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## SCHOOL-BASED CURRICULUM IN FINLAND

A system for curriculum design for Finnish basic and secondary education only appeared in a systematic form in the 1960s. The systematisation of thinking and research concerning the curriculum was closely related to the 1970s reform of the comprehensive school with which two very heterogeneous forms of schooling – both in terms of their goals and pupils – were replaced by the comprehensive school which brought together all pupils.

The new, 9-year comprehensive school placed special emphasis on pupils' social equality and the overcoming of different learning difficulties by, for instance, developing special education. Before the birth of the comprehensive school the concept of curriculum itself was largely absent from discussions on Finnish education, and the goals and instructions guiding the actions of individual schools were only to be found scattered in different laws and regulations by the school authorities. The interpretations made of this legislation by school authorities were, however, binding and the degree to which schools followed the regulations was controlled with inspection system, while on the other hand individual teachers had rather strong autonomy in terms of decisions made concerning the organising of teaching in their classrooms. (Sarjala 2008.)

This article first examines the shaping of the Finnish curriculum system in recent decades and then moves on to interrogate a particular phase in the development of the Finnish curriculum, i.e. the realisation of the idea of the school-based curriculum, particularly during the 1990s. Finally, some examples are provided to illustrate what the work on the school-based curriculum has meant in practice for some schools.

### 1. The introduction of the national curriculum as a central tool in guiding schools

From the 1970s onwards, with the introduction of the comprehensive school, the national curriculum became a central tool in the development of a new form of schooling. Although with the reform the responsibilities of the local level, i.e. the regional and municipal level, became formally emphasised, the national curriculum as well as the more detailed instructions from authorities to regulate the activities of municipalities and individual schools were rather detailed and strict. The curriculum was highly centralised, and for instance only teaching materials approved by state authorities were allowed to be used as textbooks. Furthermore, school inspectors stationed in different areas of the country supervised whether the instructions given were followed.

The early stages in the development of the Finnish comprehensive school were characterised by a belief in the power of detailed planning in bringing about change – a phenomenon peculiar to the time. The role of researchers – those conducting research on educational issues as well as others – was also central in the reform, with professors of education acting as chairs in the central bodies drafting curricula and the country's top experts working on developing the teaching of individual subjects. A further development underpinning the reform was the changes made in teacher education, as holding a Master's degree became the minimum requirement for a class teacher's post (teaching grades 1-6), and all teacher education became university-level education. (Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi 2006.)

The curriculum texts compiled at the time still are, even by today's standards, very expertly compiled, combining issues pertaining to education, teaching and learning in a modern manner, and well integrated into the overall development of society. However, as is typical of expert work, the texts produced were long and complex. Thus, they proved to be problematic for teachers and did not therefore function as a very useful guideline for them considering everyday school work. Consequently, the central guiding tools for teachers were textbooks and extensive in-service training, the introduction of which was part of the reform.

In the 1980s, the Finnish curriculum system became stabilised into its present form where the government decides on both the subjects taught at schools as well as the time used on the teaching of each subject. The basic guidelines of the national framework curriculum, compiled on the national level, determine the general principles for the activities of all schools as well the common goals for the teaching of each subject. The municipalities then have the responsibility to compose the curriculum for individual schools. In this process the expertise of teachers is widely utilised, but only to the extent that the curricula of individual schools are not allowed to be in conflict with the guidelines given in the national framework curriculum or the amount of teaching allocated for each subject by the government. Although the Finnish curriculum system has remained largely similar for more than 30 years, its implementation has varied greatly depending on political fluctuations.

In terms of the use of power, the Finnish curriculum system is fairly flexible, as it in principle provides the administrators of schooling – in most cases the municipalities – with possibilities to develop their own teaching and curricula. There are, however, considerable differences in the extent to which these possibilities are realised, and one factor contributing to these differences is the distribution of power between political decision-makers, municipal school administration and schools on matters relating to the curriculum. The bigger the municipality and the stronger the expertise available, the stronger is usually the local influence on educational matters, while in smaller municipalities the expertise and resources available are scarce. In the latter case, then, the local curriculum is in practice a close replica of the national framework curriculum. Moreover, the amount of power granted to local actors in planning their teaching also varies depending on the national political climate.

## 2. Golden era of the school-based curriculum

In the 1990s, demands for the utilisation of local expertise in the process of compiling curricula and in developing teaching became clearly more pronounced in Finland. At the same time, several studies (e.g. Välijärvi 1993) pointed to the demands voiced by pupils themselves for more choice, especially in terms of the range and width of subjects studied. The pupils' demands concerned particularly the upper secondary school which almost 60 per cent of each age group attended after the comprehensive school.

