, offering small group instruction in phonemic awareness during the course of the school day. Monitoring the student’s progress in literacy development and classroom and playground behavior, he found that improvements in phonemic awareness were accompanied by less disruptive behavior in the classroom and improved social interactions on the playground.

Harpine (2013) reported using group process to build student self-efficacy and cohesion. Working with middle elementary students, she established the *Reading Orienteering Club* program, to help shift the operating self-images of children who believed they could not read. Attempting to integrate learning and counseling with children from at-risk families, the *Reading Orienteering Club* staff emphasized step-by-step procedures and active hands-on-learning to bring about change within a constructive supportive group. Central but underlying the activity was the goal to rebuild self-efficacy of the children (helping them believe they could accomplish their reading tasks). Harpine named the cohesion that builds in group process with the children as the key to change. “Cohesion develops first as support and acceptance. It then grows into learning and development” (Harpine, 2013, p. 67). Her conclusion: an effective group, aiming to transform students’ self-perception, requires constructive, non-competitive interaction. She aimed to change not only how the child reads, but also how the child approaches life.

## Reflections on Methodological Designs

Lehr, Hanson, Sinclair, and Christenson (2003) presented a synthesis of 45 self-efficacy studies, and to answer more definitively what works, called for studies of greater quality, larger sample size, use of follow-up data, and random assignment of study samples. Lehr and colleagues also called for longitudinal studies to better understand intervention impacts over time. Researchers utilized primarily quantitative or mixed method designs. Yet, several researchers stated a need to hear directly the voices of young people of varying abilities and ethnic backgrounds in qualitative studies (Gonzales-DeHass et al., 2005; Sosa, 2011; Willis, 2012). Listening to African-American young men reflect on mentors they had throughout high school, for example, revealed unanticipated insights, including hopeful visions, college plans realized, and self-understanding about the meaning of being a young Black man (Willis, 2012).

**Tensions in the literature.** I noticed several tensions in the literature, two of which carry importance for this work. The first is the difference in research focus between *deficits* and *strengths*. Many studies examine what causes students to give up, drop out, fail in motivation, resilience, or persistence, and in academic work; some assess the achievement *gap*, which also connotes deficits in learning. These studies employ a lens of *what is wrong*, or a *deficit* lens. A few studies focus on *what does work* in helping students re-engage, stay motivated, enhance self-efficacy and resilience, and complete high school; they assess the *strengths* in the situation and how they might be used to empower students. Lehr et al. (2003) are among those asking that we flip the paradigm to examine what works, and current studies at Harvard (Ferguson, Phillips, Rowley, & Friedlander, 2015) and in Minneapolis (Corsello & Sharma, 2015) are beginning to report on interventions that aim to discover combinations of enrichment, challenge, and support that work well for student success. This study considers what works in helping JOPO students

gain a sense of self-efficacy about completing 9<sup>th</sup> grade and beyond, and what might strengthen the JOPO experience even further.

The second tension is between studies that focus on *theory refinement* and those that focus on *practice applications*. Many researchers from the 1980s to the present have focused on clarifying how self-efficacy works, and how other constructs influence or are influenced by it. This *theory orientation* has been necessary to refine self-efficacy into a useful construct within social psychology. Studies reflecting on how self-efficacy and related concepts (self-confidence, motivation, persistence) work in *practice applications* are far fewer and have often been inconclusive, based on their methodology, study size, or lack of statistical significance (Lehr et al., 2003). Israeli researcher Alfassi (2003) noted that while self-efficacy research has made significant contributions to understanding the role these beliefs play in our development of academic mastery, ironically, it has done little to inform school practice. The *praxis* orientation of this study relies on a lived synthesis of theory and practice with at-risk 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders.

**Gaps in the literature.** The first gap I noticed in reviewing the literature had to do with a gap between *individual change* and *system change*. Although the literature clearly enumerates a number of systemic factors regarding a student's environment (quality of school, resources, culturally competent teaching; peer, parent, and neighborhood influences), almost all studies focused on changing the individual without concurrent attention to changing the system(s) in which the student is attempting to learn (Greene, 1986; Lehr et al., 2003). Effecting positive and lasting change for students often necessitates some longer-term structural changes as well. Several studies expressed concern about the lasting effects of their school or program interventions, as individual interventions are usually brief, but system changes offer longer-lasting structural supports. This study looks at both a *flexible learning system* and *individual*

*changes* students are able to make, from the perspectives of teachers, principals, and former students themselves.

A second gap revealed the difference between *large studies* and those focusing on *listening to voices on the ground*. Large studies and meta-analyses of numerous studies of like kind yield valuable data on trends and can assist in policy decisions. A recent example is Harvard's examination of 16,000 6<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, analyzing 300,000 surveys (Ferguson et al., 2015). I found several studies of this kind in the literature. Yet there exists a gap between these studies and those who speak in the voice of those 'on the ground' in challenging situations, those who might not represent the majority, those needing a different attention, or a uniquely styled approach. Qualitative studies that involve listening to teachers' reflections on leading interventions aimed at building self-efficacy and self-confidence could help bridge this gap. I found few studies reporting direct reflections from teachers. Only two studies reported what students had to say about their experiences that shared in students' own words what worked for them, or not, in an intervention (Sosa, 2012; Willis, 2012).

Finally, I saw a gap between *styles of intervention* to help students re-engage, become more motivated, remain in school, and improve their academic performance. The gap appears to be between educators who value evidence-based, *data-driven* interventions and standardized tests to yield data to help students, and those who prize the *classroom atmosphere*, set for discovery, where student interests are noticed and responded to, where in a child-centered classroom one does not know ahead of time exactly what will be learned each day. One could say the gap is between a focus on academic content mastery and between orchestrating a delightful learning experience for students, based on their interests, needs, and inputs. While both of these are important and I would expect them to overlap, I observed no dialogue between

these groups in the literature. Discovering how these intervention styles can work well together is important for our efforts to keep each child meaningfully engaged. Lehr et al. (2003) stated:

The status of the evidence-based intervention research focus on dropout prevention and school completion appears to be at an early developmental stage. It is clear from this review that we do not yet have a solid foundation of research on dropout intervention and prevention from which to make strong conclusive statements that can inform policy and practice. (p. 359)

While Finland's JOPO class grounds itself in evidence-based practice, this study also highlights a relational ethic of care by teachers and a child-centered classroom atmosphere.

### **Conclusion**

Self-efficacy serves as a foundational construct in the literature on motivation, student engagement, and learning. Self-efficacy beliefs can be enhanced by one's growth mindset or stifled by one's fixed mindset. Self-efficacy in children and adolescents is influenced by parents, teachers, other adults, and peers. It can be modified, rebuilt, and strengthened, and interventions with children struggling with behavior and learning are best served in early elementary years. Interventions that respond to the affective side of a student's life often have successful outcomes. Later interventions to help struggling students need to continue longer for effective changes to anchor in an adolescent's life. Self-efficacy seems to grow when teachers and parents are both supportive and provide limits, and in school when the classroom is focused on the child and their interests. Interventions with both academic and social components tend to work well in building self-efficacy. Programs need to adapt according to the experiential, ethnic, and SES background of students. Program interventions strengthen self-efficacy when they increase individuals' physical and emotional well-being and reduce negative emotional states (Usher & Pajares, 2006).

Larger and more rigorous and long-term studies are recommended to extend our understanding of self-efficacy and its relationship to motivation, engagement and learning, self-



confidence, and personal growth. Qualitative research can add the voices of students we most need to hear, and least understand, to complement quantitative studies. Finally, bringing theoretical understandings into practical classroom applications, and depth reflection on such interventions, is a major area of needed study. Teacher self-efficacy in terms of engaging various sub-populations of students is an important interface with studies of student self-efficacy. Building a student's sense of self-efficacy, based on successful experience, can help a child begin a positive cycle of interest, engagement, and learning in school.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this section I present the theoretical framework of the study. I review Bandura's *social cognitive theory* and define his concept of *self-efficacy*. I then present Dweck's theory of *growth mindset* and include recent applications in school efforts to increase student motivation, self-efficacy, and academic and social success (Costello & Sharma, 2015; Ferguson, et al. 2015). I describe Noddings' *four methods of caring education*, as described by Bergman (2004) and Noddings (2005a) in the literature. Finally, I briefly review Gardner's theory of *multiple intelligences*, and offer some thoughts about these theories applied to the research questions.

#### **Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory**

Albert Bandura introduced his *social cognitive theory* in 1977 (Bandura, 1977). He and several other social psychologists evolved his model over the next thirty years (Bandura, 2005; Pajares, 2002; Schunk, 1991). His thinking challenged psychoanalysts, who explained behavior primarily in terms of drives, and behaviorists, who saw behavior primarily as a response to environmental stimuli. Bandura brought self-perception under the lens of scientific inquiry. In contrast to earlier schools of psychology, which viewed behavior as reactive, Bandura saw

humans as possessing self-reflective, self-reactive, creative, self-directive, and self-motivating qualities, which he termed *human agency* (Bandura, 1986; 1989, 2005).

**Triadic reciprocal causation.** Social cognitive theory is based on the mutually interactive nature of a triad of forces, each able to influence the other, known as *triadic reciprocal causation*; the triad is a dynamic interplay of personal factors, behavior, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). I describe these interacting factors as follows:

**Personal factors.** These include one's cognition, affects, and biological realities. The "cognitive" in the theory both distinguishes Bandura from social learning theorists, and highlights the importance he places on cognition in one's capacity to create reality, self-regulate, interpret information, and perform behavior (Pajares, 2002).

**Behavior.** These are the totality of one's actions. Self-efficacy beliefs influence behavior by helping determine how much effort one will expend, how resilient one will be in the face of challenge, and influencing the choices one makes.

**Environmental factors.** Social cognitive theory posits that factors such as economic conditions, socioeconomic status (SES), family structures, or being an immigrant influence behavior only indirectly, through the mechanisms of the self-system. To the degree they impact one's aspirations, self-efficacy beliefs, emotional states, personal standards and other self-regulatory influences, they influence choice and behavior (Bandura, 1986).

**Capacity to symbolize.** Understanding symbols as the vehicles of thought, Bandura (1986) posits that through symbolizing experiences, one creates structure, meaning, and the continuity needed to guide future behaviors. The capacity to symbolize enables one to be able to model observed behavior by others, solve cognitive problems, and engage in forethought.

**Forethought.** One is able to plan a course of action, anticipate consequences, create goals and challenges for oneself, which motivates, guides, and helps regulate one's activities. One can imagine and anticipate consequences now without actually engaging in the activity.

**Vicarious learning.** One can learn not only from direct experiences, but by observing the actions of others. This vicarious learning through observation allows one to learn a new behavior without undergoing the trial and error process. The processes of attention, retention, motivation, and production govern vicarious or observational learning (Bandura, 1986).

**Self-regulatory mechanisms.** People possess self-regulatory capability, states Bandura. The evidence that one can exercise self-influence can be seen in programs that help in altering refractory activities (e.g., excessive drinking, overeating) by monitoring one's activities and utilizing environmental supports, cognitive techniques, and meaningful self-incentives for the changes one desires (Bandura, 1986; 1991).

**Self-reflection.** Bandura (1986) considered self-reflection as the most distinctly human capability. One makes sense and meaning through self-reflection; explores one's own thoughts, feelings, and self-beliefs; engages in self-evaluation; and can alter one's thinking and behavior accordingly.

### **Self-efficacy Beliefs**

This section examines how self-efficacy beliefs influence one's functioning, and the most powerful sources for gaining a sense of self-efficacy.

**How self-efficacy beliefs influence functioning.** Influence over one's own behavior is not achieved by willpower, but through the tools of personal agency and the self-assurance to use them effectively (Bandura, 1997; 2005). People who doubt their capability to exercise control over their actions will tend to undermine their efforts in challenging situations. For example, a

recovering alcoholic meeting old drinking friends is at risk for relapse to earlier behaviors. In time, this same individual, in changing both internal and external conditions, may arrive at a new trust in his capability to exercise control over his actions; his perceived self-regulatory efficacy functions as a contributing factor in this.

**Sources of self-efficacy beliefs.** Self-efficacy beliefs are generated from four primary sources, according to Bandura (1977; 1986; 1997). They include (1) mastery experiences; (2) vicarious experience; (3) social persuasions from others; and (4) somatic and emotional states.

***Mastery experiences.*** One's past experience of performance of the task in question is the most important source of self-efficacy belief that one can perform this task again and builds a robust sense belief in one's personal efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Possessing strong self-efficacy beliefs in that particular area, one is more likely next time to try harder and persist to completion of the task at hand with much better results. If one experiences a failure, his/her self-efficacy beliefs will likely reduce. However, when the situation is perceived as an achievable challenge, one can hold a conviction of succeeding, and failures can serve to increase self-motivated persistence (Bandura, 1977). A child's self-efficacy beliefs are undermined if failures accumulate before a general sense of efficacy is firmly established (Bandura, 1997).

***Vicarious experience.*** People develop self-efficacy beliefs through observing others' performances. If one sees someone similar to them succeed, it can increase one's belief in succeeding as well. However, the opposite is also true; someone similar experiencing failure can lower one's own self-efficacy belief about being able to perform the task in question.

***Social persuasions from others.*** Sometimes called *verbal persuasion*, social persuasions refer to the encouragement or discouragement offered by others regarding one's performance or ability to perform. Used in a positive light, social persuasions tend to lead one to put forth

greater effort, thus increasing one's chance at a successful outcome. Used negatively, social persuasions, including predictive statements, can lead one to greater self-doubt, lowered effort, and lowered self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1977).

***Somatic and emotional states.*** Also referred to as *emotional arousal*. People experience emotional sensations (e.g., anxiety, fear, excitement) from their bodies. How they perceive this emotional arousal influences their self-efficacy beliefs. A familiar example is the “math anxiety” experienced by many students, or “test anxiety” about an important standardized test situation. Although it has been shown to be the least influential of the four, it is also noted that students who are more comfortable with the task at hand will tend to hold higher self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1986). Mood states, including depression, impact self-efficacy beliefs. As one recovers from depression or other mood disorders, one's self-efficacy tends to increase. During a time of depression, an individual's low beliefs in their own abilities will likely impede them from trying, persisting in the face of obstacles, and succeeding (Bandura, 1977). What is worth noting here is that two of the four sources come from one's own self, and one can work, sometimes with help from others, to modify both feeling states and mastery experiences.

### **Dweck's Growth Mindset Theory**

Psychologist Carol Dweck, also concerned with self-perception, began research in the 1970s that shed light on the power of one's mindset. She and her colleagues noticed that students who believed their intelligence could be developed through effort and persistence, much like one develops a muscle (a *growth mindset*) actually grew and outperformed those who believed their intelligence and abilities were a given (a *fixed mindset*). Further, this simple but profound shift into a growth mindset appeared to open a door not only into learning and achievement, but also into developing personal qualities or character traits, such as initiative,

learning from mistakes, self-discipline, or persistence (Dweck, 2006). Dweck (2006) developed school programs that led students to become consciously aware of their mindsets, helping them believe that they could increase their intellectual abilities and skills, as they worked their way from a fixed mindset (e.g., “I’m not good at math”) to a growth mindset (e.g., “I can learn math by breaking it down into small steps and asking for help when I need it”). Students began to see that they had *agency* in their challenge situation; there was something *they* could *initiate* in response and this awareness catalyzed motivation to engage with the challenge.

**Two mindsets.** *Fixed* and *growth* mindsets underlie how we see ourselves, both how we are, and how we can become. Our mindset fuels our attitudes toward ourselves and others, our behavior, the effort we put in to meeting a challenge, and our persistence in that effort. It influences our flexibility, what we dare to imagine, our risk-taking, and our willingness to try (Dweck, 2006).

***Fixed mindset.*** Dweck (2006) likens entering a mindset with entering a new world. In the world of a *fixed mindset* our intelligence and personality traits are seen as fixed – carved in stone--so success becomes about self-validation, about proving you are smart and talented. Normal setbacks – losing a tournament or a job, getting rejected, or a receiving lower test grade—means you’re not smart or talented. Your self-belief is shaken. In this world, effort can be seen as a bad thing, meaning that you are not smart or talented. If you were, effort would not be needed (Dweck, 2006). Those with a fixed mindset tend to stay on the safe side, wanting to avoid exposure of being seen as less than accomplished. One operating from a fixed mindset limits one’s freedom to explore or learn from making mistakes. The dynamic is: Stay safe—look smart—avoid bigger challenges, avoid making mistakes. The mind’s internal monologue is one

of judgment and evaluation, of oneself and others. One's identity and self-esteem become tied in with how one appears to others (Dweck, 2006).

***Growth mindset.*** The world of the *growth mindset* is undergirded by a belief that your qualities can be cultivated and developed through meeting challenges with effort and persistence. The meaning of failing at something is transformed into a new challenge. In this world, *effort* is what *develops* your intelligence and talent. One in a growth mindset is risking and stretching oneself and learning what works by making choices and learning from mistakes. Success is about *becoming* smarter (Dweck, 2006). The dynamic is: risk—stretch—success or mistake—learn—grow. The internal monologue here is that failure is a new challenge to grow and try a new strategy. The only true failure is giving up; until then, it is learning (Dweck, 2006).

**The meaning of effort.** The meaning of effort varies dramatically between the two mindsets. One operating from a *fixed mindset* shies away from the effort to change limiting habits, carve out expanded skills, or learn from a master teacher. Fear of failure, or of change, can become paralyzing, and a fixed mindset person can become risk-averse in hopes of protecting what one has. Dweck cites an example of a child-prodigy violinist who had achieved fame by age 10 but could not risk making the changes suggested by her master teacher later at Julliard, leading her into a crisis of confidence (Dweck, 2006). Fear of effort (engagement) can stifle building healthy relationships and foster less demanding career choices.

One operating from a *growth mindset* by contrast, has a sense that they are a 'work in progress' or a 'life under construction.' Here, one's self-esteem or identity are not so tied to how one appears to others, or to maintaining an image of smartness or success. One is more oriented to the notion of 'keep trying until you get there.' This person can more easily entertain dreaming dreams and using their imagination. One also tends to think about various strategies to achieve

those dreams, and to keep one's eye on that vision, rather than on how one currently looks to others. A *growth mindset* person knows that it is alright to ask for help when needed and is more likely to offer help to others when asked. The competition here is between me and myself, not myself compared with others (Dweck, 2006).

**Praise wisely.** Dweck also discovered that different kinds of praise carry different effects. When children are praised for their *abilities* (“great score—you must be smart at this”), they rejected trying a challenging new task from which they could learn, moving into a fixed mindset. Students who were praised on the same task for their *effort* (“good strategy you chose in solving this”) mostly chose the challenging new task presented to them (Dweck, 2006; 2014).

**Our mindsets are mixed.** Once clearly laid out, living out of a *growth mindset* looks very inviting and healthy, compared with living out of a *fixed mindset*. Dweck reminds us that we *grow into* a growth mindset, however, and cannot simply claim by proclamation to possess it. She invites us to acknowledge that we are all a mixture of *fixed and growth* mindsets and staying in touch with where we likely go into *fixed* responses will help us observe and become able to shift into *growth* responses (Dweck, 2015).

**The power of Yet.** In this TEDx talk of the same name in Norrköping, Sweden, Dweck (2014) introduced a new way of speaking the *growth mindset language*: the *idea of Yet*. She described a Chicago school that tells students who have failed a class and thus do not have enough credits to graduate, that they received a grade of “*Not Yet*.” Though the reality is the same (the student failed to pass the course), the result is framed by the school as an open-ended invitation to complete the task (pass that course and gain the credits) and graduate. Dweck stated that this framing of the situation transformed the meaning of effort and difficulty, leading students to increase their efforts and persist toward their goal (Dweck, 2014).



It is not surprising then that a growth mindset is more likely to promote resilience in students who may have lost their footing from fear or self-doubt. Yeager and Dweck (2012) found this correlation to be valid; students who believed that their own *effort* could help them develop their intelligence showed much greater resilience and motivation than those who felt that intelligence is an *attribute*, one that is measured on an IQ test. They concluded:

What students need the most is not self-esteem-boosting or trait labeling; instead, they need mindsets that represent challenges as things that they can take on and overcome over time with effort, new strategies, learning, help from others, and patience. (p. 312)

Such an approach of emphasizing students' ability to grow and change prepares them to face challenges with resilience.

### **Noddings' Four Methods of Caring Education**

"Selves are not born," claimed Nel Noddings, "but are under continual construction through encounters of all kinds, the effects produced from those encounters, and one's reflective evaluation of them" (Bergman, 2004, p. 153). There is a hopefulness in this understanding of self: we are continually remaking ourselves, more or less consciously, in interaction with others. We need one another in order to accomplish this. There is also a personal power in this understanding of self: it is *we* who are doing the constructing. This provides the ground for Noddings' ethic of care between people.

Noddings is about nurturing the ethical ideals of those in our care. She aims to grow a generation of future caring adults. In her toolkit for getting there are four key approaches: (1) modeling, (2) dialogue, (3) practice, and (4) confirmation (Noddings, 1995; 2013).

**Modeling.** Modeling is *being* a demonstration of what it means to care; it is demonstrating care in our relations with students (Bergman, 2004). It is walking our talk; it is being congruent, a living example of what we are teaching.

**Dialogue.** Dialogue, an essential component of caring education, allows teacher and student to ‘build up a substantial knowledge of one another that serves to guide our responses’ and the two engage in a ‘common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation’ (Noddings, 2005a, p. 23.). Dialogue models the ethic of care, and of *being with* the student by being in communication.

**Practice.** The student practices caring communication while the teacher models it. Noddings advised that all students engage in caring apprenticeships with a school staff person (kitchen worker, custodian), mentor a younger student at school, or offer some service in the community (Noddings, 2005a). Thus, a child practices a relationship of caring in a nursing home, animal shelter, or in their school, with a modeling adult who shows them how it is done, and dialogues with them about the gifts and challenges of this kind of care, while demonstrating in their own work that caring is important (Noddings, 2012).

**Confirmation.** We confirm someone when we share back with a student something about him/herself as an ethical and intellectual being, attributing the “best possible motive consonant with reality to the one cared-for” (Bergman, 2004, p. 155). Rather than setting out standardized behavioral values to all students, common in many schools, confirmation is an individual encounter where we “recognize something admirable, or at least acceptable, struggling to emerge in each person we encounter” (Bergman, 2004, p. 155). In confirming someone, we identify a better self, perhaps an ideal self, into which that young person can stretch and grow, offering them a vision of their self at its best. A confirming statement may stay with a person for a lifetime.

Modeling, dialogue, practicing, and confirmation offer four *ways in* to positive connection and supportive affirmation of students’ genuine interests, abilities, and personal

qualities that are developing; they offer four ways of inviting the development of the whole person of the child. Noddings (2005a) concluded, “So we do not tell our students to care; we show them how to care by creating caring relations with them” (p. 22). These four methods, while seemingly simple, can offer a strong relational foundation for all students, especially those who may be in a process of disconnecting from school. Noddings’ ethic of care, and its application as *caring education*, largely missing from recent literature, could offer a useful lens for considering what helps JOPO students begin to build relationships of trust and re-engage in their education. Another theory that can add dimension to the Noddings lens is Howard Gardner’s *multiple intelligences*, recommended in Noddings’ works (2003; 2005b).

### **Educating Moral People**

Noddings (2013) carries a great appreciation for the thinking of John Dewey. Her ethic of care is fundamentally relational rather than individual-based, in the manner of virtue ethics. She realizes that embodying care—*being* a caring person, as opposed to teaching about being caring—is the way to teach another. The ethic of care also assumes a base of trust in the student, and in the teacher-student relationship in learning. It implies a lesser need for coercion to entice students to engage in learning; it is more of an invitation to a student to follow their own interests and purposes—with some guidance or coaching from the teacher—that can help students grow in self-trust and self-reliance, the very qualities we likely want to see develop in our students.

A teacher operating from an ethic of care will depend more heavily on establishing the *conditions and relations* that support moral ways of life than on inculcating certain virtues or qualities of character in individuals; in this way, she differs from those who focus on character education (Noddings, 2002). The conditions and classroom culture or atmosphere will be of

paramount importance to such a teacher. Student engagement in helping create these conditions becomes a part of learning democratically.

Moral education for Noddings is encouraging self-knowledge and reflection in academic classrooms. Students should be able to raise and discuss religious and existential questions in math and science classes, for example (Noddings, 2002). Without imposing a particular view of morality on one's students, a teacher can teach philosophy, literature or social studies with an understanding that "one's aim is to help students search for wisdom and for better moral selves" (p. 33).

