

**EXPERIENCIAS SOBRE EL DESARROLLO DE
LA EDUCACIÓN OBLIGATORIA DE FINLANDIA****FINLAND'S EXPERIENCES OF COMPULSORY
EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT**

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RESUMEN

Durante años Finlandia ha hecho paso a paso varios cambios en la educación obligatoria para cumplir sus ideales. Finlandia ha conseguido una buena política respecto a la educación básica. Ha logrado mejorar la equidad y la calidad del aprendizaje. En el informe PISA Finlandia está en lo más alto y tiene muy pocos estudiantes con los rendimientos más bajos. Asimismo, las diferencias entre escuelas son pequeñas. Sin embargo están creciendo y, por lo tanto, las autoridades están intentando encontrar maneras de reducirlos. También intentan mantener actualizada en todos los aspectos de la educación y por lo tanto harán cambios en el currículo nacional en un futuro próximo. Aunque el gobierno tiene una visión bien definida de los cambios necesarios, no pueden tener ningún conocimiento real en lo que el mundo les deparará a quienes hoy empiezan la escuela, cuando terminen su educación si encontrarán trabajo remunerado. En este sentido Finlandia tiene el mismo desafío que los demás países. Sin embargo, Finlandia tiene experiencia en, a largo plazo hacer cambios eficaces en la educación.

Palabras clave: Educación política, Estrategia, Educación obligatoria, Descentralización, Equidad, Profesores, Finlandia

ABSTRACT

During the years Finland has made step by step several changes in compulsory education to meet the ideals that she has had. Finland has fairly well succeeded in basic education policy. She has managed to enhance the equity and quality of learning. In PISA review Finland is on top and, at the same time, only a very few students fall within the lowest performance categories. Likewise, differences between schools are small. However they are growing and, therefore policymakers are now trying to find ways to narrow them. They also try to keep education updated in all aspects and therefore they will make changes in the national core curriculum in the near future. Though the Government has a well defined vision of the changes needed, they cannot have any real wisdom on what is the world where the to-day's school starters will find their paid work after their education. In that respect Finland has the same challenge as the other countries. However Finland has experience in making effective long-term changes in education.

Keywords: Education policy, strategy, compulsory education, decentralisation, equity, teachers, Finland

INTRODUCTION

The OECD PISA reports (e.g. OECD 2001 and 2010a) have led to much discussion around the world. These reports talk about competencies for life and for tomorrow's world. That provides a very clear description of the very nature of the philosophy of education systems. We try to create our futures through the talents of our children. Those who start their primary education in Finland in 2012 will make the move to working life in around the year 2025 or 2030 at the earliest, depending on whether they finish their studies after upper secondary¹ or tertiary education. That represents a long educational journey for our children, but also a great challenge to our education system. As Linda Darling-Hammond (2010, 2) says the new mission of schools is to prepare students to work at jobs that do not exist today. It is more and more impossible to foresee how our societies exactly look like after twelve – fifteen years. Consequently we need strategic long-term orientation but also tactical reorientations when needed (Metsämuuronen, Kuosa & Laukkanen 2013).

As today's educational choices are so far-reaching, it is essential that educational systems ground their basic solutions on sound strategic choices that are followed over time. Long-term strategies, however, are not enough because the demands of the societies are changing all the time. Therefore, as well as long-term strategic planning, we also need to be prepared to make short-term updating operational choices in order to guarantee that our educational systems meet the changing needs of our societies.

The Finnish education system has received plenty of attention from all over the world because it has come out on top in the PISA surveys. General trust in PISA is strong.

There have been hundreds of visiting groups in Helsinki asking about the Finnish “secret” for good performance. This has been a somewhat puzzling experience for Finns. Finnish researchers and policy makers have given many different explanations for success (see e.g. Välijärvi 2004; Rautalin & Alasuutari 2007; Laukkanen 2008; Kupiainen, Hautamäki & Karjalainen 2009; Niemi, Toom & Kallioniemi 2012).²

One view is that success in reading literature surveys stems from the fact that the Finnish language is extremely phonemic in spelling. Some argue that the main issue is that Finnish society has a very positive attitude towards education. They consider education to be a good investment. Many scholars also say that Finland's good results are largely a result of its forward looking and innovative education policies. There are also explanations from outside Finland. One of them is from the OECD (2012b). But these Finnish and external from Finland explanations are not definite.

This paper shows that a success story in education needs a long-term strategy that is followed up over time. In Finland, the most important objective has been to increase national and individual wellbeing by enhancing the equity and quality of education. This has meant that the aim has been to arrange high-level education for all. The policy actions taken have been

¹ Upper secondary education is generally seen as the minimum education level for everyone to survive in today's societies (OECD 2012a, 40).