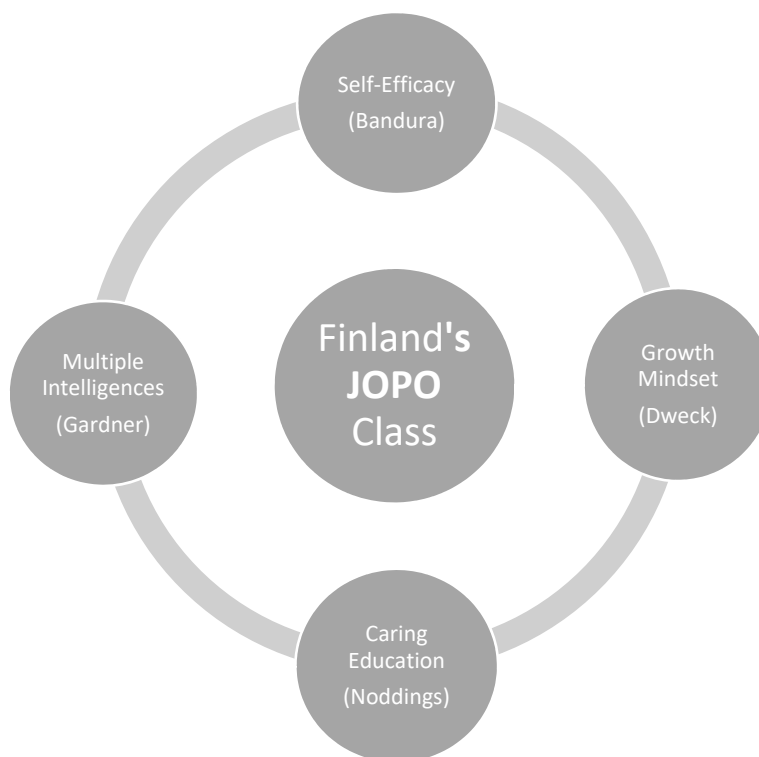
### **Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory**

Gardner (2006) believes that an education that focuses most of its energy on two areas—reading and mathematics—cannot adequately serve the development of the whole child, and that we need a broader understanding of what comprises intelligence. We need to educate the whole child and learn of the strong suits (intelligences) of each student. Gardner articulated eight intelligences, or differing but fully developed and tested learning capacities, which he states we each possess to one degree or another. He believes that most people can develop all of these intelligences to a relatively acceptable level of mastery. A balanced education should include activities in all eight arenas and allow each child to use their stronger intelligences to further explore interest areas and their less developed intelligences (Gardner, 2006). Gardner's theory runs counter to the one intelligence that is assumed to be measured by an IQ test.

Contrasting it with a learning style, an intelligence "is a capacity, with its component processes, that is geared to a specific content in the world, such as musical sounds or spatial patterns" (Armstrong, 2009, p. 17). These include: (1) *linguistic* intelligence—a capacity to use the written or spoken word; (2) *logical-mathematical* intelligence— a capacity for using

numbers, logic, calculations, classifications, or critical thinking skills; (3) *spatial* intelligence—a capacity to visualize, use depth dimension, art, color, or metaphor; (4) *bodily-kinesthetic* intelligence—a capacity to use one’s body (athletics, acting, dancing) or use hands-on experiences (sewing, sculpting, making and fixing things); (5) *musical* intelligence—a capacity to use melody or rhythm to develop music or environmental sounds; (6) *interpersonal* intelligence—a capacity to engage with others, understand the motivations and desires of people, and lead or facilitate in group contexts; (7) *intrapersonal* intelligence—a capacity to go inward, self-reflect, self-direct, process thoughts, feelings, or memories; and (8) *naturalist* intelligence—a capacity to relate to the natural world, its systems (climate, geology) or ecologies. A ninth or *existential* intelligence, a concern with ultimate as well as spiritual issues, has been considered as an intelligence and is sometimes used by educational programs, but has failed to gain full acceptance (Armstrong, 2009; Gardner, 2006; Smith, 2008). Gardner himself has been hesitant to include existential intelligence.

Because Finland focuses on educating the whole child and attempts to personalize an excellent education for each student, Gardner’s theory provides a helpful way to look at the full spectrum of a student’s strengths. While most traditional schools still build their curriculum around Gardner’s first two intelligences—linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences—many students’ strongest interests and talents lie among the other intelligences. JOPO students are particularly strong in bodily-kinesthetic intelligence combined with others and enjoy learning by doing and trying things out in their own experience. *Figure 2* (p. 63) shows graphically the four theories that form the framework of this study.



*Figure 2.* Theories forming the theoretical framework of the case study.

## Conclusion

Bandura honed the concept of self-efficacy beliefs through research over several decades, opening a new door for people to understand the power of ‘believing they can.’ He demonstrated that one’s *belief* in being able to do or achieve a thing is more powerful than one’s ability to do it. Believing one can—ski down a hill, build a house, or graduate from high school or university—spurs motivation and awakens the will. He worked as well with the broader concept of human agency—one’s feeling of being able to act to make a difference in one’s situation. Dweck also worked with the notion of believing one can grow and change when in a growth mindset. Focusing on one’s effort, learning strategies, and seeking help from others helps students thrive in addressing both learning challenges and setbacks.

Noddings brings one's *presence* to the fore, calling teachers and others to embody *being* a caring person with students—*being in relation* with them as a way of teaching them to care—about themselves, others, and the earth. Noddings and Dweck both discuss the value of Gardner's multiple intelligences as opening fresh ways to learning, since not all students find linguistic and mathematical intelligence, the bulwark of traditional education, their preferred ways of learning. Working together, these theorists would each contribute to an ideal learning community that can be described in *Figure 2*.

It is my hope that these theorists will contribute to thoughtful reflection on the question of how Finland's JOPO class staff help strengthen the self-efficacy beliefs in students who have given up on trying to succeed in school. How can these students become able to assume responsibility for their own education? What kind of classroom atmosphere can support this transformation?

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

Every child begins the world again. – *Henry David Thoreau*

A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way. - *Flannery O'Connor*

Studies involving student engagement, motivation, and the building of self-efficacy in learning have frequently employed quantitative designs. Some of these have involved meta-analyses that cull out trends by integrating the data of many studies. While such studies yield valuable insights and relationships between variables, I wanted to learn how a particular program, Finland's JOPO class for 14 to 15-year old students, helped these students build a stronger sense of self-efficacy in their learning, and a belief that they could continue to upper secondary school studies. Anecdotal evidence demonstrated this program to be very effective in its support of students returning to their education and building their future. I wanted to listen to the educators who worked with JOPO class students and also to some former students who had taken this class in earlier years. More specifically, I wanted to understand the particular perspectives of former students and their teachers in what helped them find new motivation to re-engage in school, and what helped them begin to believe they could succeed in their JOPO class studies and beyond? What helped build their feeling of self-efficacy about succeeding in school?

In this chapter, I first describe my selection of a qualitative research design and why I believed this was the best way to gain a more holistic understanding of how the JOPO class program helps its students. I then explain why I selected the case study method to explore my research questions. Later, I outline how I recruited Finnish participants for this study and describe the settings of the participating schools, the process of working with the Institutional Review Board, and data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, I spell out ethical issues I considered in developing and conducting this research.



## Qualitative Research

I chose a qualitative research design for this study to more fully capture the experiences of both former students and teachers of the JOPO class, to learn how its various parts work together for the students' growth, and to explore what factors former students and educators felt were key to experiencing a self-efficacy belief—the feeling and belief of “I can do this”—regarding successfully completing their compulsory education (9<sup>th</sup> grade). My own experience in working with students who experienced low-self-efficacy in their elementary years added to my desire to know how the JOPO experience helped students who struggled to learn in Finnish traditional 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes. I chose a qualitative approach to listen to both teachers and former JOPO students share their experiences. Are their understandings similar? What do these young adult JOPO graduates feel helped them re-engage and begin to believe they could succeed in their studies?

Qualitative research encompasses several types of research design, the most common of these being phenomenological, narrative, ethnographic, grounded theory, and case study research (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative studies derive from the unique perspective of each participant. Lichtman (2010) articulated a list of common elements in qualitative research: preferring descriptive language, employing contextual approaches, using natural settings, acknowledging the researcher's subjectivity, looking more holistically or deeply at fewer cases, using words rather than numbers, employing inductive reasoning, and following a non-linear approach. In addition to studying things in their natural settings where participants work or live, Creswell (2013) adds, “Qualitative research includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change” (p. 44). Bogden & Biklen (2007) contrast qualitative research

goals with those of quantitative research. Qualitative studies aim to develop sensitizing concepts, describe multiple realities, develop understanding, and develop grounded theory, while quantitative studies aim to test theory, establish facts, describe statistically, show relationships between variables, and predict.

Qualitative studies involve listening to people's stories for the meaning they give to their experiences. Gilbert (2001) discusses the power of showing genuine interest in people's stories. In meeting with firefighters about their experiences of rescuing people, she found that many rescuers remarked:

“Why ask me, I didn't do so much,” or, “Other people have better stories than me.” When I responded that they indeed had a story to tell and I wanted to hear it, a transformation occurred. Rescuers who felt uncertain about the value of their contribution...then replied, “Well, maybe I did do something important. If you think I have something to say, perhaps I will add something useful to your study. (p.75)

Gilbert noted that in telling their story, their own understanding of their experience changed, empowering the narrator. “Gee, I am actually proud of what I did out there. I actually helped undo a tragedy” (p. 77). Those offering a narrative often gain a deeper understanding of an important life question, such as what constitutes a rich and meaningful life?

I wanted to learn about the process of the JOPO students beginning to re-engage in their education. I wanted to listen to their stories and experiences and those of their teachers to see what helped these students re-engage in their education and begin to believe they could continue their studies successfully. A qualitative research design allowed me to look for meaningful patterns in these stories.

### **Case Study**

I chose a case study approach to understanding this innovative program for students who were dropping out of their traditional education class in their middle school years. These Finnish

students had experienced serious academic challenges and sometimes social conflict with peers or teachers. They appeared to lack motivation or belief in their ability to succeed at school. They sometimes experienced conflicts at home or lack of support from their parents. Most often, they had not reached out to someone about their needs. Instead, they attended school less and sometimes stopped coming altogether. These students needed a new way to return to school, a spark of positive connection with teachers, other adults, fellow students, and their community. In their minds' eyes, they needed to see themselves as belonging—participating in their community in some meaningful way. And they needed to come to believe that they could indeed succeed at these things. A case study seemed a logical approach to learn how this JOPO class—the class of ‘flexible learning’—helped these things happen for students who had come so close to giving up.

The aim of a case study is to understand the depth and complexity of a phenomenon in the most complete way possible (Yin, 2008). Yin argues that a case study approach holds a distinct advantage in exploring “how” and “why” questions, or if one’s research requires an in-depth description of a social phenomenon. After working through the literature on programs that attempted to increase student self-confidence or self-efficacy—most often with mixed results—I wondered *why* this particular program had such success with its students. I selected a case study approach for this study to find out more about *how* the various parts of the program worked together for the benefit of its students.

Stake (1981), stated that case study differs from other research knowledge in four important ways. Case study knowledge is:

- (1) More concrete—it resonates with our own experience because it is more vivid, concrete and sensory than abstract.

- (2) More contextual—our experiences are rooted in a context, as is knowledge in case studies, and distinguishable from abstract, formal knowledge derived from other research designs.
- (3) More developed by reader interpretation—readers bring to case study research their own experiences and understandings.
- (4) Based more on reference populations determined by the reader—in generalizing, as described above, readers have some population in mind. Thus, unlike traditional research, the reader participates in extending generalization to reference populations (pp. 35-36).

Such a case study I believe will bring the experiences of its participants close to those of its readers, who may have similar questions about programs for students who struggle with or drop out of traditional classrooms in middle school or early high school.

As an outsider to Finnish education, I felt this program to be unique in how it was knit together in its various program components, and within the Finnish education context. When I visited a JOPO class in 2015 while conducting earlier fieldwork in Finnish schools, my curiosity about this program continued for over a year before I designed this research project. I came to believe that a fuller and deeper understanding of the JOPO class and how it works to help students re-engage and experience success could be useful to Finnish educators as well as those in the U.S. and other nations.

### **The Institutional Review Board (IRB) Process**

After my dissertation committee approved my research proposal and one school had sent their formal letter of acceptance for participating in the study, I sought approval from the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB). I submitted my detailed description of the study design and its accompanying materials, including the invitation letter, acceptance letters from schools, the informed consent form, my plan to guarantee confidentiality, and

interview formats (see Appendices A through E). The IRB approved the study on August 25, 2016, and thereafter, I added schools to the study as their official letters arrived and I confirmed the date of their participation in the study. Two schools completed their formal letters to participate while I was in Finland conducting my first interviews. In early September, I added the option of two people being able to interview together if they preferred. This option was chosen on four occasions, and in those cases, I offered each participant additional time to answer all of the questions.

### **Recruitment and Selection of Participants**

My first encounter with Finnish schools took place in 2015. I spent the month of April visiting 12 schools in the areas of Helsinki, Tampere, and Jyvaskyla. During this exploratory visit, I also met with people in the education departments of University of Tampere and University of Jyvaskyla, and I remained in touch with several educators from these visits. Outreach to schools for this case study in Finland began with me contacting one of these education colleagues. In April, 2016 I asked a colleague and teacher at University of Tampere, herself a doctoral student, if she would advise me on the proper Finnish way of approaching schools to inform them of my interest in interviewing JOPO staff and former JOPO students who are now young adults. She suggested contacting education leaders at the municipal offices in each geographic area of interest.

The municipality coordinates many services to its residents, and each one houses a director of education. The directors I contacted by email in five geographic areas in Finland responded in a positive and collaborative way, sharing the names of schools that held a JOPO class, their principals and JOPO teachers, and their emails. I wanted to visit with study

participants in a variety of urban, suburban, and small town locations in Finland. My university colleague in Finland reviewed my draft of the invitation letter and offered a few valuable suggestions, including the ideal timing of the invitation.

### **Eligibility**

I selected one large city, two medium-size cities, one large suburban area, and one area of small towns in five geographic areas of Finland for this study. A comprehensive school (Grades 1 - 9) was eligible if it housed a JOPO class. Further, the principal and the JOPO coordinator (usually also the JOPO class teacher) each needed to agree that the school would participate in the study, and the JOPO teacher needed to agree to participate in a 35 to 45 minute interview. A formal letter of invitation for me to come to their school, signed by the school principal on the school's letterhead, was the final step in becoming eligible to participate. The principal and/or former students participating in interviews was optional, but one or both of these options were chosen by most of the participating schools.

### **Invitation to Potential Participants**

The initial email letter, informing principals of the study and inviting their school to participate in the coming September-October 2016 period, went to 12 schools in the above-mentioned geographic areas of Finland in late May, 2016. One school responded to this early invitation letter with a formal acceptance and returned a letter inviting me to come and interview their staff in late September, 2016. This offered an exciting promise for moving forward with the study, but I still faced significant recruitment work ahead. I then decided to wait out the summer break (June 10-August 10) and send a similar second letter to these and several new schools, in late August.

I sent out a second letter by email to 16 schools in the five areas that housed a JOPO class, writing to JOPO coordinators. This second mailing took place at the end of August, 2016, when school had been back in session for a little more than two weeks of its fall term. The mailing included a letter introducing the study in some detail, and three attachments required by the University of St. Thomas IRB: (a) a full description of the study; (b) a sample letter of acceptance that they could use or modify on their letterhead stationery; and (c) an invitation letter they could send to those eligible to participate in the study (see Appendices B - D).

On September 4, 2016 four more schools replied with a formal invitation letter via email to conduct my study at their school, bringing the total to five schools. On September 6, another school indicated its serious interest, and requested a further phone conversation to clarify some questions. This conversation took place with the JOPO coordinator two days later. We discussed the intent of the study, why it was designed as a qualitative case study, who I wanted to interview, what was required, and location choices for conducting interviews with both educators and former students. I explained the option of including the principal for an interview, and the option of inviting former students, age 18 or older, to interview and discuss their past JOPO class experiences. Several schools took one or both options in addition to offering interviews with JOPO teachers and youth workers. Seven principals and seven former students responded to invitations for participating in an interview. Four schools also offered interviews with social workers, psychologists, or guidance counselors who interfaced in a regular way with the JOPO class. These were included as JOPO auxiliary staff participants because of their potential unique perspective on a student's psychosocial learning needs or social-emotional development challenges.

When I left for Finland on September 21, 2016, six schools had formally agreed to participate in the case study and had been approved by the University of St. Thomas IRB (Institutional Review Board). Two schools remained as possible participants, but they had not yet formally committed. The potential seventh school indicated interest in the study but required a review process by their municipal education department. This school, having had multiple requests for meetings and interviews, sought the extra assurance of having formal vetting by their municipal education director. I completed their application form via regular mail during my first days in Finland and received their formal approval one week before the interviews (Appendix G). I then added this school to the IRB list of participating schools.

An eighth school wanted to meet me in person prior to deciding whether to formally join the study. I accepted their invitation to meet over breakfast with two JOPO teachers at their school. My husband joined this informal meeting, since no interview was planned. The two teachers offered a presentation of their JOPO classes and its unique history. This school housed the only JOPO classes in their municipal area and had recently moved to a new school location to accommodate space needs for multiple classes. Shortly after this informal meeting, the JOPO coordinator expressed his desire to formally participate in the study. He signed the consent form and this JOPO teacher completed the interview questions via email. I added the school name to the roster in the study with the University of St. Thomas IRB.

### **Finnish Educators Extending Invitations**

The original person I had contacted in a northern region of Finland was unable to respond for his school, yet he wanted to see schools in his region participate in the study. Therefore, he shared my original letter of request with the detailed attachments with two of his colleagues in other small towns in his region, and both of those JOPO coordinators and their principals chose



to have their schools become participants in the study. In the third metro area I visited, similarly, one school helped identify another one by sharing my invitation letter. Both schools in that city enrolled in the study. Without the departments of education in the several municipalities generously sharing their original contact information on their schools that housed a JOPO class, I would not have been able to set up the study by using an email invitation. Thus, while not intended originally, some snowball sampling occurred in the selection of participating schools.

I had hoped to have as many as 15 participants from at least three schools in this study, which I felt would be a required minimum for going ahead with this research. However, through the invitation process, 35 people, including seven former JOPO students, accepted the invitation and completed an interview for this study. I found principals and JOPO teachers quite willing to work collaboratively in arranging a half or even a whole day of interview time with JOPO and auxiliary staff, principals themselves, and former students.

The participating schools unanimously voiced their interest in this study being conducted, with the hope that findings regarding this program could be shared with Finnish educators as well as those in the U.S. and other countries. Several principals or JOPO coordinators stated that they knew of no formal studies of the JOPO class—beyond their own municipality—since 2008, when the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture completed the initial assessment of the two year trial period, which then allowed for replication of the JOPO class throughout Finland's education system. I agreed to share the completed research with the Finnish Ministry of Education as well as the schools that participated in this study.

## Settings

I wanted to select a variety of settings in which to interview participants for this study, to obtain a variety of perspectives about the JOPO class. Based on my earlier visit to Finland, I decided to contact schools in the five selected areas, representing rural small towns, suburban areas, and urban settings. Eight of the 16 schools contacted by email decided to participate in this study.

### **School # 1: Northern Small Town**

School #1 involved five interviews: school principal, JOPO teacher/coordinator, youth worker, and two former students. This comprehensive school (Grades 1-9) is located in a small town of 6,000, four hours north of Helsinki by train. The school's JOPO class is held a few blocks from the school in an old bus station housed in a strip mall. The school became too crowded, so the smallest class, JOPO, needed to find its own space. The large classroom afforded space for several small study or project groups. Posters made by students and pictures of each JOPO class group provided colorful art-stories on the walls. The students liked the flexibility of off-campus living, and the JOPO teacher felt it offered a less distracting space for the students. Classes, except for music and art, were held here, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Students went out to workplaces on Thursday and Friday, visiting many places during the first few weeks. Students then became interns at workplaces during the year for a total time of six to ten weeks, depending on their interests and future school plans.

A large open room housed the JOPO classroom work area; a kitchen and bathroom at the back of the large space gave it a home feeling. The students cook breakfast here and keep the coffee pot going all day. Someone brings in rolls or muffins in the morning. The main school

building, housing Grades 1 through 9, is a short walk down the street. It is a three-story white building bearing a traditional appearance on the outside but revealing a modern design on the inside. Student art lines the halls, from young children's bright-colored sketches to quite sophisticated multi-media samples from the older students. No bells ring here. Somehow, classes know when it's time to break, and the halls flood with students and teachers. People walk slowly, talking; the atmosphere is relaxed. Many go outside. The break is for fifteen minutes.

### **School #2: Second Northern Small Town**

School #2 arranged six interviews: the principal, JOPO teacher/coordinator, youth worker, social worker, guidance counselor, geography/biology teacher. This large, modern white school in a town of 5,200 people is nestled behind several large apartment buildings facing an outer road. The view inside the wide entrance doors revealed a split-level design, with main entrance, foyer, cafeteria and some classrooms on the first floor. Like all schools in Finland, the cafeteria here served a free hot lunch with drink, salad, fresh fruit and dessert to all students each day. An upstairs suite with the principal's office, teachers' lounge and patio, kitchen, and meeting rooms occupied one end of this second floor, and classrooms lined the long white hallway. At the far end of this second-floor hallway was the JOPO class. The JOPO classroom was large enough to create three sections—a living room section with two couches, a classroom section with individual desks, and a project section with two round tables that could each seat five people. Up front was a huge white-board and a teacher's desk. Cell phones were placed in a box on the teacher's desk as students entered and were used during project times when directed by the teacher.

### **School #3: Large Suburban Community**

This school arranged nine interviews: two JOPO teachers, a JOPO coordinator, a social worker, a principal and vice principal, and three former students. School #3 bridges the west edge of a metropolitan area and the beginning of a large, suburban region next to it. It is a well-developed, thriving multicultural community with a feeling at once urban yet with ample space and parks visible from its tree-lined streets. I walked about a mile from the train station down a side street to the school. People lived in apartment buildings in this community. The municipal schools here—elementary, middle school, and academic high school—all clustered together on several acres. The JOPO class met in a separate building down a few stairs from the middle school. This temporary housing, slated to be torn down after this school year while a larger school is being constructed, afforded a cozy haven to its two JOPO classes. The JOPO coordinator's office tucked into one end of the building. Her office was crowded, books competing for space with school event memorabilia lining shelves and walls. Two very large classrooms sat side by side off from a wide hallway; each room was home to ten JOPO students. Each class had a JOPO teacher leading subject studies—Finnish, Swedish, English, math (known as 'maths'), science, social studies, and religion/ethics. Teaming up with the male JOPO teacher was a youth worker, and a social worker paired with the female JOPO teacher. Together, they each aimed to build a learning community that bonds with a deeper connection than the students have had in their earlier classes, for their mission is academic success, social-emotional learning, and career readiness.

The classroom where I interviewed six staff and three former students was filled with an indoor garden of plants—a common classroom practice to enhance beauty and air quality. The coordinator set out a tray of bakery goods, a coffee pot and cups next to the table. Pictures of

JOPO class trips filled the opposite wall. Their bonds are deep; the teachers have both been here since the beginning of JOPO in Finland. An atmosphere of relaxation, trust, and calm fills the air. You can tell that people working there love their work.

#### **School #4: Medium City - Suburb**

This school arranged six interviews: the JOPO teacher, youth worker, guidance counselor, and two former students. I arrived early by taxi to this school complex on the edge of this Finland city, a larger metro area with a small-town feel. Two large areas of bicycles graced either side of the front door. The complex was physically a very modern, gleaming white one story building, sprawling in several directions, making a visitor wonder if various additions were added over time. Porticos covered the doors both front and back, protecting from the weather, adding to the simple yet elegant design. Inside, I saw a second story on the back part of the building, and looking down, realized there was a lower level as well. Skylights in the roof brought in additional light. Two sets of doors opened out the back to paved activity and parking spaces outside. A row of rather elegant-looking twin homes perched on the hill behind the school. Looking closer, I saw that each twin home had its own external sauna building. The bright fall colors reaching their peak contrasted with the sleek white buildings. On an afternoon walk outside, I saw a much larger building, four stories high, housing an academic high school. The grounds around all the schools were beautifully groomed, and the high school backed up onto a wooded area. The whole complex sat on a hill, overlooking a vast valley toward the city. Traffic bustled down below.

This school had as its central feature a large, well-appointed teacher's room, with kitchenette and comfortable seating areas, both at tables and on couches. Teachers were meeting in small groups as we walked through this space, walked past a computer working area for

teachers, and entered a small, private conference room which I used for the day. One teacher was quick to offer me coffee, the staple without which work does not take place! Another teacher brought in a box of powdered pastries. I was introduced to everyone present in the teachers' room, the hub of the school. As I strolled down the halls during an afternoon break, artwork of very young and older students alike graced the walls. The younger ones made block prints in bold contrasting colors of wild animals: cheetah, parrot, polar bear, zebra, puma, and panda. The white ultra-modern hallway for the older classes displayed bold abstract art in contrasting bright colors. Some classroom doors were filled with colorful post-its, with names or activities. Multi-ball lighting hanging from the second floor filtered down two more stories, and a graceful spiral staircase added an elegance not always seen in American schools. Typical of Finnish buildings, large potted plants invited the outdoors into every foyer.

### **School # 5: Medium City - Urban**

School # 5 arranged two interviews, the JOPO teacher/coordinator and the youth worker. This older tan brick three-story building nestled among maple and ash trees hides what lies inside: a beautifully remodeled modern interior, with each classroom equipped in Scandinavian-modern furnishings and the latest in technology: new computers, whiteboards, newly outfitted labs, and music rooms full of instruments. Art of all kinds, from paper prints to sculptures to taxidermy displays of owls, squirrels and other small animals, showcased behind glass, revealed the school's interests and activities. Spiral staircases wound upstairs and down. The school housed a "relaxing room" where students go to take a break (15 minutes each hour) and talk, play music, use cell phones, sit in comfortable living room configurations, and even play a piano. There was a "noisy section" and a "quieter section" to this large space, and a full coffee pot for students.

After the tour, we headed to the JOPO classroom, housed in a former chemistry lab on the second floor. This space was very ample and could easily hold 35 people. The JOPO class was limited to 10 students and their two teachers. Pictures of each JOPO class by year covered one large door of a supply cupboard. The JOPO teacher and coordinator said students love this space because it is versatile and can be set up many different ways. The sinks at one end of the room had been turned into a kitchenette where students made breakfast and coffee. It had a “man-cave” kind of feel to it. I sat in the “living room area” and used the huge coffee table to conduct my interviews. “The students feel like this room is home,” said the JOPO teacher. These students, like JOPO students in other schools, spend Thursdays and Fridays in their workplace internships. They were out visiting workplaces the day I visited, preparing to select their first student internships for the fall period. The JOPO teacher and youth worker will visit the student-selected workplaces frequently, to get ideas on how to bring their work learning back into the classroom, in terms of learning math, science, human relations/psychology, and ethical behavior. The energy in this building was palpable – things were humming, and students and teachers looked engaged. I did not visit classrooms with students present on this visit.

### **School #6: Medium Coastal City**

The JOPO coordinator participated in the study. This was the only school visited in this city, an earlier capital city of Finland. This river-lined city is a main west-coast seaport, looking out into the Baltic Sea toward Stockholm. It is a city of about 185,000. I learned at the last minute that the JOPO class had just moved to another school in town, but only for needed space; it was still part of its original school and staff. This was reportedly the only school in Finland to house three JOPO classes on one campus. The town was home to many immigrants, some older, many newer. The immigrants all spent their first school year in the “newcomer class” which is

not JOPO but is often housed near JOPO classes. Both were self-contained classrooms, and the newcomers worked on learning the Finnish language and culture for one year before being mainstreamed. Some of these newer immigrant students later came into the JOPO class—primarily, those struggling to fit in—which is what JOPO is all about.

From the main street I found my way down a little side street to enter the JOPO classes at the back of a large white building complex several kilometers from the school that served as “extension space” for the school’s special programs. I met the JOPO coordinator and we walked down a long hallway with three very large classrooms coming off of it in three directions (modern hallway!). I met in a fourth room of similar size with this JOPO coordinator and another JOPO teacher. They offered a presentation of their JOPO classes and provided written information about their program. Two of the three JOPO classes were in session, so we did not enter, but could see students working in groups of two and three.

The JOPO teachers saw this space as temporary but very adequate and larger space than they had previously at the other school. The space again had that “man-cave” feeling of being off and away from other classrooms, and more informal and comfortable in terms of furnishings. The JOPO teachers remained on staff at their original school and reported to their principal there, who showed strong support for this program. The JOPO students here came from four area middle schools, so a majority of them were not from this school. The JOPO teachers frequently returned to their old school, about 10 minutes away, for teacher and staff meetings. About a third of the JOPO students here were girls.

### **School # 7: Large City**

School #7 arranged four interviews: the JOPO teacher/coordinator, principal, psychologist, and social worker. I arrived at one end of a huge horseshoe structure designed for



a Grade 1 - 9 school. This two-story brick building, nestled among blazing maple trees in a quiet neighborhood, had a younger student entrance for Grades 1 through 6, and an older student entrance for grades 7 through 9. Outside, in the horseshoe space, an expansive blacktop area accommodated children playing several kinds of ball, tag, and other games. A few other students clustered around, talking. School had not begun yet.

Inside, on a first-floor side hallway, two very large classrooms hosted the JOPO program, a teacher's lounge at the end of the hall, along with restrooms and a couple other small rooms. Like other JOPO spaces, these spaces also offered a "living room section" and a "classroom section." Each room had a large teacher's desk up front on one side of the room. I conducted my interviews in one of the JOPO classrooms. The students were out visiting potential intern work sites. We went up a few stairs to a much longer hallway, heading to the principal's office and other middle school classrooms. Ficus trees and other plants surrounded the entrances, inside. Though the outside appeared traditional, the inside looked very new and modern. The center of the first floor housed the cafeteria, affording equal access to the younger and older classes of students. All students ate a free hot lunch here each day, set up in salad-bar fashion. This school housed approximately 400 students from Grades 1 through 9.

### **School #8: Large City – Industrial Area**

I arrived at School #8 in an industrial neighborhood quite a long ride from the city center. I learned that the school had earlier been a beer factory with a historical reputation in Finland, but I didn't learn what ultimately happened to it. The building had an unusual shape, and had been renovated both outside and in. The large, light grey frame on the outside did not resemble a school. Once inside, however, this modern school gleamed and revealed a novel Scandinavian design. This school invited me to interview the two JOPO teachers and the principal. The two

JOPO classrooms sat adjoined at the end of one hallway, around a corner. The JOPO teacher/coordinator showed me through the two very spacious rooms. Each student here had a full-size laptop computer instead of textbooks, used for research through several class assignments. My host stated that the students preferred learning on laptops to reading books, though they could use the library. I noticed some math worksheets stacked up at the end of one large work-table that can accommodate six students. The adjacent student room had three of these large working tables. A lot of the learning involved small-group or individual projects. A JOPO student came through the room, headed into the adjacent room, pulled out a folder or portfolio, and sat down at his computer. My host explained the weekly assignment sheet showing each student's work assignments to be completed by Friday. Students used this as a guide for what is completed and what is yet to be done. As in some other schools, each year's JOPO class group picture was posted on one wall.

Later, I entered the main part of the school, where the principal's offices—a private office and an adjacent large conference room—occupied the space across from the exit to the parking lot behind the school. The architecture relied on modern, simple lines which created a sleek, undisturbed look both in the conference room where I met with the principal, and in the hallways, which turned at unusual angles in the building. Most rooms had large glass windows off the hallway – a sign of transparency I have noticed in many Finnish education buildings. Display cases near the back door exhibited the metal work of students making dippers for their saunas out of copper and other metal creations. This school also housed a large teacher's lounge with a kitchen, an office workroom, and large workspace with both tables and clusters of chairs and couches. Students had their own break room/lounge for their times between classes. Even in this industrial neighborhood, all the buildings appeared to be refurbished and well cared for,

with some greenery gracing each property. I remember thinking how I would enjoy working in this transformed neighborhood.

In summary, I conducted interviews with 35 people in eight schools (see Table 1, p. 84) about their experiences with the JOPO class of flexible learning. Primary staff, either JOPO teachers, JOPO coordinators, or youth workers accounted for 15 interviews. One was a regular subject teacher who taught JOPO students once a week. Seven were principals (6) or assistant principals (1). Five were interfacing professionals who supported JOPO students in various ways: guidance counselors (2); social workers (2); and psychologist (1). Seven former students, ranging in age from 18 to 26, also completed interviews about their experience with the JOPO class. Table 1 lists the participants by their role, gender, type of setting, and school number. Nine people participated at one school; between one and six participants completed an interview in the other seven schools. Participants were not assigned pseudonyms in order to fully guarantee confidentiality. Since many participants knew one another, when quoted in the text, those who interviewed are mentioned by their role rather than a pseudonym.

Table 1. **Participants in the 2016 Case Study of Finland's JOPO Class**

<b>#</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Type of Setting</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>School #</b>
1.	Principal	M	Small Town	9/27/2016	1
2.	Former Student	M	Small Town		
3.	Former Student	M	Small Town		
4.	Youth Worker	F	Small Town		
5.	JOPO Teacher/Coord.	F	Small Town		
6.	Principal	F	Small Town	9/28/2016	2
7.	Subject Teacher	M	Small Town		
8.	Guidance Counselor	M	Small Town		
9.	Youth Worker	F	Small Town		
10.	JOPO Teacher/Coord.	M	Small Town		
11.	JOPO Teacher	F	Suburban	9/30/2016	3
12.	Principal	F	Suburban		
13.	Asst. Principal	F	Suburban		
14.	JOPO Teacher	M	Suburban		
15.	Former Student	M	Suburban		
16.	Former Student	M	Suburban		
17.	Former Student	F	Suburban		
18.	Social Worker	F	Suburban		
19.	JOPO Coordinator	F	Suburban		
20.	Principal	M	Suburban	10/03/2016	4
21.	JOPO Teacher/Coord.	F	Suburban		
22.	Guidance Counselor	F	Suburban		
23.	Youth Worker	M	Suburban		
24.	Former Student	F	Suburban		
25.	Former Student	M	Suburban		
26.	JOPO Teacher/Coord.	M	Urban	10/04/2016	5
27.	Youth Worker	F	Urban		
28.	JOPO Teacher/Coord.	M	Urban	10/06/2016	6
29.	Principal	M	Urban	10/12/2016	7
30.	Psychologist	F	Urban		
31.	Social Worker	F	Urban		
32.	JOPO Teacher/Coord.	M	Urban		
33.	JOPO Teacher/Coord.	M	Urban	10/13/2013	8
34.	JOPO Teacher	M	Urban		
35.	Principal	F	Urban		

## **Data Collection**

I collected interview data at the eight schools between September 26 and October 13, 2016. I recorded the 35 to 45-minute meetings for Rev.com, a professional transcription service, using their app. I made daily notes about the places I visited, my impressions of things JOPO class staff emphasized and valued, and questions remaining for me after a set of interviews. Participants all came on time, participated with interest, and appeared to appreciate being a part of the study. It was clear to me that thoughtful planning had gone into setting up interviews at each of the schools. I had arranged with the IRB the possibility of two people being able to choose to interview together, either for support, common interest, or English language support. Three of the interviews were conducted with two people sharing their thoughts together, and these were allowed to run up to 70 minutes in length. Former students were offered a choice on where to interview (the local library, nearby coffee shop, or their school). All former students chose to meet at their former school.

### **Interviews with Participants**

I planned to interview between 15 and 20 participants using a semi-structured interview protocol, recommended for qualitative case study interviews (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). In practice, as the number of schools increased to eight, I interviewed 35 participants. One of the 35 I met in person informally for 75 minutes along with a teaching colleague; he then completed the informed consent form and later filled out his answers to the interview questions and emailed them back to me. The other 34 participants interviewed at the schools where they worked or had attended the JOPO class. Interviews took place in a three-week period between September 26 and October 13, 2016. I conducted the interviews in English, and appropriate English support

was arranged ahead of time by the principal or JOPO coordinator. Most of those interviewed were fluent in English; four utilized minimal translation help from a school staff person.

### **Additional Data**

I kept a journal during the time of interviewing participants, including observer comments and reflective memos to self, completed the evening after the interviews. I kept an overview calendar that showed the date, time, address, names and phone numbers of each school in my briefcase. Because I was dealing with confidential material, I stayed in hotels with a safe and brought a traveling briefcase that locked.

After I returned home to Minnesota, I occasionally emailed with four Finnish colleagues, two of whom had completed an interview for the study. These colleagues voluntarily kept in touch by email and filled in some further background questions I had on the history of JOPO and how it originated in Finland. They also answered questions about Finland's educational culture and its evolution—questions that arose from some of the interview data, and some gaps in my understanding that remained. These are cited as personal communications when used in the text, after obtaining each person's permission.

### **Data Analysis**

I arrived home in Minneapolis on September 16, 2016. I stored all data from interview hand-written notes, transcriptions, journal reflections, informed consent forms, and the journal information in a locked file cabinet in my home study. Within four weeks, I had all of the interviews professionally transcribed.

### **Coding**

During the following six weeks, I coded each interview session. I began with what is called Open Coding, or the process of “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing,

and categorizing” the interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). I typed up all of the codes, minus exact replications, which became four data groups, indexing them by interview number and page of the Rev.com transcript. The data grouped fairly easily into (1) Learning Strategies; (2) Social and Emotional Learning; (3) Societal Supporting Structures, and (4) Miscellaneous Descriptions and Challenges. In addition, I typed up a separate section on comments from the former students, so their data grouped into the first four sections as well as being kept separately as a group report for possible use later.

### **Second Level Coding**

My next step was to take the coding to another level, also known as Axial Coding, which Strauss & Corbin (1990) describe as a set of procedures where “data are put back together in new combinations, by making connections between categories” (p. 96). At this second-level of coding, the data grouped into more meaningful categories. For example, in the social-emotional learning group, the data broke down into:

- 1) Establishment of trust
- 2) Climate of caring and acceptance
- 3) Autonomy and choice
- 4) Experience of belonging
- 5) “Finding my motivation”
- 6) Self-reliance and self-efficacy (“I can do this”)

Learning strategies of JOPO broke into several sub-groups:

- 1) Early intervention
- 2) Learning by doing
- 3) Create strong bonds /learn together

- 4) Flexibility and choice
- 5) Individualize and integrate
- 6) Empowerment: Going “from passenger to driver”

I completed this process with each of the three primary coded groupings. The fourth one, originally a “miscellaneous” group, yielded some data to the three major groups and was then deleted as a category. I then separately grouped the former student data, and found five inter-related themes:

- 1) Being noticed (acknowledged, affirmed)
- 2) A feeling of belonging
- 3) Establishing trust, self-belief, and self-efficacy
- 4) Finding motivation and becoming self-starting
- 5) Empowering “learning by doing”

### **Role of the Researcher**

Qualitative research recognizes the researcher as a tool of data collection and processing (Lichtman, 2010). Since qualitative researchers bring their own values to their work, at times not fully cognizant of this, the issue of researcher bias must be acknowledged. As a qualitative researcher I also bring a background of having been a psychotherapist with families and having been a social worker in medical, education, and community development settings. My attention easily attunes to social and emotional development issues, and I must listen openly to my study participants while putting aside some of my conclusions from earlier experience. This technique, sometimes known as *bracketing*, acknowledges that this may be a challenge for the researcher (Creswell, 2013). “Bracketing personal experiences may be difficult for the researcher to implement because interpretations of the data always



incorporate the assumptions that the researcher brings to the topic” (p. 83). I refer the reader to my Reflexive Statement in Chapter Two, which further spells out my experiences and values leading me to conduct this study.

### **Summary**

In summary, I selected the case study approach within a qualitative research design for this research in order to listen to those who have established, taught, administered, or participated as a student in the JOPO class of flexible learning, a more experiential alternative bringing certain students to success with Finland’s mainstream 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade curricula. I set up the study to gain these multiple perspectives, to hopefully gain a more holistic picture of how this class has helped students who have not succeeded in traditional middle school classes. I gave special attention to the voices of those who had experienced the JOPO class as students, and by now had enough life experience to reflect on the impact this program had on their educational journey. My hope is that the patterns from their interviews will give JOPO teachers and principals useful feedback as to the strongest elements of their integrated academic, learning-by-doing, and social-emotional JOPO class program.

As I worked with the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB) in setting up this study, I addressed the ethical considerations it presented. I described the intent and nature of this research to education leaders in Finland by email letter, and later, reviewed this in detail in personal meetings. I assured anonymity of schools and participants, and the confidentiality of their shared information. Verbally and in writing, I identified the voluntary nature of the study, and the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. Data were kept locked in a safe in hotels, and in a locking briefcase when traveling to school sites. In

Minneapolis, the study data has remained stored in a locked file cabinet. Data on the computer throughout has been password protected.

A uniqueness—or possible bias—of this study includes my relationship as an outsider to the Finland educational system. I have been a newcomer from Minnesota learning about and examining this program. A Finnish educator would likely approach a study of this program with different assumptions and questions. My bias toward experience in education as a preferred way of learning may be another limitation.

On the Finnish side of the study, the method of selecting former students should be noted; they tended to be those who remained in contact with their teachers over time, and thus those who could be contacted more easily. It may be that other students who may have found less success after their JOPO class experience did not have their voices represented in this study. I discuss the study's limitations in greater detail in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

Don't let the fear of striking out hold you back.  
--Babe Ruth

I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.  
--William Earnest Henley, *Invictus*

This chapter examines the findings of the JOPO class case study research. It will first examine the history of the JOPO class in Finland using data from interviews with principals and JOPO teachers. It will then examine the three main themes that emerged from interview data: (a) societal factors that support the JOPO class; (b) teaching and learning strategies of the JOPO teacher and youth worker; and (c) developing social-emotional learning in the JOPO student. Finally, a review of the reflections of seven former JOPO students who were young adults when interviewed (ages 18-26) will examine in their words what most helped these young people decide to re-engage in their education. Their reflections on what worked best for them and what felt different to them from their earlier classes add a special dimension to understanding the gifts of the JOPO class from a student perspective. They also offered suggestions to educators about the JOPO class and to current JOPO students.

### History of JOPO in Finland

#### The Finnish Education System

Several features of the Finnish system are well-suited to support a program like JOPO. Comprehensive schools (in Finnish, the *peruskoulu*), inclusive of Grades 1 through 9, usually each work with a total of between 300 and 450 students—on average, a significantly smaller

student group than comparable schools in the U.S. Fostering the development of the whole person as a top priority, Finnish schools respond to the students' differing needs at every level. Learning is personalized to the talents, interests, and learning needs of each student.

**Early identification.** Early identification and intervention in supporting children's needs is a key value. Teachers talk of students' well-being—of “finding their place” and “finding their motivation.” Finland values and offers supports for each student to find a good way to belong and meaningfully participate as a well-educated citizen in Finnish society. Various kinds of supportive help, including the first two levels of special education, allow younger students to remain based in their home classroom. When greater teaching support is needed, as in a class for students with autism, the staff to student ratio can be even 1:1. The JOPO class evolved to meet the special needs of students who lose their motivation, disengage from learning, and often stop coming to school.

**The Youth Guarantee in Finland.** Not only are students supported toward their greatest growth while in school, but such support also continues after they leave school. The Youth Guarantee in Finland (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2012) offers employment, training and placement to prevent young adults not either working or in further education or training from being excluded from the society. Launched in 2013, the Youth Guarantee is a joint program of the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Employment and the Economy, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The Youth Guarantee offers everyone under the age of 25 (30 if a recent college graduate) paid employment, acceptance at further education or on-the-job training, or a place in a rehabilitation program within three months of becoming unemployed. Supporting the inclusion and well-being of all citizens and their ability to be participating, contributing citizens is of highest importance in Finland.

## What is JOPO?

JOPO, or “flexible basic education,” is not special education, but a more experiential, hands-on form of the traditional mainstream curriculum required of all Finnish students, culminating at the completion of 9<sup>th</sup> grade with a certificate. Finnish students are typically 16 at this age, since they begin first grade at age seven, a year later than students in most nations. The school and the municipality (usually a social worker) reach out to a student who has stopped attending school and invite her or him in for a conversation. After exploring what has transpired, several options are considered, sometimes including the JOPO class, keeping in mind the well-being of the young person and their inclusion in society. Students need to apply and interview for the JOPO class with their parent or guardian present, thus requiring some initial motivation to engage in this class. The student also needs the recommendation of his or her regular teacher and a social worker, either from the school or the municipality, to be eligible for the JOPO class.

Students often see the JOPO class as a second chance at becoming successful in school. The JOPO class is offered to students who are “action learners,” those who like to learn by hands-on methods and try things out directly. In addition, almost all students entering the JOPO class have experienced serious difficulties in traditional classroom education. All at some point became disengaged in learning. States Petri Hanninen, one of JOPO’s originators:

Very often they have lost the *meaning* of learning the school subjects, but often face challenges in other areas of their life as well. Therefore, JOPO aims to offer more holistic support for the student in order to support his or her inner motivation to develop themselves. (P. Hanninen, personal communication, February 7, 2017)

In concert with Finland’s commitment to offering each child an excellent education, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture created an ample set of support professionals—social workers, guidance counselors, psychologists, and various education specialists—for each school, as well as some special programming for certain kinds of students. JOPO is a program offered to

students who attend school but are clearly disengaged from their learning, or to students who have stopped attending their middle school. It is an early intervention effort aimed at helping students get a new start—by revitalizing their interest in their own lives, in their education, and in the society around them—all within a small group context and with extra support and feedback.

### **The JOPO Class Design**

JOPO teaching staff in several schools explained how three pillars of the JOPO class work together for student growth: (a) team teaching a small group of students (usually 10) in a self-contained class setting; (b) unpaid student internships at local workplaces throughout the school year (usually between three and six intern periods within a school year); and (c) several ‘learning camps’ (between two and seven in a school year) that involve overnights at youth camps aimed at building a cohesive and spirited team and strengthening social-emotional learning skills. Nearly all JOPO staff stated that if one of these areas were to be taken away, the JOPO experience would not work successfully for the students. The three elements together create a synergy that allows social-emotional learning and academic learning to develop in tandem. These components also offer a sense of adventure and discovery for the small group.

**Pillar 1: Team teaching with a small group.** A teacher and a youth worker with a self-contained classroom of JOPO students aim to build a genuine learning community of mutual support, and a safe home base for sharing both academic and social-emotional learning. The JOPO teacher, usually also the program’s coordinator, has often obtained an additional certification beyond their master’s degree for teaching additional subjects, and may teach six or even seven different subjects to the JOPO student group. Some are certified to teach all subjects

in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade. However, JOPO students may have one or two classes with teachers outside of the self-contained JOPO class, where the group goes to a subject teacher of the larger school. This may be physical education, music, art, or a more academic subject. Occasionally, a principal or guidance counselor may teach a subject with a group of JOPO students. Every principal in Finland is also a licensed teacher and usually teaches one class per week; sometimes, this class may be with JOPO students.

The other JOPO staff person is usually a youth worker, someone with a bachelor's degree in youth work. Occasionally, a social worker has filled this role in the JOPO class. The youth worker serves as the liaison to student internship workplaces and as the organizer of student learning camps outside of the school. The youth worker functions as a mentor/coach and at times as a teaching assistant in the self-contained classroom. The youth worker visits workplaces that are working with a JOPO student to gain regular feedback. The youth worker can make some adjustments if needed or bring feedback into conversation with a student. Each school sets this up to meet its own conditions and the students' needs. Sometimes it is the JOPO teacher who goes out to visit workplaces that have JOPO student interns. This variance reflects the local autonomy of schools and their teachers to decide what works best at their school or in their program.

“Small is beautiful,” said a long-time JOPO teacher and coordinator. “It’s the first prerequisite to making the JOPO program work.” Classes normally have up to 10 students, but a few municipalities have modified their limit to 12 students and one school preferred to keep the group size to eight students. All JOPO staff agreed, however, that a small group working with two staff in an affirming, non-judging atmosphere sets the ground more easily for building trust, trying things out, and for confidence to begin to grow.

**Pillar 2: Workplace internships.** Typically, JOPO students spend three days in the classroom, and two days (most often Thursday and Friday) out at various local workplaces, as unpaid student interns. A long-time JOPO teacher suggests calling this part of the program *on-the-job learning* instead of *internship*, to avoid a connotation of the workplace as a substitute for learning. He states that workplaces must be considered as *learning environments*, as the workplace offers them a new environment in which to succeed. He and several other JOPO teachers see the workplace as the richest learning environment of JOPO for most students.

Workplace internship or on-the-job learning is also a formal class for the JOPO student, with a workplace employee/mentor who gives a grade based on a student's learning and performance at the worksite. Workplaces can be chosen by students according to the interests they want to explore. I observed nursing home memory care programs, construction companies, restaurants, small business retail stores, kindergartens and pre-schools, horse-trotting stables, television and radio stations, a tailoring shop, and auto repair companies among the choices students made for their learning internships. Most JOPO class programs require the student to initiate contact as well as apply and interview for their on-the-job learning placements, with minor support from staff if needed.

**Pillar 3: Learning camps.** A third pillar of JOPO is the learning camps, involving one or two overnight stays, housed off-campus but held during the school week two or more times in the school year. Typically, the school year features a group learning camp experience near the mid-August beginning of the school year to get acquainted, build teamwork, strengthen student bonds, and to deepen social-emotional learning skills like trust-building, self-reflection, identifying and expressing feelings appropriately, teamwork in everyday activities with others,



planning and problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills. There are usually one or two camps or activity trips in later fall and winter aimed at keeping spirits high, relationships strong, and further developing the social-emotional learning of individuals and the group as a whole.

Toward the end of the school year in the spring, a final learning camp helps students reflect on their learnings and growth during the year and look at their life goals beyond 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

Schools vary on the number of learning camps offered during the year, which ranged from two to seven in the schools participating in this study. Finnish learning camps are not unique to the JOPO class students. There is a similar “school camp” attended by students finishing 6<sup>th</sup> grade in many Finnish traditional school classes, a celebration held with outdoor and overnight activities, also serving as a rite of passage to 7<sup>th</sup> grade and middle school (Walker, 2017).

**The Interactive Components Working Together.** Students in JOPO classes must complete the academic work in three days that traditional classes spread out over five days each week, so the program is quite rigorous and demanding. Yet the work-based learning is integrated with academic assignments and is continuously assessed as part of the academic work back in the classroom. Both academics (math needed on the job, for example) and social-emotional learning (preparation, proper dress codes, professional manner, handling an upset customer) needed for the workplace are fair game for discussion back at the JOPO class. These on-the-job learning days are the most valuable and authentic learning opportunities for JOPO students, according to former students interviewed in the study.

The combination of rigorous but flexible learning, a small group separate from the large classes, two adults instead of many teachers, and room for discussing “real things” in class

appears to help most students turn a corner relatively early in the school year. Though the JOPO class originated for 9<sup>th</sup> graders, many schools now allow 8<sup>th</sup> grade students to enter the JOPO class and continue the JOPO program for two academic years. Some schools have tried offering JOPO to 7<sup>th</sup> grade students, but most report that it does not work well with students this young. In the schools participating in the study, a majority offered the JOPO class to 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, but three schools restricted the JOPO class to 9<sup>th</sup> grade pupils. There were no 7<sup>th</sup> grade students among schools participating in the study.

Students graduate from 9<sup>th</sup> grade with a certificate. This credential is required for applying for any further education. Completing 9<sup>th</sup> grade is the last required education in Finland, yet at least 94 percent of students go on to either academic upper secondary (Grade 10-12 high schools or *lukios*), to vocational upper secondary school (also Grade 10-12) or complete an “optional 10<sup>th</sup> grade” class (K. Rajaorko, 2017). This additional 10<sup>th</sup> year may be offered at a comprehensive (Grade 1-9) school or in a vocational high school (Grade 10-12) but is managed by the municipality in which it is located (Sahlberg, 2015). Of the other 6%, many enter other kinds of schools in music, arts, crafts, or trades; a small percent elect no option for further education or training, according to two long-time JOPO teachers. The JOPO class serves approximately 1,850 students each year in Finland. This high level of education holds true throughout a Finn’s lifetime; adults participate in adult education and further formal education in very large numbers (Sahlberg, 2015).