² Educational performance is generally seen to be the key to wellbeing of people. In August 2010 Newsweek published a ranking list of the 100 best countries in the world. In their analysis they used indicators of education, health, quality of life and economic dynamism of the countries. Newsweek ranked Finland the first and it seemed to be educational performance that really levied Finland on the top. (Newsweek 2010). That kind of listings are interesting but problematic as they combine composite indicators from several very different elements that are not comparable with each other.

incremental with the aim to get closer to the dream of high-level and equal performance as time goes by. The paper highlights some education policy issues where Finnish experiences could be learned from and, tells what are the challenges that Finns face today. The story starts with an overview of the history of development of equal opportunities. In Finland compulsory education is called as the basic education comprising of primary education for 7 to 12 years old and lower secondary education for 12 to 15 years old children.

CREATING EQUAL QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL ³

Finland has built up an education system with characteristics made up of uniformity - free education, free school meals and special needs education - by using the principle of inclusion. Finnish compulsory education has been logically developed towards the comprehensive model, which guarantees everybody equal opportunities in education irrespective of sex, social status, ethnic group, etc. as outlined in the constitution. The focus has been on equity.

Same education for all

In 1968 Parliament passed legislation ruling that the parallel school system should be replaced by national nine-year basic education that would represent the ideology of comprehensive education.⁴ As the Government delivered its bill to Parliament in 1967, one of the arguments for the common nine-year education for all was that it was too early to judge individual capacities at the age of eleven or twelve. They talked about losing the reserve of human resources that Finland would badly need in order to bring industry up-to-date. At that time, decision-makers also had to deal with more and more private grammar schools being founded, because the state-run and municipal-run ones could not fulfil all the demand. Parents wanted to have better education for their children. At the same time, there was an increase in ideology demanding equal education for all children: boys and girls, rich and poor, slow learners and fast learners. (Hallituksen esitys 1967.)

The legislation passed was described as being framework legislation. It laid the most important cornerstones of the new education system but left plenty of freedom for the Ministry of Education and the National Board of General Education to confirm many of the details. That was justified by the fact that there was no advance knowledge of what kind of problems might need to be solved during the implementation phase. Therefore the officials got much power to decide of the details. Legislation set a very clear target for the national administration stating that basic education should be developed to meet the criteria of comprehensive education. This formulation is important to notice. It was demanded that development should lead to ideals and it was not made clear that the ideal had already become clear in practical terms. (Laukkanen 1998, 58 – 59.). Parliament and the Government saw that there was still a way ahead to the ideal. By this background it is well understandable that Government organised plenty of piloting projects to find new solutions for education. Those projects were pedagogical or administrative focusing to find new arrangements or a mixture of pedagogical and administrative purposes. This practise was very strong through 1970s to the end of 1980s.

Municipalities were divided into implementation groups according to their geographical location. Before moving to the new system each municipality had to make its own

³ For extensive descriptions and analysis, see for example Lampinen 1998; Lehtisalo & Raivola 2000; Hämäläinen & al. 2005.

⁴ Koulujärjestelmälaki (1968).

education plan that had to state how the new system would look like in their own municipality and how the implementation of change would be taken care of in practical terms. That plan had to be submitted to the approval by the National Board of General Education in Helsinki. Implementation of the new basic education system was carried out in stages between 1972 and 1977, starting in the northern part of Finland and finishing in the southern part of the country.⁵ It was the end of the parallel education system that labelled students as being “talented” or “untalented” after only four or five years at elementary school. That also meant an increase in educational optimism.

Responsibility for basic education was given exclusively to the municipalities. The grammar schools that had been privately or by municipalities run or run by the State until then were incorporated into municipal education systems. As they became to be part of the municipal system they also had to follow the same rules and guidelines as all the other municipal schools. Only a few special needs schools for severely handicapped children and university teacher training schools remained under State control.

Schools had to follow the very detailed, nationally authorised curriculum including 700 pages (with small font). That curriculum was published in two volumes. The first part included the general pedagogical principles and philosophy of education and, the second part the syllabi of different subjects. (Komiteanmietintö 1970a, 1970b).

Ability grouping was introduced in teaching of mathematics and foreign languages at lower secondary level. That was because there was no advance knowledge on how to arrange so long and demanding education for the whole age groups. That was also a political compromise so that the new education system would be acceptable for various parties. Especially important was that both former grammar school and elementary school teachers were in favour of the system change (Aho 1996). However, the national committee that had prepared the national curriculum for basic education stated that the Government should find a way to get rid of such streaming (Komiteanmietintö 1970a, 139). The lowest ability group curriculum did not offer general eligibility for upper secondary general education. That was the problem that had to be solved.

School teaching was inspected by the State’s school inspectorates at the State Provincial Offices. Each school had to be inspected at least once every five years. Furthermore, all schools had to submit their very detailed yearly school plans for approval by the inspectorate. That was natural and important because state funding for municipalities was based on the real costs of the schools. School textbooks’ manuscripts were inspected and approved in advance by the National Board of General Education.

Decentralisation of decision-making

In the beginning of the 1985 – 1986 academic year, after lengthy political debate and pilot projects lasting many years, the ability group system (streaming) in mathematics and foreign languages at lower secondary education level was abolished and general eligibility for all further studies became thus open to everyone (Koululait 1983). The legislation changes for that reason provided extra resources for schools at lower secondary level guaranteeing thus fairly small teaching groups for the whole age group. Schools were given freedom for flexible grouping of pupils and further freedom in terms of how to use

⁵ The curriculum of basic education was applied in all municipalities at all grades by the beginning of the 1981 – 1982 academic year at the latest (Hallituksen esitys n:o 30 – 1982 vp., see in Koululait 1983, 17).

resources. Therefore all rules about minimum or maximum sizes of teaching groups were removed from legislation.

In Finland the year 1985 was a culmination point in the search for a more equal and efficient education system but also in terms of decentralisation. The purpose of the then new national core curriculum was to create a framework for curriculum design in municipalities (Kouluhallitus 1985). Before that change, the curriculum had been the same in all municipalities. At the end of 1980's municipalities were also given very broad liberties to decide how to organise their own administration of education.

At the beginning of the 1990's, the system of national pre-inspection of textbooks was discontinued. By the beginning of the 1990's, the system of State-run regular school inspections had also been discontinued. The same applied to the state inspectorates' approval of schools' annual plans. As a result of strong decentralisation in curricular and use of resources issues, those institutions were no longer needed.

Year 1994 brought a big change. A new national core curriculum was accepted (National Board of Education 1994). The National Board of Education⁶ only gave very broad aims and contents for teaching different subjects. The municipalities and, ultimately, the schools had to set up their own curricula on the basis of the national core curriculum. As part of these plans, local needs could be taken into consideration and special characteristics of schools could be taken into account. These changes considerably decentralized decision making power in choosing educational contents especially to individual teachers.

Systematic national evaluation (assessment) of learning outcomes began in 1994. The first reports were published in 1995. These evaluations were (and still are) used for development purposes (Laukkanen 1997). The Finnish basic education system does not have any high-stakes external tests, nor any final examinations run external to the schools in basic education.

My understanding and experience is that in Finland school State administration frankly cooperates with teachers and their union and associations. That cooperation bases on mutual respect between the administrative and teaching forces. As the latest national core curriculum was started to be drafted in August 2012, a web page was opened for anyone to comment on the first draft version's ideas of the new core curriculum⁷. They promised that as the draft has then been developed further it would be opened once again for the comments. The same process was implemented with the former change that began to be drafted in 2000 (Halinen 2005.) My belief is that such open cooperation with schools and society has increased the sense of realism in national guidelines and has enhanced general ownership of the required changes within the teaching force .

In order to understand the big change that happened in the 1990's, it is advisable to know that the two successive Ministers of Education in the 1990's came from the National Coalition Party (politically liberal conservative) that was eager to remove the remaining burdens of state control created by The Finnish Social Democratic Party and The Centre

⁶ The National Board of Education was formed in 1991 from two former Boards, the National Board of General Education (founded in 1869) and the National Board of Vocational Education (founded in 1966). The National Board of Education is a State central administration agency reporting to the Ministry of Education and Science. Since 2004, it has been known as the Finnish National Board of Education.

⁷ <http://www.oph.fi/ops2016>

Party led governments. Vilho Hirvi (1996, 56), then Director General of the National Board of Education, talked about the rhythm change in education. He argued that in the era of net economy and self-directing organisations, it was important to free the personal capacities of those working in the education system and to take these capacities to use in development of the quality of education. With him it is easy to agree, while it is also important to remember that nations always need a certain degree of national unity in education and culture.

What was needed?

The Finnish development history shows that strong central steering was needed to develop a uniform educational structure in the country and, that the Government then loosened its grip in order to achieve better results. Equal inputs and rules to schools do not automatically lead to better outcomes. We need also freedom for local innovations. However, it is necessary to have certain unity for the system. Structural rules are necessary and also the goals of education. The national core curriculum is often called as the national will on what to reach with education.