### **Evolution of the JOPO Class Idea**

The early educators who helped develop the JOPO class program talk of its prototype being a program in New York City, known as *The City-as-School*, which continues today in

Manhattan's West Village (M. Jahnakainen, personal communication, October 12, 2016). This alternative high school, founded in 1972 as an independent alternative school with connection to the New York City Public School system, built a learning-by-doing curriculum starting with 15 students and four staff. Enrollment in 2016 totaled 685 students. The school assigns students to work internships (500 are offered) in addition to active-learning coursework in class and requires students to build a portfolio of their high school work for high school graduation. Eighty-six staff currently work at *The City-as-School*.

Several educators in Berlin, Germany attended a conference circa 1990, where *The City-as-School* educators featured their work in a presentation (K. Rajaorko, personal communication, October 12, 2016). The Germans, interested in further integrating their public education system with skill development needed in the workplace, adapted the New York program in several of their schools in Berlin with a high degree of success, calling it "*Die Stadt als Schule*." Soon, two Finnish education researchers became familiar with both *The City as School* and *Die Stadt als Schule*, and contacted Finland's Mannerheim Child Welfare League, a national Finnish non-profit organization. This organization brought the idea of both the American and German programs to Finland in 1993, calling it "*Omaura*," or in English, "*My Own Career*." Around the same time, some Swedish-speaking Finnish educators teaching in southwestern Finland also tried adapting portions of the Berlin school program. The Finnish Lottery Association coordinated the Omaura Project or *My Own Career* for its first six years (1993-1999). A group of *My Own Career* teachers then founded the *Omaura Association* to continue to develop the program's teaching methods. One of the early developers who worked with *My Own Career* and continues working as a JOPO teacher today continued the story:

In the year 2004 the Ministry of Education in Finland became interested in our way of teaching, and the rest is history. Because the name *Omaura* belonged to our association,

the Ministry of Education gave it a new name, calling it JOPO, and started a program to spread JOPO to the whole country in 2006 (K. Rajaorko, personal communication, February 7, 2017).

Another Finnish educator and early JOPO developer offered an additional piece of history:

JOPO evolved from *My Own Career*, where the educational setting was similar. *My Own Career* was developed in Finland by pioneering volunteer educators since 1993. In 2006 the ideas and settings were adopted to become JOPO by the Finnish Ministry of Education. In 2005-2006 a project called “Uraa Urtamaan” collected the good practices from *My Own Career*. These were then disseminated when starting JOPO. The origins of the names “flexible basic education” and “JOPO” are from this U.U. project as well. (P. Hanninen, personal communication, February 7, 2017)

From these comments, it appears that the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture took about two years to study the best practices of *My Own Career* and make them ready for schools to use in preparation for offering the JOPO class. Having methodically worked for several decades at transforming its education system toward a child-centered approach, and having given municipal and local systems control of curriculum and programming, Finland offered fertile ground for developing an alternative, flexible way of learning for certain students. Consultation and approval for this JOPO class thus happened first at the local level, and over the next twelve years early JOPO educators refined and adapted it to the needs of their area and students.

When *My Own Career* came to the attention of The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, it took the best concepts and learnings of the thirteen-year experiment called *My Own Career*, and in 2006 named it the JOPO class (in Finnish, “*joustava perusopetus*”) or class of “flexible basic education.” In 2008, the Finnish Ministry of Education made the JOPO class available with additional funding as part of the national curriculum, and it quickly expanded to nearly all parts of Finland (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2008). Not every school, but almost every municipal area, offers at least one JOPO class. Students of nearby schools in the area can apply to the JOPO class in their municipality. Finland offers a school taxi service to students

attending nearby schools when needed. Some schools in Lapland in northern Finland offer JOPO classes for their students (N. Palosaari, personal communication, May 14, 2018).

According to schools participating in this study, many more students have applied for the JOPO class in the last several years than can be accepted.

**Making it Finnish, Calling it JOPO.** *My Own Career* became the prototype for the JOPO class. The name “JOPO,” according to a *My Own Career* teacher who helped to refine the class, refers to the name of a well-loved brand of bicycle in Finland, sold internationally. A current JOPO teacher in the study saw the name of JOPO as an apt choice: “JOPO, like the bicycle, helps you get where you want to go,” he stated. The basic idea was to extend the student’s experience into the community through apprenticing at several workplaces to gain ideas of what might be of interest to him or her for their future in the work world. Simultaneously, it was to study the school subjects in “real life, real situations, in praxis places” (K. Rajaorko, personal communication, October 12, 2017). The learning camps, also known as “adventure pedagogy” during this time, served as a second cornerstone of *My own Career* from its beginning, according to this early JOPO teacher who continues working with JOPO classes today. Adventure pedagogy involved learning out in the natural world and reflecting on those experiences back in class.

***Social-emotional learning base.*** Early JOPO teachers saw that building a base of social-emotional learning about oneself and relationships with others is what helped students gain greater experiences of success in this school format. A student entering JOPO needed to learn self-trust, self-acceptance, trust in others, and build self-confidence and a sense of self-efficacy before the program could become transformational for the student and the group. Further, a group that is growing together carries a synergy that helps even those having a tough

time, reminiscent of Goddard's (2006) study of teachers' *collective efficacy beliefs* helping them hold standards high and beliefs strong in working together to develop the students' abilities. Goddard found a significant correlation between the collective efficacy of teachers and their students' achievements. Former JOPO students spoke of feeling the group's acceptance of them and the self-confident [teacher] expectation for finishing comprehensive school, which helped them begin to gain traction in the class.

What appeared to help, according to JOPO teachers, was the combination of feedback from workplace mentor/supervisors, daily positive feedback on small achievements in class, and the social bonds and more accepting relationships built during the learning camp experiences away from school. "Students who would never otherwise talk with each other at school would be staying up late at night sharing their stories. They came back to school a different group," said one long-time JOPO teacher.

***Student choice and democratic participation.*** Two other key program components that former JOPO students reported as having a strong positive influence on their self-trust and self-acceptance were (a) having a choice about how and when to complete their academic work, and (b) the more participatory classroom atmosphere, where students help create some of the rules and consequences for things like non-attendance, lateness, and rudeness or other inappropriate behavior in class. Student input in designing fair consequences results in student buy-in when consequences happen. A principal interviewed noticed that the students made more strict consequences for themselves—for example, being late to class and rudeness in speaking—than had their teachers.

In choosing how and when to study a subject after a class presentation component, former students reported feeling empowered and more in charge of their time management. They carry a weekly chart with all assignments due by the end of the week and can choose how they will complete those homework or small group learning assignments to meet the deadline. One program uses the seven-week module periods as the due dates for final work. Former students reported feeling trusted by their teachers to problem-solve their week or module of academic preparation and homework. Slowly, they began to trust themselves in managing their time to complete assignments. As they experienced this kind of success, their attendance became more consistent.

***Principal support.*** What other components are key to helping JOPO work well for students, helping them gain a new self-understanding and a new motivation to learn? JOPO educators agree that without a principal's strong support, a JOPO class cannot succeed. Some principals remain at arm's length from JOPO, trusting their teachers to keep it all going well. Other principals teach one class or offer some kind of input to the JOPO class (a talk and reflection time with the students, for example). JOPO teachers see the support of their principal and assistant principal as a critical backbone without which the program could not thrive. Petri Hanninan, one of the original *My Own Career* teachers, states:

Many principals even seem to try to disseminate some methods of JOPO in their schools more widely. This was, in fact, in the original idea too. Those schools where JOPO succeeds seem to be the schools which are more open for new pedagogical ideas in general as well. This has a lot to do with good school management. (personal communication, February 7, 2017)

***Workplace mentor feedback.*** Mentors in the student intern workplaces have an impact on JOPO students. Feedback from the mentor is important in a different way than from teachers, who are more often thought of by students as in a parental role. Receiving positive feedback

from a workplace mentor is like receiving it from the adult world, someone confirming your success “out there” in the world. Add the two kinds of feedback on a regular basis together, and students begin to respond by building trust, sometimes for the first time, with adults. Most mentors in longer-established JOPO class workplaces have received training from the JOPO teacher or youth worker about the needs of the students, and how to give both positive and ‘needs-improvement’ kinds of feedback. Because students get to choose where they want to apply after checking with the JOPO teacher, some training goes on each year with new workplace mentors. The feedback to students must be ‘real’ and not ‘making nice’ with the student; it is about noticing and verbalizing the small things the student is doing well, about the things that a student might not realize about their own strengths or interests, and noticing with a respectful eye to stating what needs improvement.

***Identifying the appropriate student.*** In its days as *My Own Career* (1993-2005), some people thought of JOPO as a kind of “special needs class” for kids who were in trouble. Parents often thought of the JOPO as a class “one level above” a special education class, which carried a stigma about one’s ability level, and because of this they sought the JOPO class for their child. It took time to sort out who really belonged in JOPO, and who could succeed in it. Students who really needed special education were not a fit for JOPO, and neither were students with more serious behavioral or mental health issues.

The right student for the JOPO class is one who has developed some self-defeating behaviors, tending toward withdrawal (non-attendance or non-participation in class) or tending toward conflict with teachers and/or other students. This student is beginning down a non-growth path that may include drugs, alcohol, and behavior inappropriate to a workplace. The JOPO program aims to catch these students at an early enough point when a combination of



caring and acceptance, clear rules, honest feedback, and a small group atmosphere of openness and trust can serve as a catalytic force for students to find new ways, both academically and socially-emotionally. A student's growth as a whole person is the goal of the JOPO experience.

**JOPO's image in the school.** In time, with the near-universal graduation rate of JOPO students from 9<sup>th</sup> grade and close to 100% continuation on to grades 10 through 12 after JOPO, and with their creative offerings to the school (arts, videos, theatre productions as a group) the image of JOPO has changed to one in which people frequently say, "We'd like our traditional classes to be more like JOPO." One principal states, "Every class in our school should be 'JOPO Lite,' or more like JOPO." The positive change in the JOPO students is noticed by the larger school and the local community. Some schools have brought more experiential learning to their traditional classes, crediting the JOPO class students with the popularity of this learning approach.

Finland updates its strategic educational approach every four years. The Finnish Ministry of Education began a new four-year cycle in August, 2016 with a primary focus on project-based learning in all schools. Learning-by-doing and interdisciplinary learning have become Finland's new foundational approach to learning (FNBE, 2016). Some JOPO teachers felt that their ten-year history with the JOPO class may have had a positive influence on this new four-year direction in Finnish schools.

### **What is Flexible Learning?**

**Pedagogical style.** The JOPO class utilizes a different pedagogical style. It engages a small group, from eight to 12, and most frequently 10 students, with two adult professionals in a learning-by-doing and positive feedback format, while giving students more choices about what

to study and when to work on their assignments. In most JOPO classes, assignments are due on Friday afternoon. Many comments from interviews with former students, JOPO teachers, and youth workers emphasized how foundational and necessary the small learning group is to a student's success in the JOPO experience. These students need to rebuild trust with adults and with their peers, and learn self-responsibility and self-reliance as a basis for doing something different in school. The JOPO small group class is designed to allow this to emerge naturally from within the student, rather than to attempt to force any change from outside pressure or demands.

**Power of the small group.** The small groups start out with the teacher and youth worker trusting the student, before the student has proved him/herself as trust-worthy. At first, some students do not come to school regularly or at all. The JOPO staff team begins by finding any small step that could genuinely merit a positive feedback from the adults. Nel Noddings calls this process “noticing” and “confirming” to a student what is seen, and it may be positive information that is new to the student. Students may “catch” even just one of these comments, which can serve as a catalyst for a new way of thinking about oneself.

**The WILMA System.** One way to promote and strengthen self-trust and self-reliance is to give JOPO students their weekly assignments on Monday for each subject, printed on a card that also has its electronic form. This is the WILMA system, used in many Finnish schools, yet the JOPO students have greater flexibility in how they can use it. Students decide which day to study English, do math, work on a science project, or read up on some aspect of history or geography, all core courses in the curriculum. The student knows from his/her weekly chart just what will be due by Friday afternoon. Some students tackle the hard assignments early in the week to get them out of the way; others choose a well-liked subject on Monday to get the week

going well. It is totally up to the student. This implicit trust of the student to figure out for themselves what works best is a strategic way toward building a student's self-trust and self-reliance. It also helps with a student's metacognition: the ability to observe oneself in a social situation, and as this capacity builds, to make useful adjustments.

**Integrating academics and experience.** A second thing meant by flexible learning is that of combining academic learning with the JOPO student's experience, both in multiple workplace assignments of two to seven weeks each, depending on the school, and the learning camps or overnight experiences during the school week that bring the group together in common tasks, games, and living activities. One school described one of their several learning camps during the year as a special time to travel a couple of hours up north and ski together, staying at a youth lodge. The group helped purchase and prepare food together, serve and clean up from meals, ski and snowshoe at a ski area, spend an afternoon backpacking a lunch and cross-country skiing to a lakeside location. In the evening, games both fun and challenging are often divided into competing teams. Former students and teachers both report how these trips and group activities lead to long conversations between students who would be unlikely to become friends in another environment. These trips also give the JOPO youth worker and teacher a way to assess student interests, needs, talents, and a view into what further social-emotional learning will be important for the student to master.

**The JOPO teacher and youth worker team.** Beginning in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Finnish students enter a system of moving around each hour of their school day to a different subject teacher—sometimes to as many as 10 teachers in their week. The JOPO students have not done well in trying to build so many adult relationships simultaneously, and have often needed additional social-emotional skills to form positive and trusting relationships with teachers and other adults.

The JOPO class structure greatly simplifies this and offers a team of two, almost always a specially trained JOPO teacher and a youth worker, to begin the small group way of learning. This team also has built a strategy for what needs to happen in the first days and weeks of their new class.

Building trust is mentioned by both JOPO staff and former students as the first thing that must happen before other things can build upon it. This is why most JOPO class groups start out with a learning camp in the first days or weeks, to catalyze a bonding among the students, and the creating of a non-judging atmosphere. This is most often a new experience in the first year of a JOPO student. It is much simpler to build trust with two adults rather than 8 to 10, and with 7 to 11 other students instead of 20 or 21. Further, JOPO students quickly discover one another's reason for being a JOPO student, yet this is what they all have in common: something that needs a different approach and a non-judgmental group atmosphere.

Several former students stated their JOPO class was their first experience of school being a "safe space" – free of comments by others, judgment by teachers and students—a space where worry about ridicule or bullying could take a break. The JOPO team very intentionally sets the parameters of how the class will be and operate, and how personal (family and home) experiences may be shared in a way that does not happen in the traditional class. They model how the group can give empathic and encouraging feedback. As the JOPO team does this kind of talking in class, the students begin to feel safe in being "more real," as one former student put it. Another student reflected, "In JOPO class, less is more—you have relationships with two adults and nine other students, but they are valuable relationships. It felt safe in JOPO to be myself and try some things."

**On-the-job learning in workplaces.** For a good part of my interviewing, I heard about Thursdays and Fridays at work sites in the local area as “unpaid student internships” at places the students chose. This was an established practice in each community, in which workplaces were not surprised when contacted by an 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade student requesting to do two to seven or eight weeks of work there. I met a teacher whose history with JOPO went back to the very beginning. He spoke of these work days in a different way. He called the workplace *a learning environment*, stating:

This *on-the-job learning* is probably the most important element of JOPO, for most students. It offers them a new environment in which to succeed, to explore their own personal interests and strengths as well the possibility to create connections with their real life and the subjects learned at school, thus finding the meaning of learning, studying and developing his/her skills. This learning environment also supports students exploring their vocational orientation.

Workplace learning is probably the best way to help students integrate conceptual learning and experience—to stretch toward what they need to know and how they need to act to successfully perform a role in that setting. Workplace learning is *whole person* learning. While learning the math of being at the cashier desk at a restaurant, for example, the student is also incorporating how to treat the customer, how to gracefully handle a mistake in making change, and how to remain calm and helpful in the face of an angry patron who needs a problem solved.

Once together back in the JOPO classroom, students reflect on their on-the-job learning with staff and fellow students. As the fear of being judged minimizes, students begin to feel freer to share what they are learning at their workplaces. They work in a setting where they can expect feedback on what they did well and non-judging reflection on what they can work on next; when needed, they engage in a group brainstorm on how to resolve a problem that arose. Sometimes the reflective conversation back in class is a simple debriefing time, such as when a student felt relieved when the grocer was easy to talk with and offered him a spot in the store for

the next several weeks. Sometimes it involves more; for example, two students showed a video they made while talking with their boss about how he began and grew his small business. Back in class, the students and JOPO staff reflected both on the questioning in the interview of the business owner and on the skill of making and sharing the video on the whiteboard. This could transpire because they had developed a foundation of trust with each other, allowing the students to risk and try new things.

While former students felt it was the most stimulating and meaningful part of their JOPO class learning, one JOPO seasoned teacher also added, when talking about the on-the-job learning in workplaces:

If a youngster gets a very good practice place, I see them start to change. She or he starts to do more and more academic work, and that's the key point of this. It's not just going there and doing some work, but it's very, very rehabilitating. If they get interested there and it's going well, I can see it in school. They are relaxed. They are very proud of what they are doing. They are talking about it, and their mentor. They [mentors] are key persons in many ways, not just in the academic studies, but in self-esteem and the life skills.

This sentiment was bolstered by other JOPO teachers who noted the connection between the workplace internships and the JOPO student's increasing motivation and engagement in academic work.

**Learning camps: building the social-emotional learning foundation.** Teachers stated trust-building and team-building most frequently as goals of the first learning camp. The JOPO students, from comments by JOPO teachers and former JOPO students themselves, are facing challenges of self-acceptance, self-trust, and self-efficacy, as well as a need to build in some important relationship-building and problem-solving skills. The learning camps help launch this process in trust-building and creating a team spirit within the group. One long-time JOPO teacher flatly stated that JOPO could not work without such learning camps, and he tries to hold

as many as six or seven within a school year. The last camp outing is most often used to help the JOPO students reflect on their year, the gains they have made, the new interests they have developed, and to discuss their future plans for both their career direction and further education.

Two JOPO teachers shared in greater detail the activities they often use in learning camps. They both emphasized the need to size up the current needs and dynamic of each new JOPO group in choosing the activities that may offer the greatest help in building the group into a spirited team.

*The intent of learning camps.* JOPO teachers and youth workers described the intention of the learning camps variously as:

- Building the group into a team, especially in the first camp
- To build trust and connection between students, and students and teachers
- To see what roles students can take – to find strengths and weaknesses
- To learn in action with all of one’s senses, to learn self-trust
- To offer a change from traditional school
- To find learning environments that work better
- To build a strong team spirit and learn teamwork skills
- To set a groundwork of having fun together
- To leave positive imprints on students—especially at the end of the year
- To engage them in life-long learning processes

One participant summed up the intention of learning camps as, “You have some activities where you learn to appreciate what you have, work as a part of a team, push your limits, and learn to put back into the community, as well as plan for the future.”

*Sampling of learning camp activities.* The following is a composite list from two JOPO teachers:

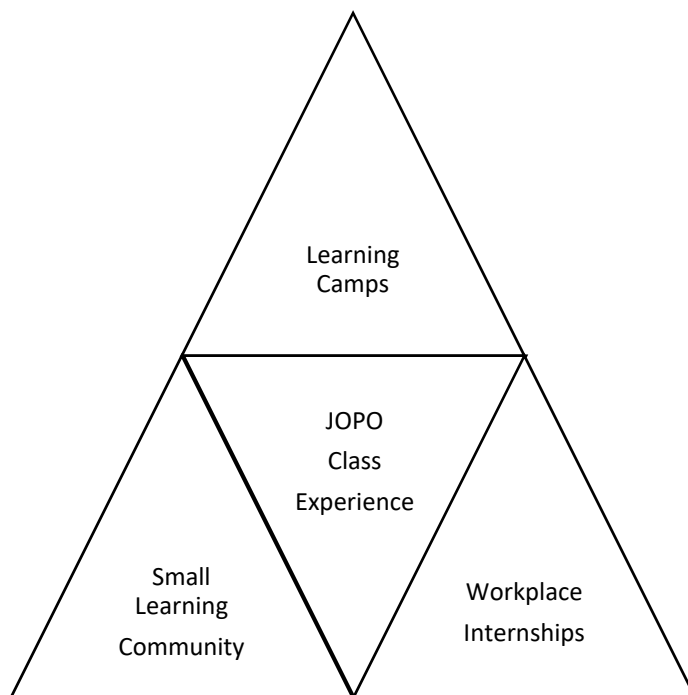
- School assignments—while also teaching accountability and teamwork
- Preparation for workplace interviews—using role plays

- Discussions, discussions—using direct and continuous feedback and assessment/mirroring behavior
- Creative activities—like designing and printing group t-shirts, cooking a full meal together, story-telling
- Mountain climbing, archery, fishing, various sports—linking them to school subjects
- Reflective conversations with group after action activities—teaching reflecting skills
- Use of or making videos, plays or skits—have students do creative projects in teams
- Use of outsiders and professionals to explain things
- Learning to learn from their own discoveries and experience
- Team assignments in nature, berry picking, flying foxes, identifying birds
- Running errands, doing household chores, learning to budget money, cleaning up—accountability, bonding and strengthening teamwork
- Camping out and trust activities –taking shifts to guard the fire, etc.
- Song-writing, folk-singing, or playing music together—jam sessions
- Downhill or cross-country skiing, snow shoe walking, learning about forestry
- Setting up hikes or treasure hunts in the woods
- Intercultural and cross-generational communication

Some schools stressed going far away from the students' normal environment (and away from parents). Other schools liked the option of doing a one-day camp at a close-by youth retreat center without the overnight, but opting for longer stays at the beginning and the end of the school year. Teachers had the freedom and flexibility to design these camps to fit their group's needs. Former students recalled these experiences fondly and as formative events for them.

*Figure 3* (p. 114) shows the triadic relationship of learning in JOPO. It centers on a classroom home-base that becomes a small learning community for academic work and integrating student learning from class learning projects, workplace internships, and activity-based learning camps. Each set of experiences inform and enrich the others.





*Figure 3.* Interacting program components of the JOPO class.

### **Summary of JOPO History and Program Design**

The JOPO class offers a meaningful way of engaging for students oriented to learning by doing and reflecting on that experience, and for students who benefit from an additional focus on social and emotional learning. A combination of a small group and two adults building a learning community together, working academically, experiencing career choice options in a workplace, and building positive social relationships and social-emotional skills in out-of-class learning camps with each other appears to provide a powerful set of new experiences for students who have had little positive support and feedback, and who have tended to consider themselves outside of the circle, not belonging in their school community. The interviews conducted in this study reveal in more detail how the JOPO class is seen by JOPO teachers and youth workers, school principals, and former JOPO students who are now young adults.

## **Interview Findings**

In this case study, I interviewed 35 educators and former JOPO students who were now young adults. The interviews took place over a three-week period in eight comprehensive schools in four areas of Finland during September and October 2016. Two schools were located in small towns (5,000 – 6,000 residents); three schools were in suburban areas of two different cities; and three schools were in inner city sections of two different cities. Those interviewed included 12 JOPO teachers or JOPO coordinators; six principals and one assistant principal; seven former students now over 18 years of age; four youth workers; two guidance counselors; two social workers, and one psychologist. All of the teachers and specialists worked directly with JOPO students. In addition, some principals connected with their school's JOPO class by teaching or meeting with the group on a weekly basis.

I grouped findings from the interviews into three major arenas: (a) societal and community supports for education, (b) learning strategies of JOPO, and (c) the social-emotional learning foundation of JOPO, each carefully woven into the fabric of the total JOPO class experience. This section will describe findings from each of these categories. It will conclude with a summary of how educators described the academic and social emotional learning strategies working in tandem to help support the growth of the whole young teenage person. In Chapter Five, these same findings will be grouped slightly differently, in terms of perceived importance to those interviewed for the study, both JOPO educators and former students.

### **Societal and Community Supports for Education**

Finland understands education to be a human right—the right of every student not only to an excellent education, but also to the pedagogical approaches and special services that support each student's successful learning. After a decade of research and planning, Finland transformed

its education system over the course of three decades beginning in the early 1970s, consciously prioritizing the full development of their human capital as their most valuable resource. To achieve this end, they re-designed their compulsory education system, brought their teacher preparation to a much higher professional level, and developed an unusually high degree of equity in their system. In the first PISA (2000) international assessment (results released 2001), Finland demonstrated the smallest performance variation between its schools and between its students of any OECD participating nation (Sahlberg, 2015).

Respondents described a number of structural supports from the larger society, including education at all levels in Finland being funded by the government. They noted the high cost of a program like JOPO, acknowledging the Finnish Ministry of Education's willingness to invest in such an alternative outreach to its students. JOPO teachers and principals spoke of Finland's strong belief in the inclusion and well-being of each citizen as values informing Finnish public policies. Principals in particular cited local autonomy over schools—in charge of hiring of teachers and special support professionals, school assessment and self-regulation—as providing a flexible undergirding for a strong system, able to respond to local needs. They noted how each community can flex its system and its JOPO class program to meet the needs of its particular student group. Such structural supports provide a rich social soil for programs like the JOPO class to meet various kinds of student needs. Professionals from the local community and school work together in supporting each student.