During the years when the then new education system was being implemented, many critics claimed that Government rules would lead to a reduction in standards compared with those that were in place in grammar schools in 1960's. (Aho 1996). Those critical voices were very loud from the 1970's to the mid-1980's as the Government tried to find ways to abandon streaming in teaching of foreign languages and mathematics. The Government wanted to make all further education options available to everyone up to tertiary education. As the result today the Finnish education system is very open and flexible with no dead ends.⁸

SOME DETAILS OF THE SYSTEM

The most important issue in the Finnish educational success is that the country has been able to raise the performance level of all students. Behind gaining that there are many interdependent factors. Very critical issues have been the use of resources, teacher education and teachers' pedagogical freedom, evaluation culture of system's performance and, steering the system in curricular issues.

Allocation of resources

As use of ability grouping (streaming) was abandoned in the mid-1980's, the Government was aware that the benefits of that change could not be reaped without increasing financial resources for lower secondary education.⁹ Therefore the Government increased resources considerably at the lower secondary education level. That made the Finnish profile in using resources at different levels very interesting.

If we assess the annual expenses per student in Finnish educational institutions, we will find that it is unique in terms of how the total amount of educational spending (including all education levels) is allocated between different levels of education. This is different from the situation in most countries. Figures detailing average expenditure on pre-primary, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and tertiary education in OECD countries show that

⁸ www.oph.fi

⁹ The increase in teaching resources for remedial education included from the beginning of the 1985 – 1986 academic year was 14.6%. It considerably increased the amount of teachers at lower secondary level. At the same time, resources in special needs education were increased. (Koululait 1983, 21, 23 – 24.)

expenses increase evenly from one level to another. In Finland, expenses increase up until the end of lower secondary education, followed by a decrease for upper secondary education and a further increase in tertiary education. This tells that Finland has wanted to focus resources on lower secondary education where there are the most problems.

Table 1: Annual expenditure on educational institutions per student in 2008, US \$ (OECD 2011, 218; OECD 2012a,261)¹⁰

Country/Level	Pre-primary	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper Secondary	Tertiary
Finland	5,334	7,092	10,950	7,461	9,592
Spain	6,708	7,092	9,108	11,113	9,592
USA	10,070	9,982	11,551	12,690	26,90
OECD average	6,210	7,153	8,498	9,396	9,349

At the same time (1985), legislation was changed to include no more rules on minimum or maximum sizes of teaching groups. The policy goal was to give teachers more opportunities to use teaching groups as critical instruments in developing their teaching. As a result of this change, schools received complete freedom to decide on how to form teaching groups. The prerequisite for that was to move to formula-based state funding in basic education instead of the criterion of real costs that had been used up until then. (Koululait 1983.)

Support for special needs

The curriculum change resulting for abandoning of ability grouping, that was implemented in the mid-1980's, meant that education standards were raised (Koululait 1983, 15; Kouluhallitus 1985). All students in basic education began to have the same goals also in mathematics and foreign languages. In so doing the Finnish Government was realistic. The reality is that such goals are reached by individuals with different levels of success. However, with extra support for the weakest students, we can considerably raise the performance of the whole age group.

Finland offers a significant amount of remedial education in her schools.¹¹ Remedial education was broadened at the beginning of the 1970's. Finnish Government has found it important for those with learning difficulties to receive special extra support. If we look at the OECD (2003, 16 – 17) review comparing 12 countries, we will find that 19.7% of Finnish pupils receive public extra support because of learning difficulties.¹² The median percentage in that international comparison was only around 6 percent. It explains the Finnish way of understanding equity that also includes fairness, support to those who have learning problems. Extra support is a democratic way of evening out differences in the social background of students and a way of increasing the overall educational performance of a country.

Remedial education is provided for those with very normal learning difficulties, e.g. reading, writing and speech. Needs in those three difficulty areas are met by teachers specialising in

¹⁰ Tertiary education expenditure does not include R & D costs. OECD 2012 publication that uses 2009 figures is not used here in this table because that publication does not make breakdown between lower secondary and upper secondary education.

¹¹ See Blom et al. (1996).

¹² Statistics show that 21.9% of students in basic education have received part-time special needs education between 1995 – 2004 (Statistics Finland 2006, 35). It is good also to mention that in Finland private tutoring is very rare.

university programmes. Their help in those three issues concentrates on the first two years of primary education. It is important that those basic difficulties are taken care of at the very beginning of basic education, because these communication skills are fundamental for any further personal growth. A major review showed that the focus of remedial education from the third grade onwards is to take care of other learning difficulties, mostly in mathematics and foreign languages.¹³ That kind of normal support is taken care of by pupil's own class teacher or subject teachers. That support is given throughout basic education for those who need it.

In this connection it is also good to tell that in Finnish basic education class repetition is really rare.

Teaching force

Finnish teachers are well acquainted not only with various teaching approaches and methods but also with educational research. That is one of the benefits of that teacher education is carried out in university departments of teacher education within faculties of education. Pertti Kansanen explains this by arguing that “[t]he basic aim of every teacher education programme is to educate competent teachers and develop the necessary professional qualities to ensure lifelong teaching careers for teachers” (Kansanen 2003, 89). This means that teachers must have a good basis for lifelong learning within their profession. Therefore, teacher education is research-based in Finland. “The aim of research-based teacher education is to impart the ability to make educational decisions based on rational argumentation in addition to everyday or intuitional argumentation” (ibid, 90).

Since 1974, teacher education for all teachers in basic education has been arranged at universities. Before that, primary school teachers were educated at teacher-training colleges.¹⁴ In 1979, primary school teacher education was also upgraded to the level of a Master's degree. The purpose of this modification was to unify the core aspects of primary and secondary school education and to develop an academically high standard of education for prospective teachers. Teacher education for the secondary school level was also reformed expanding the scope of pedagogical studies. (Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen 2006). Competition for teacher education specially for primary education is really hard because only around 10 - 15% of applicants are accepted. Thus, it is fair to say that teaching work is popular. We also have seen that a career as a teacher in Finland is the most popular choice amongst those leaving upper secondary education. This was confirmed in a poll carried out by Helsingin Sanomat, the biggest newspaper in Finland (Liiten 2004).

Table 2: Teacher salaries US \$ in 2010 after 15 years experience (OECD 2012a, 465 – 466)

Country/Level	Pre-primary	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper Secondary
Finland	28,152	37,455	40,451	42,809
Spain	42,846	42,846	47,816	48,818
USA	n.a.	45,226	45,049	48,466
OECD average	35,630	37,603	39,401	41,182

¹³ Blom et al. (1996).

¹⁴ Teacher education before that, see Kansanen 2003.

Why is the teaching profession so popular? Teachers' salaries in Finland are only at the average level in international comparisons, so this cannot be the explanation (Table 2). My own guess is that the high popularity is the result of three things. 1) All Finnish teachers in basic education complete an academic Master's degree either in education or in one or two teaching subjects. Academic education is respected. If teachers' education was still based at colleges, it might not be so popular. 2) Finnish teachers enjoy significant autonomy in organising their work. Due to decentralisation, Finnish schools do have plenty of autonomy in terms of the organisation of instruction, personnel management, planning and structures and deciding on the use of resources. A research published in June 2012 revealed that in Finland teachers are the most satisfied professional group (HS 2012). 3) In Finland, education has been respected through its history. Thus, teachers have also enjoyed considerable respect.

Evaluation policy¹⁵

The Governments' mind is that also evaluation is a steering instrument. Therefore evaluation policy is a method within the whole methodology of education policy. As we define evaluation policy in such a way, it also implies that evaluation should support other education policy choices.

At the moment in the education sector Finland has three evaluation bodies: Finnish Education Evaluation Council¹⁶, Finnish National Board of Education¹⁷ and Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council. Their evaluation practises and approaches differ from each other. The present government has decided to found a new independent evaluation body that takes responsibility of those three bodies' duties (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2011). That will happen in 2014. Behind that change is the desire to find economical savings but perhaps mostly the critic that has been headed to the role of the Finnish National Board of Education. The critics say that it is not credible that the Board evaluates issues that it itself has decided on. In the political arena that kind of arguments are heavy though there are no evidence that the Board ever had misused its position.

The Finnish Education Evaluation Council¹⁸ is responsible of broad evaluation projects. They are carried out with a network of universities and research institutions. However the assessment of educational performance in different school subjects is carried out by the Finnish National Board of Education.

One of the duties of the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) is to monitor the performance of the education system at the levels of pre-primary education, primary and lower secondary education, upper secondary education and adult education. One form of this monitoring is evaluation of learning outcomes in basic education. For that evaluation the Ministry of Education and Culture makes a general plan of the subject areas that it wants to be evaluated in the becoming years. The funding of the FNBE evaluations bases on the individual evaluation tasks in the plan.

Since the mid-1990's, the Finnish National Board of Education¹⁹ has conducted national assessments of learning outcomes mostly in the 9th grade of basic education. Regular assessments have been carried out in mathematics, mother tongue (either Finnish or Swedish)

¹⁵ Development of evaluation policy in Finland, see Laukkanen 1998.