**Developing human capital.** Finland's commitment to offering an excellent education for each child led to developing a new system inclusive of grades one through nine, the *comprehensive basic school* (*peruskoulu* in Finnish). Elementary and middle schools combined together in the 1970s with greater integration and teachers who sometimes looped with their

elementary students for two or even three consecutive years as they grew. School size in most cases intentionally remained small (typically, 300-450 students), with ample staff. This included teachers and many specialists who offered various kinds of special educational help as well as social work, guidance counseling, and psychology support. Finland committed to offer an excellent education to every student regardless of their socio-economic status, ethnic background or geographic location. Respondents frequently mentioned the importance of inclusion in their education system—the designing of programs with the aim of meeting all kinds of student needs, and leaving no one out. They mentioned the frequency of students utilizing counseling and mental health support as well as guidance counseling for education planning. It became apparent that from early elementary grades, these services are a normal part of the environment that at some point are utilized by a majority of students. According to respondents, such services offering supports to help students move through social, emotional, or academic hurdles are readily available in every *peruskoulu* and every upper secondary school.

***Community inputs.*** Community and school worked together on building their education as well as social service systems. The municipality maintained a team of social workers who came to know students and their particular needs. Sometimes, the community social worker would be the first to suggest the option of applying and interviewing for the JOPO class. The feedback loop is complete between municipality and school. Because municipalities are responsible for their area's education and its community social services, a school or municipal social worker can intervene early with many students on the margins who may be in danger of falling through the cracks. To an unusual degree, both school and community know their students. Respondents spoke of how a student from one school in a metro area may be seeking a new start after having had difficulty academically and/or behaviorally. As not every school

offers a JOPO class, guidance counselors or social workers can help a student apply for a JOPO program in their 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade year at a nearby school. Most JOPO classes have both students from the local school and some outsiders from the area who can be helped across town by a student taxi as needed. One former student spoke of the value of starting the JOPO class in a new school as a “fresh start.”

***Collaboration.*** Working collaboratively forms the heart of Finnish education. Teachers work to build their curriculum together. They reflect daily on how things went – together. Not surprisingly, the Finnish JOPO teachers, youth workers and support staff spoke of being “all in this together,” expressing a shared responsibility for the well-being of the JOPO students. Their comments exhibited a strong inclination to make sure that students “turn out alright” and “find their place” in the society. Teachers, youth workers, and to a lesser degree professional support staff (social workers, psychologists) mentioned having time to be together each day—usually about an hour—where they can plan curriculum, problem-solve things that need improvement or a different approach and reflect on what best meets their students’ needs and challenges. This is an integral part of a teacher’s day, whether they teach the JOPO class or a traditional class. The JOPO teaching team talked of how they interfaced frequently with the guidance counselor, social worker and psychologist on behalf of their students.

***Civic education.*** Civic participation in the community begins when students are in the early grades and continues throughout their middle and high school years. Students also will take a religion or ethics class sometime in their basic education. Participating in the community is a strong theme, and students learning on-the-job goes right along with this ethic of civic engagement. A JOPO class small group made a slide show of their community for elder residents in a memory care facility, showing the town just as it was when these residents were

young. Residents perked up and began talking with each other in reference to some of the slides. The project served both as a skill-building exercise in newspaper research and slide-show development for the students, and a community education service to the elders. One respondent described a vocational high school that maintained its own small art gallery of student work, which rotated to local hospitals, health clinics, and senior living centers. The JOPO teachers noted that a majority of students engage in some kind of activity that benefits their community.

**An ethic of care.** Almost all JOPO teachers and youth workers interviewed emphasized a foundation of care and joy in learning in their class. They aimed to set up their program to engage students again, let them try out and experience things, explore out in the community, and become a small group learning community with their team of two teachers. Their number one priority is to help build (or re-build) a student’s trust—with teachers, fellow students, and with themselves. Two teachers specifically mentioned building trust as one corner of JOPO’s foundation. “Act like you trust them before you know that you can trust them,” said one teacher. “It’s a good investment and gives the student room to prove himself trust-worthy.”

One of the principals interviewed, reflecting on the JOPO class program, described this ethic of care for the JOPO students as “*pedagogical love*,” stating:

It has to be inside every interaction with students. If what you’re doing is not based on love, you’re in the wrong place. It can be hard, but you must have a special feeling for what you are doing. You are here because of the children. They are not here because of you. The only reason you come to school in the morning is for them. It cannot be love of English language or love of chemistry. It must be the children, and their future.

Such an ethic of care creates an atmosphere of safety and invites trust. From there, engagement and motivation and a feeling of succeeding can evolve.

***Sense of well-being and belonging.*** As teachers, youth workers and principals looked at the question asking them to describe “the most important things about JOPO—the ones you

couldn't live without," nearly all mentioned how crucial it is to nurture the students' sense of well-being and belonging. One JOPO teacher stated:

If your student does not gain that feeling of belonging, he or she won't be engaging in your class. We need to establish a basic trust, and help the student shift their self-understanding to 'I belong here, in this JOPO class and in this school.'

Throughout my school visits in Finland, I heard *well-being* and *belonging* mentioned nearly every time I spoke with an educator, either in an interview or informally.

***Finding one's place.*** Nearly all JOPO teachers and support staff—teachers, principals, social workers, psychologists and guidance counselors—expressed their concern that students “find their place” in society. By this, they meant finding the “right fit” –a place of engagement and possible future career that would build on their interests and talents—and help the young person experience a feeling of meaningful engagement and success in their community. The JOPO class used the workplace on-the-job learning experiences to allow the student an opportunity to explore various ways of engaging. “Finding one's place” appears to be a strong Finnish value for the whole society. One former student talked of “finding my place” in discussing how his JOPO experience had helped him figure out what he wanted to do beyond ninth grade, and he felt a new motivation to work harder once he gained clarity on this for himself.

***Abundance of supportive services.*** JOPO teachers, youth workers and support staff described a large number of specially trained staff to support students, whether in traditional classes, JOPO, or special education classes. They acknowledged how labor-intensive the JOPO class program is, and how expensive, but asserted that without the two JOPO staff and 10 students, the program would not work the same for the students. Four respondents expressed concerns about the JOPO class budget in the coming year or two, and also concerns about costs

of the learning camps, hoping that cuts will not occur and students will retain their current level of support. One respondent stated that extra funding of 3100 euro for each JOPO student was added by the state and municipality to the school budget for the extra expenditures throughout the school year.

### **JOPO Class Learning Strategies**

JOPO teachers use different pedagogical approaches from those of the traditional Finnish classroom teacher and employ a greater flexibility in working with each student. The *structure* of the JOPO class design, with learning activities both in and out of the classroom, support these learning strategies. This section describes findings about JOPO class learning.

**Learn by doing.** The learning strategies of the JOPO class begin with action—getting up in the classroom whether working on projects or on individual assignments and getting out into the community. Teachers spoke of “action learning” or “learning by doing” as the basic strategy of the JOPO class. Teachers discussed the importance of students bonding with each other and having fun together, and of flexibility in the curriculum to allow students to learn in ways that work well for them, while keeping their eye on the development of the whole person. A principal credited American educator John Dewey for being “the central thread in the tapestry” of the JOPO experience. “It’s democratic practice, it’s learning by exploring and trying things, it’s flexibility and trust—the teacher and the school—and, without all its pieces, it is not JOPO.”

**Intervene early.** A primary idea of the JOPO class being offered to both 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade students—after JOPO’s initial design for the 9<sup>th</sup> grade student—is the notion of intervening as early as possible when a student has disengaged in class or has just stopped attending school. A seasoned JOPO teacher spoke of “a window of opportunity” for reaching these students before



their disengagement hardened into a lifestyle and their self-story about learning solidified into “I can’t.” It is at this point when assessment of the situation includes additional input from guidance counselors, social workers and psychologists on staff.

At times, according to one principal interviewed, JOPO is considered a prevention strategy even when a student has the academic skills but has lost his or her motivation. “Early intervention aims to prevent academic collapse,” remarked this principal. “Before we would have problems, we tried to make a move,” she stated when discussing the early intervention with the JOPO class as a strategy for regenerating a student’s motivation. Two bright students who had begun to experiment with alcohol and were withdrawing from engagement at school were offered the JOPO class, and then applied for it at her school. Advice offered by leaders at two different schools was to try to intervene when students may be absent more frequently or losing their motivation but have not yet totally given up.

**Invite the student to apply.** Rather than assign a student to the JOPO class, the student is invited to apply. It is an option—a choice presented. This approach tends to make the JOPO class a more viable idea for the student and divorces the JOPO class from an image of a class for failing students. JOPO, according to educators interviewed, has a good reputation, both with students and parents. One principal in the study noted that Finns are also aware that the JOPO class has a higher success rate in improved grades and program completion, than the traditional classes in schools housing JOPO.

If a student decides to apply for the JOPO class, she or he must attend an interview with their parent or guardian present. The JOPO teacher and youth worker attempt to evaluate the level of support that can be expected from the parent(s) as well as the student’s reasons for

wanting to participate in the JOPO class. Some schools reported having room for only one in three or four applicants to the JOPO class. Several former students interviewed stated they were looking for a new start—and a new way to complete their compulsory basic education. Those accepted into the JOPO class thus have at least some motivation to give engagement in school another try, and applying helps locate the students with a desire to return to school in a new format.

**Develop the whole person.** Growth of the whole person—as one grows and develops through the school years—is a value that pervades all Finnish education. JOPO educators articulated this understanding as the core of the JOPO class. The child is at the center of the learning process, and thus learning is individualized; student choice is maximized. JOPO teachers astutely assessed their students’ learning styles, strengths, challenges, and both academic and social-emotional development needs. JOPO teachers devised their own tests and other forms of assessment. Students stated the ways they preferred to be assessed; they could choose to make a video, a portfolio, or a classroom report on his or her work as an alternative to taking a written test on the material covered.

The JOPO teachers and youth workers were just as interested in their students discovering their own interests and motivation to learn as they were about their mastering academic content. JOPO teachers, social workers and guidance counselors mentioned how self-trust, self-initiative, self-responsibility, and the resulting sense of one’s emerging self-confidence are foundational aims of the JOPO class experience for students. The JOPO class is not test oriented, reported one principal, but “Many JOPO students can and do raise their grades one to one-and-a-half or even two grade levels, opening the door to applying for upper secondary

school after 9<sup>th</sup> grade.” One principal noted that Finnish students take their first standardized test at age 15, after completing their compulsory basic education ending in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Make learning flexible.** JOPO teachers are well aware that the traditional classroom has failed these students, and that they need different ways of learning. Indeed, the name JOPO in Finnish translates to mean “the class of flexible learning.” Experiential learning is a primary approach in the JOPO class. Each student’s experiences are different and partially designed by him or her. JOPO educators often refer to its pedagogical style as “action learning.” JOPO teachers stressed the importance of helping a student see that learning by making mistakes and reflecting on them is a valuable way to learn, and mistakes will not be judged. “As students begin to believe this, the class begins to relax,” stated one JOPO teacher.

One participating school offered students a choice of using textbooks in the library or working on laptop computers in class to complete assignments. Most chose the laptops. Students had great flexibility in terms of choosing a workplace in which to learn, and they typically had multiple on-the-job learning experiences during the school year. On-the-job learning—from working in a restaurant to assisting at a horse trotting stable—helped students see the value of math, science and other classroom subjects. Such flexibility allowed for more of a match with a student’s interests and talents. Students universally liked the on-the-job learning parts of their JOPO experience.

**Have fun, create strong bonds.** JOPO educators talk of the joy of teaching and learning and say that both the students and they learn with and from one another. Learning becomes an active adventure in the JOPO program, partly in school, partly out in the community, and partly in the learning camps or “camp schools.” Workplaces become new opportunities to learn both

social skills and practice math and other academic learning. “Practice, reflect, and positive feedback,” said one youth worker, naming the key elements of JOPO. “You try things, discover what you like and are good at, and start to like yourself,” stated a former student. Learning camps develop team spirit and help the teachers get to know their individual students as well as understand their group’s dynamics and how best to work with this particular group. One JOPO teacher talked of how each group has a personality of its own, and can be utilized, if understood, to help bring certain students into feeling included and belonging with the group. Former JOPO students shared about realizing that they didn’t need to be perfect to be accepted, and this helped them accept others in their group as well. “We could let our hair down,” said one young woman in describing her earlier JOPO experience.

**Get out in the world.** Getting out of the classroom to learn on the job is the essence of JOPO. Most JOPO classes have students out at work sites two days a week; one program had one of their classes out for three days a week. The challenges of arranging a workplace internship are many: researching possible work sites, writing a simple script for talking to the boss and requesting an interview, preparing to talk about oneself in that interview, thinking through appropriate language, behavior and dress. Two former students commented on this process being a set of key learnings for them that helped them later in similar endeavors, and helped them feel they could in fact do these steps when pursuing a career position. In a JOPO class I observed, students came back into the class after a two-hour visit out to workplaces and reflected with the two teachers. One small group made a video of their conversations with local business owners, which they shared on a whiteboard back in school. This activity allowed students to gain feedback from adults in small businesses as well as their JOPO teaching team and fellow students once back in class. Frequent positive and honest feedback and reflecting on

learnings out in the student's workplace helped students gain motivation for investing further in trying new things. One former student, reflecting on his JOPO class, said he had never liked theoretical learning, but "I sure liked the same things when put in practice." The difference for him was the direct experience of learning about something, or "learning by doing it."

**Give more choice to students.** Though students in traditional Finnish classes experience a lot of choice about what they are studying and how they want to be assessed on their work, the JOPO class widens the student's choices further. What, how, and when to learn is more open-ended, though the teacher will present subject lessons at certain hours to the whole group. Teachers post the academic work assignments early in the week which are usually due at the end of the week. The choice of when to complete the assignments after the subject classes is up to the student to organize. As explained earlier, many schools have a system known as WILMA, whereby the JOPO class uses a computer-generated card for the student to track their assignments and prioritize when they will work on each subject. Three former JOPO students commented on this greater freedom to choose the "what I am doing when" as a meaningful part of their JOPO experience. Two commented on how this ability to prioritize class work assignments put them more in charge—and entrusted them with responsibility for completing their own work. While completing assignments at school, students could ask for individual help from one of the two teachers or work collaboratively with another student or two. Five of the former students commented on how the individual attention from JOPO teachers helped them master the material and keep moving ahead. One of these former students emphasized how completing work at his own speed kept him in a feeling of success, which further spurred him on. Former students also gave credit to this greater choice for helping them learn self-

management and, along with their workplace assignments, for “helping me find my motivation.” These comments harkened back to the long-held Finnish value of self-reliance at an early age.

**Create safe, non-judging learning space.** Former JOPO students felt more time to work individually or with coaching by one of the teachers when comparing their JOPO small group with their former classroom. One major difference they reported was experiencing the JOPO class as non-judging and a place where one would “not be laughed at for mistakes or labeled stupid.” In the JOPO class students could honestly say what they didn’t know or what they needed to figure out and have someone walk them through the problem. In the safety of this classroom climate, students began to trust and risk and engage.

One JOPO teacher spoke about his experience teaching math. “They often say they hate maths,” (the term for mathematics in Europe) he said. He continued:

But this is simply because they have been scared to ask questions or admit where they may be stuck. I break it down, step by step. I ask one of them to come up and do the problem at the front, and ask others in the class to help as needed. We get through it together.

This teacher also noted how workplace experiences often demand application of math skills and the value of discussing “maths in the workplace” as they work on math lessons in class. Two of the JOPO teachers spoke of students working in pairs, especially on math and science assignments, after the teacher had gone over the material. Integrating experiences in the workplace with academic learning was valued by both staff and former students, as a key to both conceptual learning and student engagement in the subject. Former students recalled collaborating with one another on assignments, special projects, or practicing for an upcoming interview at a new workplace, as making their learning relevant and meaningful.

**Choose highly committed teachers.** To be certified as a JOPO teacher often requires an additional year or more of study beyond the teacher's normal master's degree preparation. This allows the teacher become certified to teach additional subjects, sometimes as many as six or seven. Though JOPO is not formally seen as special education, the JOPO teacher's additional training is most often in special education. Nearly every teacher, youth worker and principal interviewed highlighted how crucial it is to select just the right teachers for the JOPO class. They referred to the sincere dedication of this kind of teacher, his or her willingness to go the extra mile. Two teachers mentioned remaining during the summer break, holding a summer session for those JOPO students who still needed credits to go on in the fall to upper secondary schools. "We sometimes graduate a few in August," commented one teacher. This level of dedication may help to explain the almost 100% graduation rate of JOPO students. "If they show up and engage," claimed one JOPO teacher, "I can see them graduating." On the issue of dedication, another JOPO teacher commented:

Why do I do this? This is the first time in my life, you can ask my wife, that I wake up in the morning feeling that it counts, that it matters. I'm in a process that is making a difference. I'm not the process but I am *part of* the process – you know what I mean? It's a basic need for a human being to feel that you are doing something that is worthwhile —that you're a part of something that's worthwhile.

Nearly all those interviewed stated their firm belief of the need for the two-person team to lead the JOPO class; several felt the program clearly would not work with just one teacher working with these students. In addition to helping in the classroom, the youth worker serves as liaison with the workplaces and their mentors who work with the JOPO students. They also are in charge of arranging the learning camps and organizing its activities. Often, they assume the lead in connecting with the JOPO student parents, though in some settings this responsibility is shared or assumed by the JOPO teacher. Such variation reflects the autonomy of each local

JOPO class program to best meet its own needs. Youth workers agreed that the two-person team anchors the JOPO class for success in learning.

**Go from ‘passenger’ to ‘driver’.** Educators enumerated various goals of the JOPO class as they spoke of the program, including to: (a) help students re-engage in school and complete their 9<sup>th</sup> grade compulsory education; (b) get their certificate (diploma) so they can go to upper secondary school, whether general or vocational education; (c) be accepted at an upper secondary school of their choice (mostly vocational schools); (d) help students discern their future; (e) find their strengths and weaknesses and see what they can achieve; (f) build on their strengths; (g) find their way in life; (h) build up group and individual motivation; (i) discuss and actively work with their weaknesses; (j) develop a consciousness about themselves (self-reflection); (k) see the good in themselves; (l) build back into trust in school; (m) feel like they belong in the school, community and society; and (n) in the words of one JOPO teacher, “most important, to build confidence in yourself—that feeling that you can do it” (self-efficacy). One principal interviewed called this process “helping the student to go from being the passenger to being the driver” in her or his life. The ultimate goal of the JOPO class is the empowerment of its students. This process of building social and emotional learning skills is further described in the next section.

### **Social and Emotional Learning: The Foundation for Well-Being**

Without such a strong foundation of social and emotional learning, the JOPO class could not succeed, according to JOPO staff and principals. Indeed, the classroom environment and the labor-intensive two-person staff team set a tone that allows all learning—and the whole child—to move forward, individually and as a member of a group. It is as if a small group of people



were going on safari together: the vision is clear, a lot will be expected of each team member, and the commitment of the leaders makes it known that “we will get there.” This is the framework within which the JOPO class does its transformational work.

**Create a climate of caring and trust.** Step one is to establish trust where it was not—between the student and teachers, the student and others in the group, and self-trust or the relationship with oneself, as well. JOPO teachers talk about noticing the smallest “well doings” of the student, such as the fact that a student showed up at school; the fact that one attempted the homework; the fact that someone helped a fellow student find something; or the fact that a girl made eye-contact and said “good morning” to the teacher. The littlest positive things are “noticed” back to the student verbally by either leader. Former students mentioned this kind of thing as one of the first things they remembered about JOPO – being noticed, and with positive comments attached. Two former students mentioned not being used to this kind of conversation with a teacher. Without trust, the rest cannot happen, for it will be based on mistrust, says Erik Erikson (1980). Building trust is critical and must be addressed in the beginning, stated several JOPO teachers and a social worker interviewed.

***Trust-building in workplaces.*** The second place where trust begins to grow early in the JOPO class is within the workplaces. Students in most settings needed to use their own initiative to apply for an internship with an employer, requiring a fairly sophisticated set of social skills, which are often rehearsed in the JOPO class before one’s interview at a workplace. In some instances the youth worker or JOPO teacher would nudge, suggest, or brainstorm ideas, but the main task was still left to the student to arrange an interview and convince the supervisor that she or he would be a good choice as an intern. Internships appeared to last from between two weeks to about eight weeks—again based on local needs and decisions. There was something close to

transformative for several of the former students about receiving positive feedback from an adult mentor in a workplace—something very confirming. One former student said she began to feel grown-up when she heard daily positive feedback from her boss at a catering place/restaurant. Another talked about trying really hard to think through how he would dress and talk with customers, and receiving positive feedback from his workplace mentor on these kinds of things. This helped him become “more serious” in his approach at work.

***Trust-building in learning camps.*** A third part of the JOPO class that helped create and augment this climate of caring and trust was the learning camp experiences. School begins in mid-August, and a learning camp outing is usually held soon thereafter. The learning camps aimed to create a feeling of team spirit, collaboratively working together, and acceptance and belonging among the students. It gave students “a feeling of welcome” and “you have a place here.” A JOPO teacher said he tried to convey the notion of “I trust you—and invite you to trust you” even before the student had shown him/herself as trust-worthy. A youth worker stated the importance of getting across the idea of “we are here for you” as the students began the class together and attended their first learning camp. Another idea woven into everything in the JOPO experience was that “you can raise your grades this year” and “you will graduate,” according to both a JOPO teacher and a principal. The learning camps infused a feeling of fun, challenge, adventure, and high expectation into the mix.

**Offer autonomy and choice.** Recognizing both that JOPO students have experienced difficulty in relationships with teachers and others, and many have begun to experiment with negative behaviors, JOPO teachers chose a path of offering greater autonomy and choice to the students to allow them to work toward self-regulation, wiser choices, self-responsibility, and self-initiative. This may sound counter-intuitive, but as some of the longest-serving JOPO

teachers explained, the ultimate goal is not external control by authorities over such behavior, it is to create the space for responsibility and self-reliance to gain a foothold and grow in the person's life, from the inside—a part of becoming “the driver.”

A JOPO teacher spoke of making room for the students to re-work some internal negative messages they may be carrying about themselves, even unconsciously, and to have both honest and positive feedback surrounding them so they can do this work. They want to see these students discover that they really do have talents, strengths, and interests worth developing further, and they want the students to know someone believes in them. Ironically, the student's tendency to rebel and insist “I'll do it my way” often becomes pre-empted and affirmed as a good thing by the staff; JOPO students DO get to do it “their way.” The same goes for a negative self-image: As one JOPO teacher put it, “I noticed some negatives, but I ignored them and gave honest positive feedback on the least little positive things.”

One of the principals interviewed focused on how this class is based on democracy and student input and choice, crediting John Dewey with the bedrock idea of creating the proper social climate in which a student can grow. This does not imply a lack of the need for structure, limits, and student accountability, which JOPO teachers also emphasized as foundational. The style for creating these, however, appeared to combine a teacher's basic curriculum while simultaneously working with student inputs and choices. Respect for the student-as-whole-person was modeled every step of the way.

For these students, in the past, the adult focus has been almost entirely on what is “not right” about them. Further along in the program, when working within a trusting relationship, the JOPO teacher addresses student weaknesses and behaviors that need some modification. A

JOPO teacher described weaknesses and negatives as “mop-up,” explaining that “the great challenge is finding ways to help shift the self-image of the student into a more positive one.” One could argue that the JOPO class, as it is designed, is a form of therapeutic education. The aim is certainly to help the student begin to do a turn-around both in self-understanding and academic engagement. The former students interviewed confirmed that this did happen for them; they gained not only new ideas about what they might do for a career, but also new and more promising understandings about themselves.

**Experience belonging.** In addition to building trust, “if I feel I belong, I can grow.” This sentiment was expressed by several interviewees, including one former student. Belonging and inclusion is deeply embedded in Finnish culture and is talked about in schools as a basic value. The challenge of the JOPO class is taking 10 students who have not felt they belonged in their traditional classroom—and have sometimes been bullied or otherwise excluded—and help them feel that this class is a place where they can and do belong. One class I visited was updating one another on their previous weekend, and describing the primary way they were feeling on a Monday morning. The skill being addressed was identifying and expressing feelings—and realizing it was acceptable to do so.

The learning camps, according to JOPO teachers and youth workers, are another main place where belonging begins to develop. Sports, games, small-group competitions, campfires and conversations around them give space for one to experience “being part of” what’s transpiring. Students who might otherwise never talk with one another in a school setting are found to be staying up late, sharing stories. What has been difficult is the occasional student who misses attending such a one or two day experience with the group, feeling left out of what happened and the team spirit that developed.

Feeling accepted by the teacher and youth worker, taking in some positive feedback that one might never have considered, and sharing stories with others who have their own things they're working on helps create ground for beginning to accept oneself. A former student commented, "We all had something, and it made it easier to feel that you were OK." As students began to experience belonging with their group, they could begin to build positive relationships with each other.

**"Finding my motivation."** This was a phrase I encountered a number of times during my meetings with former students. It seems to be a particularly Finnish way of talking about one's motivation. One student in talking about finding her motivation in the JOPO class, said, "When I came [to JOPO] I had self-confidence, the "can-do" feeling...just not the motivation." Then she added, "I knew that I can do, but I didn't want. In JOPO, I wanted. In my former school, I didn't." Continuing to talk about finding her motivation, she said:

JOPO was a highlight of my life. It changed my life in a bigger way. It develops social, emotional, and motivational skills that you need in the future. The teaching style motivated me—made me want to learn. I gained the chance to work on my own growth as well as school.