¹⁶ http://www.edev.fi/portal/english5/basis_for_operation

¹⁷ <http://www.oph.fi/english>

¹⁸ www.edev.fi/portal/english/basis_for_operation

¹⁹ www.oph.fi/english

and literature and occasionally in other subjects as well. Results are used for development of education. Evaluations have also been exercised at the end of the second grade, for example. The purpose of this is to enhance the use of evaluation for formative purposes. There have also been evaluations at other class levels and of cross-curricular themes. National assessments produce information about the quality and results of education and training in relation to objectives stated in the national core curricula. Assessments are sample-based and thus do not cover the whole age group.

All schools in the sample of an assessment receive an individual feedback report (Mattila 2002). These reports are delivered to schools as soon as possible after assessment data has been collected, as fresh results are more interesting for schools than results that are months old. Recently, feedback has been received as quickly as 2 months after the data was collected.

Individual feedback reports present national profiles and the profiles of an individual sample school. In mathematics, for example, it shows how many points the whole sample received on average in numeracy, geometry, statistics, functions and algebra and the averages of those in an individual school. As you present results in this way, it is important and interesting to look at differences in performance between the whole sample and the sample of an individual school. If the average performance level in a school is lower than in the sample as a whole, it is obvious that the school should take a look in the mirror. That makes teachers think once again about what to demand of their students and how to teach better. That will gradually lead to the positive use of tests run from outside the school.

The national evaluation reports by the Finnish National Board of Education have never published data municipality by municipality or school by school, but they have scrutinised the performance of the whole sample. As a result, ranking lists are not published. Schools are accountable to the local level (municipalities/parents) and not to the State. The Finnish thinking is also true in that publication of school- or municipality-specific test results and ranking lists could product more problems than benefits for individual schools.

These evaluations increase the level of information about education both for the purposes of national and local educational development. However Finland still faces the major challenge of ensuring that these evaluations have a real impact on everyday school practices.

A move to more detailed steering

After implementation of the 1994 national core curriculum, central steering of the Finnish education system was perhaps the lightest in the world. It is worth knowing that the 1994 national core curriculum only included some 110 pages (National Board of Education 1994). That was all that the central administration needed to say about all subjects for the whole nine-year long basic education. The curriculum document outlined the general objectives of various subjects for the whole of basic education. For mathematics, for example, teaching the core curriculum only took up 3.5 pages and 6 pages for foreign languages.

In 2004 a new national core curriculum was accepted (Finnish National Board of Education 2004). That core curriculum devoted 9.5 pages to mathematics and 18.5 pages to foreign languages. A big change also compared with earlier national guidelines was that educational objectives were set not just for the whole nine years of education, but for the 2nd grade, 6th grade and the 9th grade, for instance. However, the cutting points (grades) for objectives in

different subjects were chosen differently. These objectives were set in the form of criteria for good performance. The national document concerned contains around 320 pages.

The Financial Times wrote that these steps taken in 2004 might threaten the “educational paradise” of Finland (Ibison 2006). They said that it was important to notice that Finnish PISA success was gained just at the time when education was nationally ruled by the very liberal curriculum guidelines of 1994. In the future, we will see if Finland manages to enhance educational performance and narrow the performance differences by the move towards centralisation that it has taken. The next national core curriculum will be implemented in 2016 in all municipalities.

Searching for the next phase

A new national core curriculum for the basic education has been adopted in 1972, 1985, 1994 and 2004, so roughly each ten years. Therefore the Ministry of Education and Culture gave the start for planning of the next phase. It nominated a parliamentary committee to make a proposal for the distribution on lesson hours of different subjects and the general national objectives for the new Basic Education Act. The committee published its report in spring 2010 (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2010).

The committee analyzed national and international operational environments, organized several seminars, had net based interviews of lower secondary education level students and had much debates in its meetings. The committee explained that it built its proposals on the present strengths of basic education and the foreseen development needs of the future.

The starting point of the proposal was to clarify and enhance the mission and integrity of basic education, to ensure the high level of knowledge and skills and to guarantee individual support and guidance and to clarify the operational principles of basic education.

The committee proposed several changes. It defined citizen skills. Those skills were split in five categories: thinking skills, ways of working and interaction, crafts and expressive skills, participation and initiative, and self-awareness and personal responsibility. School subjects were proposed to be collected into six multi-disciplinary groups: 1) language and interaction, 2) mathematics, 3) environment, science and technology, 4) individual, enterprise and society, 5) arts and crafts and 6) health and personal working order.

They also proposed raising of weekly working hours. Reason for that was the fact that the present decision on distribution of lesson hours rules on minimum and maximum weekly hours and, many municipalities have adopted only the minimum hours. Also international comparison shows that the amount of the lesson hours is low in Finland (Table 3). The amount of elective lesson hours was proposed to be increased. Also two new subjects, ethics and drama, were proposed. They also proposed that the second national language (Finnish or Swedish) would start from the 2nd grade.

Table 3: Number of hours of compulsory instruction time per year (OECD 2012a, 435)

Country/Level	7 – 8 years old	9 – 11 years old	12 – 14 years old
Finland	608	640	777
Korea	612	703	859
Spain	875	875	1,050
OECD average	774	821	899

All that was neatly between the covers of the committee report but the continuation of the proposal met resistance. Within the politically balanced committee there were some strong differing opinions that were annexed to the report. Furthermore as the Ministry of Education and Culture asked opinions on the report many issues seemed to be obstacles, for instance raising the amount of weekly lessons, broadening elective subjects to the primary education level and starting age of the second national language. The feedback was not very positive. The problems culminated because the Minister of Education could not get support from her colleague ministers from other government parties. Therefore the Minister decided to stop the process and, all planning had to be started from the beginning.

Continuation

After the spring 2011 parliament elections the story continued with the new Government. The Minister nominated a new working party whose all members were only civil servants of the Ministry. That group's proposal differed much from the proposals of the former well balanced group. After that the Ministry asked opinions of the group's proposals. Finally the Government decided on the division of weekly hours of different subjects (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012).

The next core curriculum that will be implemented in 2016 will increase 4 weekly teaching hours in the subject group of arts and crafts. History and civics will get 2 weekly hours more and their teaching will begin earlier than at the moment. Religion will lose one weekly hour. Language program will be diversified. Drama is seen important as a teaching method but it does not get the status of a separate subject. (Ibid). It is very interesting to see how Finland will solve the dilemma of future looking educational contents ("new skills") and the traditional subject based approach.

CHALLENGES FOR FINLAND

New plans

The Finnish Governments prepare five year development plans for education and research. These plans base on the objectives set in the Government Programs. The plan for the years 2007 – 2012 starts with an analysis of the operating environment and continues then to describing the priorities in education and research (Ministry of Education 2008).

The development plan presented five priorities. The first one was guaranteeing equal opportunities in education and training from preprimary education to the university education throughout the country. The second was taking care of the quality of education and training. Main issue was in reducing basic education group sizes. Also student/teacher ratio in tertiary education was in focus. The third priority was to safeguard skilled workforce. Therefore forecasting of education needs was in focus as well as putting the talent reserves of immigrants to full use. The fourth priority was developing of higher education. This has resulted in thorough changes in legislation giving universities more autonomy in financial and administrative autonomy (University Act 558/2009). The fifth priority was to see teachers as a resource. The plan talked about guaranteeing sufficient amount of teachers and the importance to develop teachers' working conditions. One objective was to improve teachers' in-service training. The plan was that all teachers would have right to have more regular in-service training since the budget year 2009, but this plan didn't come true.

After the parliamentary election in April 2011, and a new governmental plan, a new development plan for education and research was accepted for years 2011 – 2016 (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2011). That plan wanted to move day-care service and early childhood education under the Ministry of

Education and Culture²⁰. State funding for basic education should be based more on indicators like amount of immigrants, education level of adults, employment level etc. of municipalities. Action program to increase equality in education will be prepared. Actions for safety school-days will be taken. Decreasing of teaching group sizes will be continued. Adoption of quality criteria for basic education will be broadened. New evaluation institute will be formed. Those are some of the goals that the present Government has put forward in education sector. One background issue for those becoming changes is that the latest research findings show that differences between schools have grown. That is the case specially in big cities (Ranta 2012).

Challenges

One big issue is that the population of Finland is ageing very rapidly, fastest in Europe (Ministry of Education 2008, 7). This also presents a challenge to the Finnish educational system in two ways. The first impact of demographic changes is that the sizes of age groups currently at school fall very rapidly. In the coming years, enrolments in compulsory education will fall faster in Finland than in Japan for instance, where the biggest immediate changes will concern enrolments in upper secondary education.

The second impact of aging population is that, in the near future, the education sector will face increased competition for qualified work force as will other public sectors and the private sector. In Finland today, there are no problems getting bright young people into teacher training, but the future may be very different.

Another issue is the present economic crisis that causes raising of taxes and cuttings of welfare services. In education that means raising the teaching group sizes but also pressures to establish bigger school units. Finland has had that phenomenon (closing of schools) in rural areas for a long time, but politicians in city areas are also now having to balance good welfare services and diminishing tax revenues. People have become used to having schools close to where they live but in the future the distance to the closest school might be longer.

A very hot political issue today in Finland is the amount and the size of municipalities. In Finland, in the country of around 5,4 million inhabitants, in the beginning of 2013 there were 320 municipalities while in the year 2000 there were 452.²¹ So the amount of municipalities is decreasing. The biggest municipality Helsinki has about 606 000 inhabitants as at the same time half of the municipalities have less than 6 000. The present Government tries to encourage and pressure municipalities to emerge into bigger entities. Reason for that emerging move is the fact that many municipalities have small populations and have difficulties in arranging high-standards welfare services especially in health care but also education.