Finding one's motivation allowed former JOPO students to begin to take themselves seriously and to look toward the future beyond ninth grade. Four students spoke of how they began to care about bringing up their grades so they could apply and be accepted into a vocational school of their choice. One former JOPO student chose the more academic senior high school (*lukio*). All of the former students applied to upper secondary schools and, with one exception, graduated. The one student who had not graduated was back in school while caring for two young children and was close to completing her vocational high school. Students brought their grades up between one and two grade points, a very significant accomplishment

according to their teachers. Looking back on this change, students attributed their change in motivation toward their future to (a) learning by doing being more interesting; (b) the JOPO class atmosphere being more relaxed; (c) not being judged in class; (d) the small learning group (mentioned by all); (e) realizing “it was up to me what I did with the JOPO class;” and (f) “freedom to study and be assessed on my work in a way that works for me.” In my interviews, I learned that *all* Finnish students by 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade get to choose how they want to be evaluated on their work. Because standardized tests are not utilized to measure progress, students may choose to take a test from the teacher, make a presentation with a poster or written paper, or make a portfolio of work on a project. Presentations might include art work, drama, music or song, video clips, or interviews.

Former students also credited their work placements and the class learning camps outside of school as “helping you get out of your comfort zone” and “experiencing new things,” and working into “a positive team feeling.” Three students spoke of how much safer it felt in the JOPO class. This safety to participate without judgment led to greater confidence and feelings of “I can do this.” Once students gained this kind of confidence, they were off on another pathway. As I listened to these former students, learning to trust oneself and value oneself were the new-found strengths undergirding “finding my motivation” and leading a student toward a feeling of self-efficacy about being able to successfully complete her or his basic education and go to upper secondary school.

**Positive relationships.** The importance of building closer relationships also felt important to former students. JOPO teachers frequently commented this was an area where all the students had much to learn. Students appreciated the learning of skills in building friendships. Some noted that they had struggled to relate well with teachers and other adults.

When asked about the most important things about JOPO, they mentioned “getting to know each other so well,” “making friends”, “getting along so well as a group,” and “you helping friends, and they helping you.” Some of the students had missed learning these skills within their families, and expressed the value of learning to build positive relationships with both peers and adults.

**Self-efficacy: “I can do this.”** Eighth or ninth grade students went from “I don’t care” to “I care about my future and I am responsible for it” in the short span of one or sometimes two school years. This turn-around more often began toward the beginning of their first year in the JOPO class. Learning this from both teachers and former students surprised this researcher. I asked former students about how they discovered the “I can do this” feeling, or a feeling of self-efficacy about succeeding in their JOPO class. Several credited gaining a feeling of “I can” from learning by doing (experiencing the thing or trying it out) and from directly observing the task being done, the two main ways of gaining a feeling of self-efficacy, according to Albert Bandura.

Some former students credited support from their peers in the JOPO class as fostering a feeling of self-efficacy. Another former student reported how feeling affirmed by teachers and workplace mentors added to her self-efficacy. The support of guidance counselors, social workers and a psychologist were also mentioned as adding to a feeling of safety, well-being, and ultimately of feeling able to succeed both academically and in the workplace.

Although each person’s journey through JOPO varied, and although stages or steps experienced by former JOPO students overlapped with each other, the journey toward self-confidence and self-efficacy could be mapped like the graphic shown in *Figure 4* (p. 137). JOPO teachers, youth workers and principals concurred that trust was the most foundational of the stages, upon which the other stages or steps could build once it became established.



*Figure 4.* From trust to self-efficacy: Key elements of the JOPO student journey as described by study participants.

First, it appeared that the JOPO student's feeling accepted and emotionally safe created the ground for trust to grow (step 1). Former students spoke of feeling safe and learning to trust, while JOPO teachers diligently worked to create an atmosphere of safety and acceptance. Former students and JOPO teachers reported that, in feeling accepted and taking in positive feedback from JOPO staff and workplace mentors, they began to trust the adults on their team. The former students credited caring and consistency of the staff and the active rhythm of the week (in class – out of class) as helping their trust-building and learning. They commonly reported feeling relieved that there were just two teachers to get to know.

As the group began engaging, both in the classroom and out at learning camps and workplaces and as trust built among them, students began to feel a real sense of belonging with



their teachers and fellow students (step 2). Former students remembered the experience of support that felt different from their earlier and larger classrooms. This allowed them to take new risks, try new things and to make mistakes without fear of ridicule, and they began to initiate more activity on their own. They reported beginning to trust themselves and take responsibility for themselves (step 3.)

Continuing positive feedback from workplaces and JOPO staff opened up the space for “finding my motivation” as former students reported (step 4). Students were additionally learning how to give their own positive feedback to each other. Motivation appeared to involve becoming internally referenced, where the curiosity and drive began to initiate from the student rather than the teacher. Deci and Ryan (2008a) refer to this as intrinsic motivation. One class decided during this period to make their own group rules about showing up late and using disrespectful language, which were more stringent than those of the teacher. These students showed the self-confidence of creating their own system of moral behavior and accountability for how they wanted to be as a group (step 5). Finally (step 6), the internal realities of the student (feeling accepted, belonging, confident) come together with the student’s external realities (grades improve, upper secondary schools accept the student, friendships grow; prosocial behavior increases) and the student begins to experience a feeling of self-efficacy about succeeding in school, completing 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and one’s future as an upper secondary student. Self-acceptance and self-trust have taken root. By this time, a JOPO student is likely to have interned at least three and perhaps four workplaces, which is helping the student to clarify some career interests and pathways. The student is most likely in a place to expect and to accept future positive feedback, to take suggestions on improvement, to create relationships based on trust, and to allow oneself to “go ahead and just be myself,” as one former student put it. He or she has

experienced some success at motivation and self-reliance. “Finding my motivation” is also about becoming responsible—for oneself and one’s own career interests and learning path. Most have improved their grades, and most have been accepted at a first or second school on their list of preferred schools by the completion of 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Most JOPO students plan to attend a vocational high school. While the “steps” in Figure 3 do not proceed in the same manner for each student, their remarks tell me they reached these touchstones somewhere along the way. Another image that came to me as I sifted through student reflections on their JOPO experience was that of a jet plane on the runway. After lots of input, preparation, and getting the engines revved up, the plane accelerates down a long runway and finally reaches “lift-off.” These JOPO students at some point reached “lift-off.”

Upon completing my interviews at the eighth Finnish school, I found myself still scratching my head as the last JOPO teacher confirmed what all others had told me in each conversation: nearly every student who begins JOPO completes it and gains their certificate for completing their compulsory basic education. When I would ask what percent complete the program successfully, the answer was invariably, “They all do.” Or, “We had one or two in the last several years who did not complete JOPO.” How could this be? The incredible dedication and collaboration of the JOPO staff, combined with tremendous flexibility in “doing what was needed” and the creativity of inventing on one’s feet—including students helping each other—appear in combination to support student success. JOPO teachers conveyed to their students the collective self-efficacy of the teaching staff—their belief that these students could succeed academically. And the ethic of care was in the air. Sometimes it included a JOPO teacher’s staying into the summer to help students get through their last hoops to successful completion of their 9<sup>th</sup> grade coursework. Those young adults who completed their JOPO class several years

ago recalled these kinds of “extra mile” stories of their JOPO teachers and staff. Tirri (2011), a Finnish educator and researcher focusing on whole-person education, confirms the power of educating the whole student—the cognitive, social, moral, emotional and spiritual dimensions, supported by a caring classroom and school environment as a foundation for students to thrive and to live purposefully. She sees teachers needing to find a sense of purpose and meaning in their work and to likewise foster purposefulness in their students. Such meaning and purpose was clearly evident in the JOPO teachers I interviewed.

### **Reflections from Former Students**

Though the thoughts and experiences of former JOPO students are woven throughout these findings, this section brings together some of their additional reflections on (a) the most valuable things gained from your JOPO experience, and (b) feedback or advice to educators who work with JOPO students today. When asked about the most valuable things these students gained, emotional safety, trust in others and in oneself, and new or renewed motivation to learn were most frequently mentioned. Learning in workplaces and the learning camps received credit for much of the personal learning: a feeling of belonging, believing in oneself, and self-efficacy or “the ‘I can’ feeling” were mentioned by five former students. Being proactive or an initiator were mentioned by three former students. Finding motivation was mentioned by all but one former student.

When recalling their most positive experiences, former students most often mentioned learning in the small group, making friends, getting along so well as a group, the team spirit of their class, learning by doing, and the flexible study and learning methods. One respondent stated: “When you don’t have to go and sit in lessons six hours a day, you have more energy to

learn.” Another stated, “I looked forward to being in school with my group.” A third shared, “It became very nice to go to school.”

Several former students recalled the relaxed atmosphere of their class. One former student called it “a cozy, safe place where we began by making breakfast together” and credited this feeling of safety as giving her new ground for beginning to care about her grades and her future. Several also referred to being able to work on their own growth—and “having the space to work things out”—while learning academically and experientially, and how that helped them in the long run. Students credited their teachers and youth workers as caring, dedicated people who had their best interests at heart and who often went the extra mile to support them. They also reported that their principals supported them and their program, and one principal taught in the JOPO class once each week.

### **Advice from Former Students to Educators and Current Students**

Regarding the JOPO class itself, former students recommended that educators:

- Keep fighting for JOPO and its learning camps in the face of smaller budgets.
- Believe in the students; trust them on little things.
- Be patient and positive with the students.
- Help students really begin to believe in themselves.
- Help them find their motivation.
- Keep both teacher and youth worker, making it easier to get help
- Keep the work experiences, to help one to choose what to study in vocational high school.
- Give JOPO students the option to do a project at a vocational high school while still in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, to get more of a feel for upper secondary school and how it will work.

These former students also offered some advice for current JOPO students:

- Be consistent, be there each day.
- Try new things, especially at the learning camps and workplaces.
- Consider career ideas and high school courses as you do your workplace internships.
- Try some new things and get a feeling of “I can do this” – it’s motivating.

These former students are inviting the new JOPO student to attend, risk, and engage with the JOPO class experience.

The feedback from former students spoke to the gains they made and things they appreciated about their JOPO class experience. No one offered negative comments, though there was room in the interview questions for them to do so. These universally positive reports may be somewhat influenced by whom the JOPO teachers invited to interview, but the life-changing experiences expressed by former JOPO students included finding emotional safety, building trust, a feeling of belonging, finding one’s motivation, gaining confidence, and beginning to feel a sense of self-efficacy and success in school. They appreciated the whole-person aspect of JOPO—the chance to grow personally as well as academically.

### **Conclusion**

The JOPO class, at its foundation, is about personal empowerment: empowering students who began the class with little or no belief in themselves and their ability to succeed at school. The combination of two staff working with a small group of 10 students, combined with workplace on-the-job learning and learning camps that build on social and emotional skills, have worked very successfully in the participating schools in this case study. A vast majority of the JOPO students at participating schools continued their education at vocational high schools,

while three to four percent went on to an academic high school. The JOPO teachers or youth workers at most schools in the study followed these students well into their first year of senior high school (10<sup>th</sup> grade), offering support to their graduates to keep on and not give up. JOPO students also know the door is open to return to their 9<sup>th</sup> grade school and visit while in high school, and many do. By 2015, at least 1,850 students throughout Finland participated in a JOPO class each year, and more students apply for the JOPO class than can be accommodated (K. Rajaorko, personal communication, February 7, 2017). A long-time JOPO teacher stated:

The reward for me comes when I see them. They have gone to vocational school or some of them go to academic high school and they are doing well. That's my reward. I would like to find some JOPO graduates from the 1990s to 2000 and then ask them, "What happened in your life?" We know that some of them go to the higher [university] level. It would be a very good research to do that.

The findings seen as most important and emerging themes arising from the interviews in this study will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. *—Karl Menninger*

Community is not present until members experience feelings of belonging, trust in others, and safety. *—Karen Osterman*

The purpose of this case study has been to learn from those directly involved with Finland's JOPO class program how this class fosters and strengthens students' self-efficacy beliefs—their belief that they can succeed at school and graduate from 9<sup>th</sup> grade. This qualitative study utilized interviews with JOPO teachers and youth workers, school principals, support professional staff who worked with JOPO students, and former JOPO students who were now young adults. The study was conducted in eight schools in five regions of Finland, and included urban, suburban, and rural comprehensive schools (Grades 1-9). I sought to understand the process of JOPO class students' re-engagement in school, starting with attendance, building trust, evolving a sense of belonging, finding new motivation to learn, learning to create positive relationships with adults and classmates—and ultimately succeeding in completing 9<sup>th</sup> grade and entering upper secondary school. All former students interviewed had succeed in completing Grade 9 and entering an upper secondary school (Grades 10-12). All but one had graduated from upper secondary school, and the one who had dropped out was back in vocational high school to complete her last year and graduate.

The primary question guiding the study was: How does Finland's JOPO class strengthen their students' sense of self-efficacy in learning—their belief that they can become successful in school and complete 9<sup>th</sup> grade? Sub-questions were: (a) How does the JOPO classroom culture

encourage students to re-engage in learning? and (b) How do JOPO students become responsible for their own learning?

Regarding the primary question about self-efficacy, I wanted to more fully discern and describe how academic and social-emotional learning processes foster a student's re-engagement and motivation in learning and to understand how this leads to a student's self-efficacy belief in being able to complete comprehensive basic education (Grade 9). I also sought to understand how the JOPO class culture helps to empower students in their own learning—helps them go “from passenger to driver” in their life. In this final chapter, I summarize conclusions from the findings, discuss the implications of these findings, relating them back to the theoretical framework and literature, and offer recommendations for educators concerned about strengthening the engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy of disengaged middle school students. I conclude by offering recommendations for future research and some final reflections.

### **Conclusions**

This case study yielded five main themes: (a) through the JOPO class program, Finnish middle school students who disengage or drop out demonstrate resilience and can re-engage in their learning; (b) a small, caring learning community provides the social soil—a term used by John Dewey to denote a positive and growth-oriented learning environment—for JOPO students to begin to trust and re-engage in school; (c) selecting the appropriate JOPO teachers and students are key elements in JOPO's success; (d) JOPO students felt a sense of safety and trust, gained a feeling of belonging in their group, found their own motivation in learning by doing, and discovered or strengthened a sense of self-efficacy—a belief that they could succeed in learning and complete their 9<sup>th</sup> grade; and (e) the triadic dynamic of the JOPO class—the academic coursework, workplace internships, and learning camps—work synergistically to allow



students to move forward in schools across urban, suburban, and rural settings. As they move through the program, JOPO students are growing socially, emotionally, and academically. These findings may be evident to educators who work with JOPO students but are made more convincing by former students sharing their JOPO class experiences and to educators not familiar with Finland's JOPO class.

### **Student Resilience**

A resilience exists even in the Finnish student who appears to have given up or has dropped out of school during his or her middle school years (Grades 7 – 9). In this study former JOPO students reflected on their 9<sup>th</sup> grade year or 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade years in the JOPO class. Each one reported working with two classroom staff during their JOPO experience, and were surrounded by additional staff—guidance counselors, social workers, psychologists, and principals—ready to assist as needed. Given early intervention, supportive teachers and classroom atmosphere, greater flexibility in learning, experiences out in the work world, and activities that strengthen social-emotional skill-building, JOPO students responded positively. The seven former students in the study re-engaged in school and flourished. They brought up their grade-point average, finished 9<sup>th</sup> grade and obtained their basic education certificate (diploma), applied to upper-secondary (mostly vocational) high schools, and continued to 10<sup>th</sup> grade in a new school. These were stated goals of the JOPO classes in this study.

### **Belonging to a Small, Caring Learning Community**

According to JOPO educators, a small and caring classroom of ten students and two staff in JOPO classes fairly quickly became a supportive learning community and was transformative for students who had felt socially and academically on the margins in their traditional class. JOPO students who experienced someone believing in them began to believe in themselves.

JOPO students who felt cared-for began to care about themselves and others. Former students reported “finding my motivation” and teachers reported JOPO students “finding their place”—their way of belonging in the larger community—when discussing their students gaining experience in several possible career areas. A common thread in interviews with JOPO educators was their commitment to the students’ well-being as a person as well as their academic success. The individual attention and other supportive help offered these students demonstrated this student-centered, caring focus. The power of feeling that one ‘belonged’ in their class (and sometimes their school as well) was an unexpected finding; in this chapter’s Discussion, I reflect on belonging as a factor that helped students turn a corner into re-engagement. Additionally, I was surprised to learn that not all students in JOPO classes had failed academically; a few succeeded academically but were there preventively for the extra social-emotional learning support. As with other JOPO students, this required the recommendation of the principal or social worker and the student’s teacher, student and parent agreement, and the student’s application and interview for the class.

### **Selecting Appropriate Teachers and Students**

Respondents considered the training and selection of teachers and youth workers to lead the JOPO class as critical elements in its success. JOPO teachers evidenced a dedication to this group of students, often going the extra mile with them. In talking at greater length with one JOPO teacher about this, he stated that though there is not one national training plan for JOPO teachers, they all have taken further education of some kind in working with JOPO students. Some return to university for further certification in teaching additional subjects, or pedagogical and psychology coursework. Others attend professional in-service trainings to add to their expertise (A. Rousi, personal communication August 12, 2017). A principal stated that the

JOPO teacher must evidence both an open heart and a special commitment for the JOPO students as well as strong pedagogical skills—akin to the “pedagogical love” mentioned earlier by another principal. These respondents appear to be speaking of how the teacher *is present with* the JOPO students. These comments illustrate the dedicated ethic of care and commitment involved in working with JOPO students.

Principals and teachers in the study considered selecting the right students for the JOPO class to be just as important. Students with more significant behavioral issues, mental health problems, or addiction issues needed other kinds of support or rehabilitation programs within the system and were referred to them. Discerning these differences diagnostically contributed to the success of the JOPO class, according to social workers, guidance counselors, and psychologists.

### **Gaining a Sense of Self-Efficacy**

As JOPO students began to trust their teachers and the small group that was their class, they began to feel a sense of safety, and from both class (cooking breakfast or having coffee together) and early outings together (learning camps, first workplace internships), they began to feel they belonged to their class, and with each other. This sense of belonging, together with a sense of emotional safety and trust in teachers, allowed the students to reinvest—slowly for some—at school. The fact that “we all had something,” as one former student put it, afforded students some space to more easily be themselves in their class.

The workplace internships offered a chance to try on adult career roles, and JOPO students reported the feedback from workplace mentors as important to them. They began to feel like young adults and career-wise as workers-in-training when working at a restaurant, pre-school, youth program, home-remodeling business, senior-living center, TV station, horse trotting stable, or an auto repair center. This process of trusting, feeling safe, belonging, risking

new behaviors and attempts at learning, with daily positive feedback from JOPO teachers, helped students build a positive belief—a feeling of “I can” or self-efficacy—that they could succeed in completing their basic education. Though not specifically explored, a group-effect possibly operated here as well, because as the class began to see that this was their teachers’ expectation, they were indeed succeeding. As a group they were on track to complete the year successfully.

### **The triadic dynamic of JOPO**

The triadic dynamic of the JOPO class—academics within a small learning community, workplace internships, and learning camps—had a way of working synergistically to meet students’ needs as they progressed through the school year. From this case study all three components, facilitated by two JOPO educators, worked well across many types of schools—rural, suburban, urban—in five areas of Finland. This is likely due in part to the authority vested in teachers and local municipalities to adjust their programming to local needs and realities. The JOPO class is both flexibly designed for the local area, and flexibly addresses individual learning modalities and student choice, while focusing on learning by doing.

### **Discussion**

How do these findings relate to the literature described in Chapter Two, and to other research that is pertinent in light of these themes? Considered here are the findings and themes of this study as they confirm or cast doubt upon the ethic of care described by Noddings, Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy beliefs, the mindset theory of Dweck, and Gardner’s multiple intelligences. This discussion revisits these theorists and others in analyzing and reflecting on the journey of the JOPO class teachers and students.

### **The Importance of Being Cared-For**

JOPO students who experienced feeling cared-for began to care for themselves, as well as for others. Nearly all former JOPO students reported feeling affirmed and supported, and came

to believe that the teachers were in their corner. When a teacher operates from an ethic of care and creates a supportive class atmosphere allowing a greater feeling of trust, emotional safety and student choice, this *social soil*—as Dewey (Fessmire, 2013) considered foundational—promotes growth, not unlike giving plants in the garden good soil, food, plenty of sun, and water. Things then begin to happen. The trusted student begins to trust. Affirmed young people begin to connect and grow. In the words of a former JOPO student, “When you realize someone believes in you, you believe you can do just about anything.”

**An Undergirding Ethic of Care.** All four of Noddings’ (1992/1995) tenets of the ethic of care—*modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation*—are demonstrated in the JOPO class experience. Students are *noticed* by the staff from day one: every little thing they do appropriately is *verbally noticed* back to them. Some former students stated they had never experienced this kind of positive feedback before. The JOPO teaching team *modeled* positive adult relationships in teaching, planning, problem-solving and resolving conflicts with their students on a daily basis. Students also observed the *modeling* of appropriate workplace demeanor and skills in their workplace mentors.

The JOPO staff would *dialogue* with their students as well, *being with* the students in daily class activities like doing a small-group class project or cooking breakfast, or at a learning camp, stocking supplies, chopping wood and building a camp-fire. Both *intentional dialogue with* and *attentive listening to* students were practiced daily with the JOPO students. *Dialogue* in the small group context allowed teacher and student to “build up a substantial knowledge of one another” allowing them to engage in a “common search for understanding, empathy, and appreciation” (Noddings, 2005a, p. 23). Although Finnish students have a less formal, less hierarchical relationship with teachers—calling teachers by first names for example—the

informal, collaborative feel between teacher and student in the JOPO class is even greater. Student and teacher are *with* each other in the educational process, and teachers often spoke of what they *learned from* their students.

In addition to modeling healthy adult relationships with their students, the JOPO staff also afforded students many opportunities to *practice* an ethic of care themselves. Students practice expressing their feelings appropriately, caring for their class by helping to create and maintain the daily rules, decorating and caring for the classroom itself, caring by collaborating and problem-solving with their classmates in learning tasks, and caring for the community in their intern workplaces.

JOPO teachers also *confirmed* (or validated) their students by raising expectations and articulating belief in their being able to improve grades, graduate, and be accepted to upper secondary school, and helping students to incorporate a vision of achieving these goals. Confirming the other, according to Noddings (1995; 2005a), includes letting one know about the greater self you see within the person, based on a kernel that can currently be seen.

**Receptive attention and empathy.** Attention is of primary importance in care ethics. Noddings (2012) speaks of the carer (or the one caring) as being first of all *attentive*. It is a *receptive attention*, a kind of attention that is open and vulnerable, in contrast to the kind of attention a teacher might give to students in teaching critical thinking on an issue (Bergman, 2004). The one caring puts aside one's own agenda and listens fully to the one cared-for. The feeling response to such deep attention is most often one of *empathy*, which involves both a *feeling with* and fuller understanding (Noddings, 2012; Smith, 2016). This fuller "attending to" the JOPO student was acknowledged by JOPO teachers and recognized by former JOPO students as they reflected on the most important aspects of the JOPO class: they felt "listened to" and

“heard” by their JOPO teacher(s). Being heard and listened to attentively appeared to add to an environment that invited the student to begin to trust and risk anew.

**Social persuasion and a new self-understanding.** Similar to Noddings’ idea of confirmation, Bandura (1977) talks of *social* or *verbal persuasion* from others—one of the four major ways he sees of helping one develop a sense of self-efficacy. The social persuasions of JOPO teachers to their students that “*you will be able to* succeed here, and we’ll have fun doing it,” and “*you will be able to* bring your grades up this year, and graduate from 9<sup>th</sup> grade” demonstrate a powerful belief in the JOPO student. The teachers’ commitment to their students’ well-being and social and emotional skill-building—and being in dialogue with them on these issues—appeared to provide new ground for nearly all students to return to school and reinvest in academic and vocational learning. The teachers’ assumption that JOPO students could succeed academically, combined with positive feedback from on-the-job learning mentors created space for students to begin to see themselves in a new light.

### **Social-Emotional Learning and Re-engagement in Learning**

A central understanding that emerged from this study is the critical importance of social-emotional learning for re-engagement in learning, especially for students at-risk of dropping out of school early. Without an environment where students can begin to trust the teacher(s) and fellow students and feel safe emotionally, nothing new is likely to transpire. Without some connection with at least one teacher and a sense of belonging to the JOPO class, students are unlikely to gain the motivation or will to risk engaging again in learning. Without addressing the very real social and emotional needs of the student, educators are not likely to see the resilience the student has locked inside. Students need the care and attention, the being noticed, the confirming and true statements from adults about one’s capabilities to inspire an increase in their

aspirations. Bergman (2004) described Noddings' ethic of caring as the foundation of education, calling for teachers to *be a demonstration of care*, both with students and other teachers. This includes actively supporting childrens' creativity and invention, cooperation, and democratic participation in their own education. Along the way, the students' mindset about what they can achieve and their motivation to achieve it began to shift.

Zins, Elias, and Greenberg (2003) examined the impacts of social and emotional learning on student success in school and life. Among students who experienced social and emotional learning in their school programs, they found a strong correlation with a higher sense of self-efficacy, a stronger sense of bonding and community, higher academic motivation and educational aspirations, more prosocial behavior, and being more likely to work out one's own way of learning. They found students developed greater trust and respect for teachers, showed improved coping with school stressors, and better conflict resolution skills. The JOPO students' experiences confirmed these findings, and they found room to make new and positive choices.

**Resilience and growth mindset.** The work of Dweck (2006, 2014) on *fixed vs. growth mindset* may shed some light on the notable resilience and new growth in the JOPO student. Dweck (2006) found that those with a *fixed mindset* will take failures in school and slights and judgments by others more personally. They will tend to assume it is something about themselves that is wrong, inferior, or not likeable, and is inherent rather than something that can be outgrown and left behind. The idea of growth is not in their thinking, so they tend to be more defensive, less apt to take risks, and to become more easily depressed (Dweck, 2006).