Finland is a country that many commentators talk about with much admire. Finland belongs to the AAA economic group in the Euro zone. Some commentators propose that Nordic countries should be seen as the model societies for rest of the world (The Economist 2013). That kind of labels might be flattering for Finns and their Nordic colleagues, but they also might be dangerous if decision makers consider that all is fine. All countries have their own problems. Also the dynamics of economy can quickly change the former positions of countries. Already at the moment there is going on a big change in the industry structure in Finland as in many other countries. Therefore also the Finnish Government has the big

²⁰ Implemented in 1 January 2013

²¹ <http://www.kunnat.net/fi/tietopankit/tilastot/aluejaot/kuntien-lukumaara/Sivut/default.aspx>

challenge to find out what are the occupations and industry branches that they need and can have tomorrow.

IMPORTANT POLICY ISSUES SEEN FROM FINLAND

In compulsory education, there are two traditions. The first one represents the parallel education tradition where students are divided during compulsory education in different schools or in study lines within a school according to their earlier performance in primary schools. That option definitely leads to different competences and looses talents. Another tradition is the comprehensive education model, as I call it, where during the compulsory education all students have the same objectives and further education opportunities. By implementing that policy, it is possible, as Finnish experience shows, to raise the quality of educational performance for the whole age group. In terms of education, governments want success for everyone, but as they decide between those two traditions, they also decide what kind of success (benefit) would be seen and by whom. Finland represents the comprehensive model.

Taking the Finnish experience seriously, I see the most important issues for successful compulsory education systems as being:

- 1) Making a profound change in education requires strategic objectives, time and patience. The Finnish example shows that, after setting detailed objectives at the end of the 1960's, successive Governments have made incremental changes to basic education in order to meet the original aims set for in 1968. There has been national consensus that education is important. I would say that this is rare. In many countries, Government change means radical changes to education policy that can at the same time reverse the effects of the earlier policy.
- 2) Empowerment of the teaching profession produces good results. Professional teachers should have high level education and space for innovation, because they should try to find new ways to improve learning.
- 3) A supportive culture and practise is necessary. If we want success for all, we must understand that slow learners drop away from the pace of others without appropriate extra support. That support should be given to anyone as soon as his/her learning difficulties become apparent.
- 4) High standards for all encourage and enable students to do their best. If a teacher sets low standards, he or she will see low performance and vice versa. That was why Finland stopped the process of "streaming" in lower secondary schools.
- 5) Developing education is a never ending journey. There are two reasons to say that. First, educational structures must support pedagogical solutions. Second, now and then we should think once again what should be the subject contents of today's school. It is essential to set new challenges for all stakeholders.

Finnish public administration has a long tradition to work closely with researchers trying to find the most promising approaches in pedagogy (Männistö 1997; Kupari 2008). There are many examples of that during the years. Perhaps the approach that the National Board of Education had at the end of 1980's is interesting example in this context. The Board ordered two short books from researchers, the first focusing to the conception of knowledge and the

other one to the conception of learning (Voutilainen & al. 1989; Lehtinen & al. 1990). Those documents were used to encourage teachers to debate about those issues. My understanding is that those debates made a very good ground for the big change that the 1994 national core curriculum brought.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In Finland, the new long-term development objectives for compulsory education were set some 45 years ago. The reasons for the then revolutionary change were economical, political and practical. Finland wanted to have economical growth by taking care of the potential reserves of gifted people. They thought as Angela Gurría, the OECD Secretary General, who said that “better educational outcomes are a strong predictor for future economic growth” (OECD 2010b). The main measure in gaining that and also an important goal in Finland was to develop compulsory education to meet the criteria of the comprehensive education ideals. PISA shows that Finland has succeeded in its policy to enhance the equity and quality of learning. Finland is on top and, at the same time, only a very few students fall within the lowest PISA categories. Likewise, differences between schools are small. In Finland equity means equal opportunities and fairness. However it is not wise to base development objectives only on PISA performance as national reviews can tell about other more alarming issues. It is also good to realise that PISA has raised criticism (Hopman & al 2007; Raivola 2010; Sjöberg 2007).

Finland has a challenge in trying to maintain her position in international comparisons. There are many reasons for saying this. One issue is increasing international economic competition that forces countries to find ways of increasing knowledge and competences. Another issue is that certain problematic challenges, that I handled earlier, Finland will have to solve in the future. Therefore Finland needs to look behind her shoulders all the time. Others are coming.

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