JOPO teachers and youth workers offered phrases more in alignment with an effort made, a risk taken, progress noticed, or how a student organized their school assignments, supporting a growth mind-set. Implied (and often stated by the JOPO teacher) is, "You may have not done



well in school earlier, but you can raise your grades here with support available as needed, and you will graduate.” Statements like “you’re smart in science” which foster a fixed mindset were not in evidence in the study interviews. Former students frequently acknowledged the positive impact of JOPO staff expressing belief in their learning strategies and efforts. Whether or not staff were consciously using a growth mindset the students demonstrated resilience, and it helped them shift gears on their engagement in learning.

**Changing one’s mindset about effort and challenge.** Both in the JOPO classroom and in the learning camp activities, JOPO teachers transformed the meaning of effort and challenge (degree of difficulty) with the students. JOPO leaders verbally noticed the student’s engagement, effort, and improvement—in other words, they paid attention to the student’s *process* of engaging and learning, rather than the right answers. The idea of growth and developing expertise took precedence over one’s “being smart,” similar to Dweck’s idea of *Not Yet*, in her TED talk (2014). As students shifted into a more open-ended growth mindset, believing that they could improve and further develop, they *became able* to do so. From the interview questions asked in this study, it is difficult to know the range of students’ being able to shift into a growth mindset, but there may have been a sort of group effect as some students moved into an understanding of being able to grow in knowledge, skill-building, and the degree of difficulty in their learning. Growth-oriented messages came from their teachers daily. In their small group, they were *watching each other succeed*—another of Bandura’s four major ways of gaining a sense of self-efficacy (1977). Schunk (1987), who followed Bandura’s ideas in his research, called this *Model Similarity*—the observing of similar others performing and succeeding (or failing) at something; it has a powerful effect on one’s assessment or belief in being able to succeed at something. The old adage: “If s/he can do it, I can do it” is a reflection

of the power of model similarity. For similar others, as JOPO students knew themselves to be, observing their fellow students gain mastery in learning a skill often lent motivation and courage to try it themselves.

### **Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation**

The work of Deci and Ryan (2008) distinguishes between *intrinsic motivation*, or the natural propensity to explore, learn, and assimilate; doing something “because the activity itself is interesting and spontaneously satisfying” (p. 15) and *extrinsic motivation*, doing something because it leads to a particular outcome—performed “to obtain a tangible reward or to avoid a punishment” (p. 15). Their work evolved into the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which examines the connections between relatedness, competence, and autonomy. They state a mindset is created by one’s *autonomy* and *competence* working in tandem (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Further, SDT claims that these three innate human needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—when satisfied, allow one to develop optimal functioning. JOPO teachers focus on developing each of these by offering greater choice in what and how to study (autonomy), arranging two days each week in workplace on-the-job learning to develop a student’s skills and confidence (competence, self-efficacy), and focusing on relatedness with peers and adults both in class and in the learning camps.

While the JOPO students’ motivation may at first have been extrinsic, it soon began to become the students’ own intrinsic motivation that helped them move “from passenger to driver” in building their educational experience. Former students credited the workplace internships as helping them begin to feel their own sense of motivation, as well as the safe feeling of support and non-judgment in their smaller JOPO classroom. JOPO teachers also acknowledged the

positive impact of the learning camps in helping students—individually and as a group—believe they could try new things and express their real thoughts, feelings, and insights.

**Workplaces stimulate student motivation.** Students and JOPO teachers validated the workplace experiences of students as the ones that helped them shape a mental picture of themselves in the future doing something they enjoyed. Not all students had figured out what they wanted to pursue as a career during the JOPO class. Some did. One knew he wanted to work in the media. Another knew he wanted to work with youth. One dreamed of becoming a small business owner in construction, and another aimed to become a vocational teacher. Everyone, however, did some significant sorting out of what they enjoyed and what was not of interest to them by moving through the workplace internship roles. They credited the safety of the program as a main contributor allowing for trust and a feeling of belonging, and both the workplace internships and the learning camps as helping them with positive relationships, feeling “more grown up,” and giving them a feeling of success.

The interviews with former JOPO students, corroborated by JOPO teachers and other educators, indicated that the JOPO experience helped students build a new and more positive view of themselves and a belief that they could succeed in school—self-efficacy and a sense of agency. Former students in the study did in fact succeed and completed 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and all were accepted to an upper secondary school for Grades 10—12.

### **The Importance of Belonging**

Former JOPO students reported the impact of beginning to feel like they belonged in the JOPO class, saying it helped them to engage, apply themselves, ask questions, try again, and ask for help. They reported feeling it was worth working on a project or paying attention in class and attempting to do the assignment. I had not anticipated the power of this feeling of belonging

for the students, and thus had not reviewed literature specifically about students' feeling of belonging and its impact on school engagement, risk-taking, and coming to believe they could succeed in school. Reflecting on this, it appears evident that 'feeling like one belongs' is a central pillar of what makes things work for a JOPO student. Without a feeling of belonging, who is going to try hard or risk much? Who would return to school tomorrow when one struggled to gain competence today, or failed a test? Belonging serves as a lifeline for the student to his or her learning group. Implicit here is that there is enough of a feeling of emotional safety and trust for the student to risk and engage with the group. The students' growing sense of belonging may be the first evidence that a true learning community is evolving.

Osterman (2000) in fact defines a sense of community as a feeling of 'belongingness' within a group. She states, "Community is not present until members experience feelings of belonging, trust in others, and safety" (p. 323). Osterman's research establishes that students' experience of belonging and acceptance is connected in important ways with their engagement and performance. She concludes:

We can also establish that, while kids care about the quality of peer relationships in school, many do not consider themselves to be part of a supportive student community and have relatively few opportunities in the school day to interact with one another. (p. 323)

The JOPO class offers them that opportunity. Discovering a sense of safety and trust in the JOPO class allowed students to gain a feeling of belonging, a critical step on the path to finding one's intrinsic motivation to follow one's own interests in learning. As students moved through the school year, the belief that they could succeed at school grew—this time, not from the required curriculum but from their natural preferences and experiences gained both in and outside the classroom and their teachers' verbal persuasions (Bandura, 1977) that they could

succeed. For this group of students, learning by doing was their ticket to self-efficacy beliefs about being able to succeed, and opened them to their actual success in learning.

Bouchard and Berg (2017) conducted a study of students' school belonging in Grades 4 - 8, comparing the perspectives of both teachers and students. They built on Goodenow's (1993) definition of school *belongingness* as "a sense of being accepted, valued, and encouraged by others and of feeling included in the life and activity of the class or school (Bouchard & Berg, p. 108). After reviewing a number of studies on belonging, they concluded:

The underlying consensus of belonging research indicates that students who feel a sense of belonging to their school environments are more likely to develop positive psychological, academic, and social outcomes and better overall health and well-being when compared to students who feel unsupported and disconnected from their school. (p. 109)

Their distillation of research findings from studies on belonging show strong evidence of a relationship between one's sense of belonging at school and effects on motivation, academic performance and affective well-being. Walker (2017) an American teacher in Finland, devotes a whole chapter in his recent book on belonging, considering ways that teachers can foster belonging in their classroom: celebrating students' learning—teachers and students pursuing a challenging goal and celebrating their work *together*, and 'buddying up'—older students helping younger ones—and beginning to see their care making a difference, being just two examples.

**Positive relationship between teacher and student.** Bouchard and Berg (2017) noted the importance of a positive relationship between teacher and student, citing an international study confirming the teacher-student relationship having the strongest impact on student belonging in school. Students reported "feeling known" by their teacher as what helped them feel like they belonged in their class or school (p. 110). The study confirmed, as did this current

study, that schools as relational communities carry a responsibility for their students' social and emotional needs as well as their academic growth.

Teachers do not always correctly assess their students' feeling of belonging. "As a result, teachers may underestimate, minimize or potentially ignore indications of a student's struggling to integrate into the classroom or school" (Bouchard & Berg, p.113). In working with a JOPO class or similar group of students, cultivating this special sensitivity by the teacher will make an important difference to a student not yet comfortable or feeling accepted in their class group.

A few years earlier, Osterman (2000) studied students' needs for belonging in their school community. She raised the question of how well the school, as a social organization, creates a sense of community, defined as "a feeling of belongingness" (p. 323). She stated that trust in others, feelings of safety, and members experiencing a feeling of belonging are necessary for a sense of community to be present. This sense of community was confirmed by statements of JOPO teachers, youth workers, and guidance counselors who worked with the JOPO students, and by the former JOPO students in talking of their needs and how the JOPO class assisted them. On Maslow's hierarchy of human needs (1943/2013), the primary life need and challenge after survival needs are met is that of belonging. Once that need has been met (i.e., one feels a sense of belonging), one can move into new territory which Maslow terms "self-actualization." Though some have questioned the exact order of the hierarchy of needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Diener & Tay, 2011), the issue of belonging seems to be a necessary gateway to proceeding to the higher levels of one's development.

Osterman's study also showed that those who feel accepted and secure are more likely to demonstrate a sense of autonomy and self-regulation, while those who feel rejected often act less independently and are unable or unwilling to act within class norms. Former JOPO students

talked of their teacher as feeling safe, or the class as “cozy,” where “I could be myself”; the same former students talked of “finding my motivation” and “caring” about their schooling and their future.

**Autonomy and choice.** Deci and Ryan (2008b) compared teacher’s styles, in terms of a controlling communication style versus an autonomy-supportive style. They found students to be more intrinsically motivated, “being curious, preferring challenges, and making independent mastery attempts” when teachers supported student autonomy, and also “felt more competent at schoolwork” and demonstrated higher self-esteem (p. 18). They concluded that greater learning and performance outcomes resulted from teachers’ autonomy-supportive style than from the controlling communication style. Though self-initiative is common in traditional classes in Finland, the design of the JOPO class helps to augment a student’s autonomy by giving greater choice to the student on when and how to complete their learning assignments. Students liked this aspect of their class. The flexibility and greater choice may have led to greater intrinsic motivation of JOPO class students.

### **From Passenger to Driver**

Students who interviewed for this study in their late teens and twenties described the things that helped them most: finding a “safe” space or class where they could be themselves and share their thoughts, feelings, and real experiences; beginning to trust others and themselves as well; finding a feeling of welcome and belonging in the JOPO program; finding a new, intrinsic motivation to learn; and beginning to discover a new self-esteem, sense of competence and self-efficacy in their ability to learn. Students began to experience their own voice and personal power through these shifts and began to move from feeling like a passenger (a passive person, waiting for the teacher’s direction) to feeling like the driver in their life (being able to make

things happen and collaboratively checking in with the teacher). Student reports of “finding my motivation” appear to signal a turning point into greater self-directed action and learning. One might also use the term “finding my sense of *agency*” to describe students as they turned this corner. The JOPO class gave them room for this empowerment process to unfold with strategic support (not too much, not too little) from its faculty.

**Outreach and inclusion in society.** Finns highly value the inclusion of everyone in society—everyone “finding their place.” It is not acceptable for a student to drop out or remain unemployed after searching for work without formal follow-up assistance to help that person re-engage, find a way of belonging to the society, and gain adequate skills to earn a living. In 2012, to address the growing number of unemployed job seekers between 20 and 29, the Youth Guarantee in Finland was launched to offer further education, training and employment placement, paid for by the state (Finnish Ministry of Education, 2012). Each unemployed young adult who has completed their basic education (9<sup>th</sup> grade) is offered a study place at the next level, or job training, with a particular focus on vocational education. Those with a particular qualification certificate are offered employment.

***Each child is important.*** It is not surprising that teachers and school social workers reach out to locate the child who has stopped attending school; it fits in with Finland’s ethic of caring for each citizen. The attitude is one of active caring and bringing resources to the one who seems at risk of falling out of inclusion. It might be that the simple act of reaching out, showing that one cares for this student to find the right resources to succeed, may actually offer a lifeline of hope to the learner excluding himself or herself from school.

***Every citizen is important.*** Could it be that developing multiple resources for citizens with varying needs provides a stair-step toward new development for many people in the



country? Each child, and each adult, is important in this culture; developing to their highest level is valued—for the individual person and for a high-functioning, well-educated and skilled society. Noddings' ethic of care is seen here at the individual and societal level.

### **Returning to the Study Question**

Let us return to the original study question: How does the Finnish JOPO team strengthen the self-efficacy of their students? A principal called the JOPO teacher's approach as one of "pedagogical love." It means changing the way one teaches so that each person learns. It begins with the teaching team's dedication, operating from an ethic of care, supported by the principal. The teachers trust the students before the students have learned to trust themselves. They demonstrate their belief in the students before the students believe in themselves. They create a small classroom learning group that feels like a safe home base, where students can "be real" as one former student said, and where a feeling of belonging grows.

The JOPO students continue their learning in community workplaces and on trips out in nature, setting the ground for teambuilding and a sense of belonging. The teachers honor a student's multiple intelligences—and especially their preference for learning by trying things out and direct discovery. They create a democratic classroom with student input and expand student choices and autonomy. They create space for students to learn self-reliance and to take self-responsibility for their own learning with the WILMA system. They tell them on day one: you WILL be able to succeed here, and you WILL be able to complete 9<sup>th</sup> grade and go on to upper secondary school—one of Bandura's four avenues to gaining self-efficacy. They help students move from their fixed mindset—the self-talk of "I can't"—to a growth mindset, of *developing* one's understanding and intelligence through experience, effort, and asking for help. Teaching in an atmosphere of teamwork, giving permission to ask for help and to help one another, and

emphasizing learning from mistakes, the JOPO team enables each student to go “from passenger to driver” in their schooling and in their life.

### **Comparing Finland with Other Education Systems**

In the U.S., students too often are not systematically followed up by school personnel when they disengage from their learning in school or leave school altogether. These students are vulnerable to joblessness, homelessness, hopelessness, and entering the criminal justice system (Forman, 2017). As I was conducting this study, I became aware of some of the differences seen in the Finnish education system with those of other well-known education systems including the U.S., the European nations, Australia, Japan, and South Korea. Sahlberg (2015) describes the reform efforts of these systems together as the Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM. These more hierarchical systems frequently use standardized tests to see where students are in their learning. What characterizes these systems are moves toward increasingly centralized, standardized, and efficiency-driven innovations, with bureaucratic controls to ensure standards are enforced (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Sahlberg, 2015). Finland, during the same period, moved toward increasing teacher professionalism and giving more control to the local municipalities and the educators in each school within it. Finland was also building on their wisdom of “teach less, learn more” and, though pre-school is free and used by nearly all citizens prior to entering school, its curriculum is based on play, the joy of discovery, and building strong social and emotional learning for each child to begin first grade at age seven. Finland continued the trend of free time once in school, giving ample break-times for students (and teachers) to re-group, spend time outside, and get a little physical activity into their day. Teachers created their own tests to measure their students’ learning and allowed student choice on their preferred ways of being assessed—a portfolio of work, a created video, a class presentation, or the test.

This loosely-grouped set of education systems was also examined by Hargreaves and Shirley (2012), comparing several levels of more traditional education systems with more innovative ones, calling these the “Global Fourth Way.” Finland, California, and Singapore are noted as “Fourth Way” education systems that encompass a broader range of learning for all kinds of learners. Testing is less frequent and by small samples; teachers develop curriculum together within and across their schools; and accountability is collective rather than vertical. Fourth-Way schools lead by inspiring and transforming students through their education; “teaching is mindful and truly personalized” (p. 10).

Table 2 (p. 164) is a compilation from Sahlberg (2015) and several other sources, including teachers and principals interviewed in 2015 and in this study, that may help distinguish some basic differences of policy and focus in education between other advanced (mostly western) nations and Finland. There are some exceptions to the general emphases, but it is the total picture that carries impact. Finland’s focus on the child and the personalized approach to learning as well as the professional authority vested in educators stands out; collaboration is built into the system. Western systems reveal a more hierarchical and standardized approach, relying on standardized testing for feedback; competition is built into the system. Competition exists in smaller ways in Finland and collaboration is present in smaller ways in the U.S. and other western systems.

Table 2

**A Comparison of Education Reform Policies in Western Nations with Finnish Education Policies**

<b>Global Education Reform Movement</b>	<b>Finnish Education System</b>
School Choice	Public School Excellence & Equity
More Time in School	Less Time in School
Teachers Implement Pre-set Curriculum	Teachers create curriculum
External Evaluation	Self and Local Municipal Assessment
Focus on STEM and Literacy, Numeracy	Focus on Liberal Arts and Whole Person Development
Emphasis on Competition	Emphasis on Collaboration
Lower Support, Higher Stress	Higher Support, Lower Stress
Standardized Testing	Personalized Teaching
Standardized Curriculum	Flexible Learning Approaches
Test-Based Accountability	Trust-Based Responsibility
Curriculum-Centered Learning	Child-Centered Learning
Teachers Work and Plan Individually	Teachers collaborate, Reflect and Plan Curriculum Together
Teachers Manage Their Classrooms	Children Learn to Take Responsibility for their Learning in Class
Several Five to Ten Minute Breaks Daily	Five to Six 15 Minute Breaks Daily
Few Times Outdoors	Frequent Times Outdoors
Hierarchy of Staffing and Policy	Staff Team Creates School Policy Together

Compiled from Hargreaves & Shirley (2012); Niemi et al. (2012); Sahlberg, (2015); Walker (2017); and Finnish educators interviewed by Bonafield-Pierce (2015; 2016).

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study has several potential limitations. First, although I interviewed all seven former students who volunteered for the study, they were selected and invited by their former JOPO teachers or principals. They universally offered positive experiences with their JOPO class, though most also described their challenges openly and thoughtfully. Those who may have had less favorable experiences or negative opinions might have either not been invited, were not still in touch with JOPO teachers or, upon being invited, had been reticent to participate in an interview. Students who did choose to interview with the researcher may have been motivated by wanting to share positive reflections on their JOPO experience. Additionally, one might speculate this about the JOPO teachers, principals, and other staff who chose to be interviewed: those with the most positive experience with the JOPO class may have chosen to participate in this study, or conversely, schools with less success with their JOPO students may have chosen to pass up an invitation to participate in this study.

Second, the study was conducted in just five areas of Finland, and findings may not be generalizable to all other social contexts. What does the JOPO class look like up north with the Sami population, for example? How has the program brought students back into their schools, and what differing experiences or barriers might there be? How might the JOPO class look different in eastern Finland, or in schools with greater numbers of immigrant students?

Third, there is the issue of how replicable this program might be in social contexts differing from the one in Finland. One must consider the “social soil” (Fessmire, 2007, p. 26) of Finland, a nation that shows the highest equity within and between schools of any nation when measured on the PISA international test (OECD, 2001). Finland highly values and economically invests in education with resources appropriate to the needs of every child and places a priority

without judgment on identifying a student's special needs and offering appropriate help early. Social-emotional learning forms a powerful base on which to build at school, since special academic help, social work, psychology, and guidance counseling are all readily available in each Finnish school. Resources go to the schools where student needs are the greatest. Teachers have completed research-based master's degrees and the educational cost is covered by the government. There is an understanding that teachers will collaborate regularly in building curriculum and solving common problems, and time is made available for it. For education systems without such supports and cultural norms, instituting a similar program would likely present different challenges. Though its effectiveness has been demonstrated, the high cost of labor-intensive staffing utilized in the JOPO class—two educators working with 10 students—might be difficult to obtain in many education systems. Finland sees programs like the JOPO class as an investment in individual students as well as in their communities and in the human capital development and ultimate well-being of the nation.

The forerunner idea for the JOPO class originated in New York City in 1972 as an alternative more experiential high school program, and the City-as-School has grown from fifteen to over 50 students who have access to 500 workplace internships. The program, part of a Grade 10—12 public high school, appears to be thriving in the multicultural context that is New York City. The JOPO class idea can be adapted, but the process of refining it to fit well as a best practice within one's cultural context may take several years, as it did in Finland.

### **Recommendations**

I found scant information about the JOPO program in the literature when I began my search. Since then, some informal material has appeared online, such as presentations at

conferences or Facebook pages put up by various JOPO classes. The longer reports on JOPO from 2006 and 2008 were in the Finnish language only, with the exception of the abstracts. This highly successful program needs to be shared with the wider education community and in education journals. Below are a few suggestions.

### **Recommendations for Practice: Finnish Educators**

I recommend that Finnish JOPO teachers and principals present more of what they understand to be best practices with their JOPO students at international conferences for educators. I would also encourage Finnish educators to collaborate with school systems in other nations that are working with this population of students—those on the edge of dropping out by 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Consulting with university teacher education programs outside of Finland to share learnings from the JOPO program would help extend the JOPO class wisdom and best practices. Former JOPO students sharing more of their stories on their journey into adult life—in writing, shared back with their former JOPO teachers, or in person—and what most helped them would offer helpful reflections for young teachers-in-training to consider as they prepare to teach.

Include an in-depth discussion on the culture of the school and of the JOPO classroom, as well as the societal supports that help these remain in place when working with—or writing for—an audience outside of Finland. JOPO was adapted from a school in New York City, yet it took about 12 years of refinement by committed teachers until it became an adopted program in Finland. Adaptation and refinement to one's cultural context will take some time.

Create educational materials, possibly including some made by JOPO students themselves, including reflections on the JOPO class process by teachers, youth workers, and former students, parents, guidance counselors. It would be beneficial to have JOPO teachers

give presentations to teacher education programs—in Finnish universities and in locations outside of Finland.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

With the Finnish Ministry of Education's formal introduction of JOPO classes in 2006, and initial evaluation in 2008 that then invited expansion of JOPO classes to all parts of Finland in 2008, Finnish schools now have a solid decade of experience offering the JOPO class to middle school students on the cusp of prematurely dropping out of school. The Finnish Ministry of Education or Finnish National Board of Education may want to gather cumulative experience from a greater number of municipalities toward a ten-year reflective assessment of how the JOPO class has worked in various parts of the nation. The insights gained may assist Finnish educators as Finland continues to experience a greater diversity of students entering their education system. This more longitudinal assessment would be valuable to educators outside Finland working with this student population.

I became aware of a somewhat informal JOPO teacher network while visiting Finnish schools participating in this study in fall, 2016. I would encourage members of this network to collaboratively discuss and write their reflections on working with JOPO students—their challenges, learnings, and best practices—and publish these. Studies that tell more about how things have developed longer-term in these students' lives—as suggested by a participating JOPO teacher in this study—would be of help especially for new JOPO teachers or those engaged in teacher education. This study listened to those who successfully completed JOPO and went on to upper secondary high schools. Listening to those who dropped out of the JOPO class and discovering the life choices they made since then would provide a contrasting long-term study of value. Hearing the experiences of former JOPO class students in their own words



would add wisdom on what has had some of the strongest positive impacts for them, and what might be further refined for some students.

This study did not concern itself with any of the parents of JOPO students, yet parents or guardians play an important role in their student's success in the JOPO class as well. Finnish culture involves reading with children at home and families having regular contact with their children's teachers (Burridge, 2010). A study about JOPO students' parents and their potential influence on student success in the JOPO class would contribute an important addition to a fuller understanding of the challenges and supports of the JOPO class program.

This study did not examine what happens to the JOPO student who fails to engage, or engages for a time, but does not develop a sense of motivation and self-efficacy belief about being able to succeed and finish 9<sup>th</sup> grade. I recently received a 2007-2008 report from the Finnish Ministry of Education in Finland on the first year (2006 - 2007) of the implementation of JOPO classes. In its English introduction, it states that approximately ten percent of students failed to complete their 9<sup>th</sup> grade JOPO class and cited family factors as a main reason for a student's failure to complete the class and graduate. I have included this brief report as Appendix E in this document. It is now ten years into the wider implementation of JOPO in Finland, and the program has been more fine-tuned in various settings. Further research on what happens to JOPO students who do not complete and graduate from 9<sup>th</sup> grade would help educators learn what other resources may have supported them and about the quality of their lives today.

Finally, having noticed the importance of the *presence* of an affirming teacher in this study as a steadying influence in the success of this program for its students, I would hope that future studies could examine this variable further. What personal qualities of the JOPO teacher

are seen as most helpful to JOPO students? What is the effect of *noticing* in small detail the efforts and good deeds of a student who may have not felt ‘noticed’ before?

### **Closing Reflections**

The JOPO class, as captured through 35 interviews in eight schools in Finland, has by several measures shown itself to be highly effective with 14 to 16-year-old Finnish students. JOPO students re-engage in school, begin attending regularly, participate in off-site learning camps, find and complete several workplace internships, bring up their grade-point averages, apply and find acceptance at upper secondary schools, graduate with their certificate (diploma), and begin the next year in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. All schools but one reporting this graduation rate for “virtually 100%” of JOPO students, and the other reporting for “at least 90%” of its JOPO students meeting these goals. Though this case study involved learning more deeply about how a program in Finland helps students who are on the brink of dropping out of school, I hope this research effort stimulates educators outside of Finland to think more outside-the-lines of already established programs to attentively listen to the needs and interests of these students, and to consider how learning by doing and an ethic of care can form the foundation for living and learning in one’s classroom and school.

Because this case study revealed quite positive results, it may appear to be easy to set up and lead such a program for this vulnerable population of middle school students. However, none of the respondents spoke of being a JOPO teacher, coordinator, or adjunct professional as easy. Teachers spoke of the great challenge it is to be a JOPO teacher whose students work at overcoming sometimes seemingly impossible barriers and go on to not only gain their basic education certificate by completing 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but elect further education for themselves. They spoke of it as making a difference in the lives of young people, as caring unconditionally, and as

a vocation. They spoke of it as “pedagogical love.” After all of my analysis and reflection, this is the rock with which I am left, and what seems to contribute to a student’s transformation: the JOPO teachers and support staff unconditionally *being* in their students’ corner *with them*—with receptive attention and empathy—as they slowly turn their lives around.

One also notices that the JOPO class experience is related to a student developing a greater consciousness, evidenced by their greater self-awareness and self-acceptance. Though this study did not focus specifically on growing in consciousness, it appeared from conversations with former students that some kind of “aha” moment happened, where one began to understand oneself differently, and began the process of going “from passenger to driver” in one’s life. This case study involved my witnessing stories of students’ empowerment—as learners, and as whole persons.

The JOPO class enjoys strong economic and cultural support from Finland’s education community. The process of adapting aspects of this program would best be done in consultation with those who have worked with JOPO students in Finland and with evolving the JOPO class program over time. Successful implementation in another cultural context would also require deeper study of what resources are available in one’s own country to successfully support such an educational effort. Yet, imagine a world where all students are offered an education that fits their needs, interests, and learning capacities, and supports their growth and development to the fullest. What a world it would be!

## Post Script

***THE WILD HORSE OF LIVING***

Holding too tightly to the reins  
Of our imagination and powers,  
We waste our chances.  
Trying to defend old ideas,  
Riding our usual choices,  
We take away much growth and drama  
From the wild horse of living.  
We MUST acquire a new viewpoint –  
It is a crushing weight to not  
Admit the limits of old ways.  
Don't lose your sense of wonder –  
It opens new doors to ways  
Of loving and living.  
We need mystery  
To keep us alert,  
Questioning and romantic!  
Wonder is the seed of philosophy,  
Not-knowing the bridge  
To adventure and discovery.

--G. Miller Haskins, 1997

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide Form

#### The Three Interview Guides

#### 1. Interview Questions for JOPO Teachers and JOPO Youth Coordinators (program heads)

ID # \_\_\_\_\_ School # \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Transcribe Date \_\_\_\_\_

1) Tell me about your role with the JOPO program here. How long have you worked in the JOPO program?

2) Please describe the goals of the JOPO program.

3) How would you describe the success of JOPO in meeting its goals?

How do you measure success in the program?

[Ask whether there are follow-up studies? Where published?]

4) How long can a student be in JOPO? [It appears to cover grades 7-9, and the 10<sup>th</sup> optional grade.] What is the usual length of time a student spends in JOPO?

5) What social and emotional learning are you hoping to engender in the JOPO student?

[self-esteem /self-efficacy/self-confidence/empathy/collaboration/pro-social behavior/persistence/growth-mindset]

6) How do you go about helping to cultivate this social emotional learning?

[What are the top factors or activities that help strengthen one's self-efficacy?]

7) Describe certain kinds of students who tend not thrive in the JOPO program? Contrasting with this, what kind of student is most helped by JOPO?

- 8) How would you describe your greatest challenges in teaching JOPO students? [Ask for a story].
- 9) What do you count as your greatest victories [successes] in working with JOPO students? [Again, ask for an experience or story].
- 10) What percentage of JOPO students graduate from Peruskoulu (9<sup>th</sup> grade)?
- 11) What percentage of JOPO students go on to upper secondary school?
- 12) Of these students, what % choose the vocational high school, and what % the general upper secondary school?
- 13) Do you know what percentage of your JOPO graduates complete vocational or upper secondary high school?
- 14) How, if at all, would you change JOPO to be more effective with students?
- 15) What are the top things you would make certain to keep in the JOPO experience for students?
- 16) For those educators who are learning about JOPO now, what would you want to make sure is shared with them?

**2. Interview Questions for Principals** [all of whom are also teachers as well]

- 1) From your perspective, what are the essential parts of JOPO that help students feel greater connection and belonging in school? [expand, ask for examples]
- 2) From your perspective, how does JOPO help students to greater engagement and motivation in their learning?
- 3) From your perspective, how does JOPO help to strengthen a student's sense of self-efficacy or personal agency at school?



- 4) How do you know a student is re-engaging or re-investing?
- 5) How do students tend to change academically while they are in the JOPO class?
- 6) When can a student select into a second year in JOPO? How often does this happen?
- 7) How would you change JOPO, if at all? [what would you add, let go of, etc.]
- 8) Who studies and evaluates how JOPO is helping students? What studies are published?
- 9) What reflections does this conversation raise for you about JOPO?
- 10) What questions do you have of me, or about this study?

### 3. Interview Questions for Former JOPO Students [now 18 to 26 years old]

**ID#** \_\_\_\_\_ **School #** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date Transcribed** \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) I understand that you participated in the JOPO program in your middle school experience. What grade(s) were you in JOPO?
- 2) What are some highlights / key memories you have from your JOPO experience?
- 3) What were some of your most positive experiences in the JOPO program? [ask for stories]
- 4) Was there a meaningful person [or persons] connected with JOPO that helped you? Can you describe that situation a bit more?

- 5) What were some of your least favorite experiences? [some of the greatest challenges]
- 6) What would you say JOPO was trying to offer to the students?
- 7) How well did JOPO offer these experiences to you? [ask for examples]
- 8) How did the JOPO program help you feel more able to meet academic requirements? [If yes] Can you share a story about that?
- 9) How did the program help you feel stronger [more able or confident] as a person? [If yes] What do you remember being helpful to you in this regard?
- 10) If you were going to offer advice to the JOPO current teaching team, what would you want to make sure they heard from you?
- 11) In what ways did JOPO help you clarify your career choice? Can you share a little more about that? What kind of work are you doing now?
- 12) For those educators who are learning about JOPO now, what would you want to make sure is shared with them?

## Appendix B

### Invitation Letter to Principals

Dear

I am writing to invite you and your school to participate in a qualitative case study focusing on Finland's JOPO class. This study will take place in two metropolitan areas in Finland **between September 22 and October 14, 2016**. I am a doctoral candidate in educational leadership at the University of St. Thomas, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.

After visiting numerous Finnish classrooms in April, 2015, I found the JOPO program to be a valuable alternative learning format for students at risk of dropping out of school. This is the student group I have worked with for the past seven years in Minneapolis. Here in Minneapolis, I also engage in social-emotional learning research, and how to bring more of this learning into our public schools in grades 1 through 8. My research interest focuses on what helps students at risk of dropping out strengthen their sense of self-efficacy and re-engage in learning. Among the theorists who inform me are John Dewey, Nel Noddings, Howard Gardner, Albert Bandura, Paulo Freire, Carol Dweck, Lev Vygotsky, and Susan Engel.

Because you are an education leader who houses a JOPO class, I would like to invite you to participate in this study as well. I would appreciate your perspective on this unique program. I also hope to interview JOPO teachers, youth coordinators, and possibly, former students who are now young adults, to learn more about their reflections on this program. The semi-structured interview I have designed takes from 40 to 45 minutes. Whether or not you choose to participate in an interview, I would like to invite you to consider offering your JOPO staff a chance to participate in this study.

I am very willing to share more with you about me, or this project, and I welcome your questions via email or phone conversation. The **first attachment** included here is a letter to potential study participants introducing the study and offering general information about it, which you can share with any of your staff you invite to participate. If you decide to participate in this study, the St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB) requires a letter of permission from you on your school's letterhead. The **second attachment** is a sample text of what is needed, which you may use or modify in your own words.

This study aims to gain the insights of educators from four school locations in at least two metropolitan areas in Finland. All study data, including individuals and locations, will be kept confidential by the use of pseudonyms and locked files. With permission, interviews will be tape recorded, transcribed, and recordings then deleted. Participating schools will receive a digital copy of the final research full text.

I am excited by what this study can bring to educators in many locations working with at-risk students. In the 1960s, Finnish educators studied our North American education systems; now I am looking to Finland to discern best practices in many aspects of your education system. I hold the highest regard for how Finnish educators use flexible approaches to reach every

student as a valuable future citizen. Thank you for your consideration of this important research study.

Terveisin,

Joyce Bonafield-Pierce

[bonafieldcohort26@gmail.com](mailto:bonafieldcohort26@gmail.com)

Doctoral Candidate, University of St. Thomas  
Minneapolis – St. Paul, Minnesota, U.S.

[bona7835@stthomas.edu](mailto:bona7835@stthomas.edu)  
+1 612-578-9597 cell, text

## Appendix C

### Invitation Letter to Potential Participants

[ To be sent by school principal to JOPO staff or former student ]

Dear

Thank you for considering being in this study! I am writing to you as a doctoral candidate in educational leadership at the University of St. Thomas, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S. I requested that your principal invite you to participate in a qualitative case study of the JOPO class in Finland. For the past seven years, I have worked with students in Minneapolis, Minnesota public schools as a literacy specialist. While doing this work, I observed the excitement of their natural curiosity leading some students, and other students losing the joy of discovery and beginning to disengage from learning. Dropping out of school between age 15-16 is a common occurrence for our U.S. students.

In April 2015, I visited a number of classrooms in Finland, and discovered the JOPO class. Its combination of classroom learning with outside engagement in various worksites, as well as retreats that strengthen relationships and social-emotional learning, made me want to know more about this “class of flexible learning.”

These experiences have inspired a research study to explore how JOPO helps students strengthen their sense of self-efficacy, and re-engage in education in a way that is a better fit for them. I plan to interview JOPO teachers, youth coordinators, principals, and hopefully, former students who are now young adults, to learn more about their experiences with this program. My hope is that this study will yield insights useful to educators of students at-risk for dropping out of school, in Finland, the U.S., and elsewhere.

My research design is a qualitative case study. If you agree to participate in this study, I will request a 40 to 45 minute interview with you about your experience with and reflections on the JOPO program. These in-person interviews will take place between September 26 and October 7, 2016. Please note that I will hold all information you share in strict confidence and will use pseudonyms for all names and locations to guarantee anonymity of any published results. Participation is voluntary. You may freely withdraw from the study at any time without affecting your relationship with the researcher, the University of St. Thomas, or staff at your institution; I would destroy any data shared upon your decision not to continue in the study.

Few potential risks or discomforts exist within this study. There is a slight risk of encountering a painful memory or question that you may prefer not to answer. To minimize any discomfort due to the nature of the questioning, you may abstain from answering any question, request a break, or may choose to end the interview without consequence. Benefits of participating in the study include sharing your learnings about ways that JOPO has helped students gain in self-confidence, self-efficacy (agency), in clarifying career choices, and building relationship skills. It also offers you an opportunity to make suggestions that may add to the effectiveness of the JOPO class, and provide meaningful feedback to education leaders about this flexible learning program.

Prior to participating in the study, I will ask you to sign a Consent Form. This study requires approval from the St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB). Please contact me if you are interested in participating in this study or would like to know more about it. I am glad to share more about myself and answer any questions you might have more fully. Thank you for your consideration.

Terveisin,

Joyce Bonafield-Pierce  
University of St. Thomas  
Minneapolis, Minnesota, US 55403

[bonafieldcohort26@gmail.com](mailto:bonafieldcohort26@gmail.com)  
+1 612-578-9597 cell + text

## Appendix D

### Sample Letter of Permission from Organization

**University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board  
Grants and Research Office  
Letters of Permission from Study/Recruitment Organizations, Agencies, and Institutions**

The Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas requires that investigators submit a letter of approval from any external organization, agency, or institution through which an investigator plans to recruit participants or obtain existing data. The letter must give permission for recruitment or research procedures to take place at each site or to provide data to the investigator. **Letters of permission must be on organization letterhead and signed by a representative of the organization who is authorized to speak for the organization as a whole.**

It is the responsibility of the investigator to: 1) inform the cooperating entity of the purpose and procedures of the study so the entity can make an informed decision regarding involvement, 2) request a letter of permission from each site once they have been fully informed of the research study, and 3) submit the letter to the IRB with the completed application on IRBNet. The following is a template for a letter of permission that may be modified or copied by the head or principal of a school who decides to participate in the research study.

#### **On Letterhead of School (Sample Letter of Permission)**

Date

Joyce Bonafield-Pierce  
Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership  
University of St. Thomas  
Minneapolis, Minnesota, US 55403

[bonafieldcohort26@gmail.com](mailto:bonafieldcohort26@gmail.com)  
[bona7835@stthomas.edu](mailto:bona7835@stthomas.edu)

Dear Joyce Bonafield-Pierce,

I have reviewed your research proposal, entitled “Strengthening Self-Efficacy in At-Risk Middle School Students: A Case Study of Finland’s JOPO Class,” and grant permission for you to interview employees of the JOPO program who voluntarily agree to participate in this case study.

The study aims to synthesize the perspectives of educators in four Finland schools who have been involved with JOPO’s class of flexible learning, to discern what factors they view as the strongest contributors to students’ gaining a stronger sense of self-efficacy (agency), choosing to complete 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and pursuing an appropriate further education or training goal. In-person interviews of approximately 40-45 minutes in length will take place at school sites in a private area, and with the participant’s permission, will be audio recorded. The study interviews will take place between September 26 and October 7, 2016.

Further, I understand that participation is completely voluntary, both for my school and each potential staff participant. A participant or school may withdraw from the study at any time throughout the research process without consequence.

Few potential risks or discomforts exist within this study. There is a slight risk of an interview participant encountering a painful memory or question that s/he prefers not to answer. To minimize any discomfort due to the nature of the questioning, a participant may abstain from answering any question, request a break, or may choose to end the interview without consequence. Benefits of participating in the study include the opportunity to share one's professional experience and perspectives, make suggestions that may add to the effectiveness of the JOPO class, and provide meaningful feedback to education leaders about this flexible learning program.

I understand that you will maintain confidentiality of all data by using only pseudonyms for all participants, schools, and locations, and keeping all physical data in a locked file. I understand that as the researcher, you will offer each participating school a digital copy of the final research report after its completion in 2017.

Warm regards,

Official Signature

Name of Signer

Title of Signer



## Appendix E

### Participant Consent Form

*Strengthening Self-Efficacy in At-Risk Middle School students:  
A Case Study of Finland's JOPO Class*

You are invited to participate in a research study about the middle school JOPO class in Finland, that seeks to understand how students in this 'class of flexible learning' develop a greater sense of self-efficacy and better ways to move forward with career and education choices. I invite you to participate in this research. You are eligible to participate in this study because you are connected with the JOPO program at your school. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Joyce Bonafield-Pierce, doctoral candidate at University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, U.S. The study advisor is Dr. Karen Westberg, Dept. of Education, University of St. Thomas. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

#### Background Information

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how Finland's JOPO class helps to strengthen student self-efficacy and a sense of agency in at-risk middle school students. Through individual interviews in September-October 2016, I plan to meet with JOPO teachers and staff, as well as some former JOPO students who are now young adults. I also plan to meet with some principals who have had the JOPO class in their school, who may have a slightly different perspective. I hope to learn what each participant feels has been among the most valuable aspects of JOPO in helping students re-engage in their education. I feel the insights from this study can be of value for those working with JOPO in Finland, and similar programs elsewhere seeking to support this at-risk student population.

#### Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to participate in an individual interview about your experiences with the JOPO class, which will take between 30 and 45 minutes. Former JOPO students may choose to interview individually or in a group of two, depending on their comfort level. A joint interview will still keep a 45 minute limit. I will arrange for a private meeting room at the participating school, or if preferred, the interview could be set in a private space in the local community library. I will offer times later in the afternoon and early evening when requested to minimize conflict with work demands. With a participant's consent, the

interview will be audiotaped. The study does not include videotaping or photography. Names of participants and schools will be kept confidential by use of a coding system. There are no planned follow-up interviews, but a participant may be in touch with the researcher with questions or comments via email or phone. Likewise, if there is any question of what was said on the recording, I will email a clarifying question to you.

A special arrangement may be made with the researcher to complete the interview questions by email. In this case, the researcher will hold a phone conversation to review the consent form prior to the participant deciding to sign it and return it by email.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

The study carries some risks, which are listed below:

- 1) Possible violation of privacy: the possibility of a JOPO Coordinator signing on for this study, while a staff or former student may choose not to participate, yet may feel pressure to do so. To minimize this risk, I will express to the coordinator and each potential participant the voluntary nature of participating in the study. Meeting in a small room at the municipal public library is also offered as another venue for the interview, if this is more comfortable.
- 2) Possible emotional distress: To minimize this risk, you may skip any question [or part of a question], request a break for any reason, or end the interview without consequence if the interview leads to emotional distress.
- 3) Possible probing for personal or sensitive information. To minimize this risk, similar to risk # 2), you can say you prefer not to answer any question [or part of a question], request a break, say whatever else you may need, or end the interview without consequence to you. If I notice a participant seeming to be distressed, I will stop and ask the participant what they need and want at that point.

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study. The study may, however, yield valuable reflections for educators concerned with JOPO or similar programs aimed at helping to prevent students from dropping out of school prematurely.

### **Compensation**

There is no compensation for study participants.

### **Privacy**

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. As a participant, you can control the location and time of the 30 to 45 minute individual interview, in which I will ask you about

your experiences with the JOPO class. Your name, and your school's name, will not be shared in any of the reporting of this study.

### **Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include an audiotape of the individual interview, coded with a number and letter instead of your name. The audio record will be sent to a transcriber who will know only the code used, not your name. I will keep a separate file on my cloud account which will have participant names. The list will be available only to me, my advisor, Dr. Karen Westberg, and the St. Thomas Institutional Review Board. During my travel in Finland, the cell phone will be kept in a locked file when not being used, and any paper files, with codes rather than names, will also be kept in a locked file. All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years upon completion of the study, kept in locked file while traveling and back in Minneapolis. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with your employer, colleagues, myself, or the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected from you will be deleted from the study. You can withdraw by letting me know that you wish to do so. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask, or request a break during the interview.

### **Contacts and Questions**

My name is Joyce Bonafield-Pierce. You may ask any questions you have now and at any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions later, you may contact me at +1-612-578-9597 [cell + text] or by email at: bonafieldcohort26@gmail.com. You may contact my advisor, Dr. Karen Westberg at +1-651-962-4985, or by email at klwestberg@stthomas.edu. You

may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give my permission to be audio recorded during this study.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

---

Signature of Study Participant

Date:

---

Print Name of Study Participant

---

Signature of Researcher

Date:

## Appendix F

### Abstract of the Finnish Ministry Second Year Assessment of JOPO

From K. Rajaorko, August 14, 2017. Personal Communication re: Ministry of Education, 2007-2008 JOPO Assessment.

<http://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/78945/opm36.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

(Joustava perusopetus-hankkeen vaikuttavuuden arviointi) Flexible basic education – impact analysis Abstract Flexible Basic Education (JOPO®) is a project launched by the Ministry of Education in 2006.

Its purpose is to develop new teaching methods and procedures which help reduce dropout. It develops new methods catering for individual needs which use activity based learning, small group teaching, on-the-job learning and different learning environments. JOPO activities support pupils in finishing school and applying for further training by means of multi-professional cooperation, early intervention and intensified school-home cooperation. The report describes the implementation of the JOPO project in schools in the school year 2007–2008 and assesses the impact of the project. The impact analysis is based on changes effected in the JOPO pupils' (n = 624) situations in the course of the school year. It also evaluates how the different methods and forms of learning influence pupils' development. Apart from pupil-specific monitoring data, the impact analysis is based on self-evaluations by schools and local education authorities (n = 65), feedback submitted by pupils (n = 265) and their parents or care-givers (n = 170) on questionnaires, and interviews with stakeholders.

The JOPO activities are organised into small groups led by a teacher and another professional. The teachers usually have special education training, and their work partners are generally youth workers, youth instructors, community pedagogues or special needs assistants. The foremost forms of activity are small group teaching and individual guidance; on-the-job learning and possibly studies in other subjects in ordinary teaching groups. Other activities include school camps and various excursions in order to develop team and community spirit. Pupils also participate in forms of learning and special courses especially tailored for them. In particular, the JOPO groups have developed action-based learning methods which highlight inquiry based and co-operative learning and project learning instead of teacher-led learning.

In place of subject centered learning, the JOPO project has developed thematic learning and more needs based and situational time use. Different groups emphasise slightly different things. In some groups, the focus is more on special needs type guided and individual learning, while others favour on-the-job learning. The activities of some groups focus on learning derived from the pupils' strengths and interests, which bolsters their self-assurance, self-confidence and future orientation. In all groups, the basic educational task, that is, learning basic life-management skills (time management, working in a group) and social deportment consumed a great deal of time from actual instruction. 8 The most common reasons for enrolment in a JOPO

group are problems with motivation, a need to study in a small group and low school achievement.

The JOPO pupils' family and life situations are more difficult than average, which is manifested as psychosocial problems and insecurity, and the groups include an above-average proportion of children from one-parent families. JOPO activities are effective. The situation of nearly 90% of the pupils had improved from the initial state of affairs. As regards pupils that had not benefitted, the main reason for the failure to get their studies underway even within JOPO was their extremely difficult family and life situations. JOPO had its largest effect in ensuring that pupils got their school-leaving certificates, in reducing absenteeism and in improving study motivation. The pupils' situations were affected most by small-group work and personal support and guidance. Other effective forms of activity were on-the-job learning, immediate intervention in non-attendance and intensified school-home cooperation. In practice, the differences between the various JOPO procedures were small, and the results show that the effects are individual; in other words, success is explained more by the pupil's background and life situation than the use of certain action models within JOPO. A given method thus works with some pupils and not with others. The differentiating factor in benefits gained is to what extent a pupil has participated in non-traditional activities, notably in on-the-job learning and in school camps.

The pupils who had most benefitted from JOPO had participated several days longer in these than those who had benefitted the least. Both the pupils' and parents' assessments and feedback were mostly positive, and the JOPO project was considered valuable and useful. In fact, JOPO activities are being adopted on a permanent basis in all but few municipalities. Their adoption is hindered by the additional resources they require and the current financial situation in municipalities. Mainstreaming the new action models into basic education will in turn require the development of structural factors relating to the action learning culture and subject centeredness of schools.

*Key words:* Flexible education; dropout, development of basic education, learning environments, operational methods, on-the-job learning, impact analysis, enhancement-led evaluation, individual teaching methods

=

## Appendix G

### Application to Conduct Educational Research

City of Helsinki  
EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

RESEARCH PERMIT

<b>RESEARCHER</b>	Name Joyce Bonafield-Pierce	
	Address 1066 Cedar View Dr., Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.	Tel. +1-612-578-9597
	E-mail address bonafieldcohort26@gmail.com; bona7835@stthomas.edu	
	Research institute, educational institution or other body University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, Department of Education	
	Qualification / profession MSW (Social Work, Smith College), MAS (Peace & Conflict Studies, Austria); Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership, University of St. Thomas [5 yr.	
<b>RESEARCH SUPERVISOR</b>	Name Dr. Karen Westberg	
	Address of institution/body Opus Hall, University of St. Thomas, Minneapolis, 55403	Tel. +1-651-962-4985
	E-mail address kwestberg@stthomas.edu	
	Qualification and profession PhD., Education and Educational Research	
	Name of study Exploring Self-Efficacy in At-Risk Middle School Students: A Case Study of Finland's JOPO Class	
<b>STUDY</b>	Level of research	
	Doctoral thesis <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Licentiate thesis <input type="checkbox"/> Master's thesis <input type="checkbox"/> Vocational thesis <input type="checkbox"/> Other thesis study <input type="checkbox"/> Other study, please specify: <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Date of approval of the research plan by research/educational institution 25-08-2016	
	Brief outline of the research plan Qualitative case study of the JOPO class in Finland schools in both rural and urban middle schools. JOPO teachers, school principals, and some former students, now over age 18, will be interviewed in 25-30 minute conversations using a semi-structure interview format. School principals must approve of the study and invite the researcher by formal letter of invitation before scheduling of meetings can take place. Study estimates between 18 and 24 interviews.	
	Research approach / method Questionnaire survey <input type="checkbox"/> Interview <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Documentary/statistical analysis <input type="checkbox"/> Trial/experiment <input type="checkbox"/> Observational study <input type="checkbox"/> method of observation Other, specify <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Does the study involve use of personal data?    yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> no <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Educational units targeted by the study Educators working with JOPO 8th and 9th grade students (not students themselves).	
	Have the units in question been consulted in advance regarding research cooperation? yes <input type="checkbox"/> date of consultation and name of person consulted no <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

	Size of sample 18 to 24 staff and former students who are now over age 18
	Period of data collection Begins 26-09      Ends 14-10
	Estimated completion date of the study 04-2017
PROMISSORY NOTE AND SIGNATURES	In accordance with my secrecy obligation, I hereby undertake not to use any information that comes into my possession to the damage or detriment of the person(s) that are the subject of the study or the family members or interests thereof and not to disclose any such personal information to third parties.  I am aware of the legal requirements prescribed primarily in the Personal Data Act regarding the processing of personal data and of my obligation as a researcher to use and process personal information accordingly. I understand and accept that the role of the Data Protection Ombudsman is to advise, direct and supervise the processing of personal data, and shall undertake to handle personal data in accordance with the "Data Protection and Scientific Research in view of the Personal Data Act" and "Processing of Personal Data by Consent" guidelines and other such guidelines issued by the Office of the Data Protection Ombudsman regarding the processing of personal data.  I shall submit one copy of the completed study report without charge to the Information and Planning Services unit of the Education Department; address: P.O. Box 3000, 00099 City of Helsinki
(To be signed by all persons handling confidential information during the duration of the study)	Place and date 29-09-2016
	Researcher's signature <i>Joyce C. Bonafield-Pierce</i>
	Place and date
	Signatures of other persons handling confidential information <i>None</i>
RECOMMENDATION	I support the application <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I do not support the application <input type="checkbox"/>  Place and date _____ Signature _____ Clarification _____ Position _____
DECISION	Place and date of decision _____ Decision made by (signature) _____ Clarification _____ Position _____  This decision entitles the researcher to collect research data during the period: <i>29-09-2016 - 14-10-2016</i>  The decision does not entitle access to City of Helsinki documentary material or register data.  The decision does not obligate the Education Department of Helsinki to contribute to the costs of the research.