At the same, the political climate in Finland changed, as the Social Democratic Party, which had for long controlled the Ministry of Education had to stand down, and the Minister of Education as well as all the central officials in the Ministry were replaced by representatives of a right-wing party. The neo-liberal education policy which had its roots in England was gaining ground also in Finland, and special emphasis started to be placed on the rights of the family and individual pupils in choosing their schools and the contents of their education. This became concretely evident in the decisions made concerning the hours allocated for each subject in schools, and with the government's decision pupils' opportunities for making their own choices regarding the subjects they were to study increased, particularly in upper secondary school. Similar development occurred in the lower secondary school (grades 7-9), but the changes there were considerably more moderate. In their public statements, the new Minister of Education and the leading officials in the Ministry of Education started to emphasise the utilisation of teachers' expertise in developing curricula, the central role of schools and municipalities in improving the quality of schooling, as well as the importance of profiling for each school to highlight their own areas of strength.

In upper secondary school (grades 10-12) the structure of the curriculum was changed into modular form where students could more flexibly than before build their own study programme by choosing courses from different subjects. This was a significant change as, unlike in the earlier system where everyone followed rather a similar study programme, students could now decide on which courses they wanted to take, following their own inclination. At the same time this naturally required more readiness from the students to be able to plan their own studies and take more responsibility for following their own plans. Consequently, this reform quickly led to a growing need for study counselling. (Välijärvi 1988, 1993.)

Another factor which contributed to this growing need for study counselling in upper secondary school was the change into applying a modular and a non-graded curriculum (Moon 1988). This meant that the time reserved for the completion of one's studies was no longer strictly restricted to three years, and students did not have to follow a study programme that was organised in terms of completing grades. In this system, students could no longer fail a grade – an improvement to what had been considered one of the central problems in upper secondary school studies as failing had in many cases completely destroyed a student's motivation for studying and self-development after school. In the non-graded system each student could control the time they were to use for their studies within the time-frame of two to four years. This enabled for instance for a

student to combine sports or some other time-consuming leisure activities with their studies without it being detrimental to their studies. The non-graded system also requires from the young students the ability to reflect on and take responsibility for their own choices and following their own plans. (Väljörvi 2003.)

### 3. National framework curriculum 1994

In the Finnish practice, the national framework curriculum, reflecting the current political atmosphere, provides general guidelines for local curriculum work to be carried out in municipalities and schools. In the early 1990s, the change in educational policy meant that these guidelines became considerably looser than before, and the most concrete realisation of this was the new national curriculum framework from the year 1994. The mere number of pages in the document was a clear indication of the change taking place; whereas the document which it was to replace was almost 400 pages in length, the new national framework was only c. 100 pages long. (Opetushallitus 1994.)

The theoretical thinking underlying the composition of the new national curriculum framework was completely changed. Whereas the focus had earlier been on the detailed definition of the content of teaching, the control was now targeted at the process of compiling the curriculum in schools and municipalities, with the aim of promoting the active compiling and continuous development of curricula in schools. While this was a completely new situation for Finnish schools with a tradition of quite strong national steering imposed on them, there had already been strong demands from schools and teachers since the 1970s for possibilities of expanding their scope for action and for implementing the curriculum more flexibly to meet the individual needs of pupils and to respond to changes in society.

In the following, the early stages in the development of the 1994 national curriculum framework will be described. The analysis will highlight particularly those stages in the process which aimed at strengthening the role of schools in constructing their own curricula.

#### 3.1. Activating schools for curriculum work

Encouraging schools to invest on the composition of their own curricula became the central goal in the new national curriculum framework. However, gaining credibility for this process in the eyes of the teachers was not self-evident, as the teachers' own experiences spoke against it: earlier they had not been invited to participate in curriculum work which had been controlled by the Ministry of Education and other central administration to achieve certain ends.

The situation was new particularly for the National Board of Education, whose responsibility, under the guidance of the Ministry of Education, the formulation of the national guidelines had been. For schools, the National Board of Education had traditionally embodied the strong power of the central administration in curriculum work.

Now, however, it had to change its role completely and start to promote the idea of a school-based curriculum as well as start moulding attitudes so that the reform would meet with a favourable response. Its aim was defined as the strengthening of the expertise and initiative of schools in questions regarding the curriculum. From a political point of view, it was also a question of a new group exercising power and making conscious effort to move power away from central administration to local authorities and the schools themselves in questions regarding curricula. Whereas prior to the reform, the central concerns in the national guidelines had been the content of teaching and related teaching materials, attention was now directed at the processes of composing the curriculum. The aim of the reform was to empower teachers in guiding their own work and developing their own expertise.

Working on the new model for action started at the beginning of the 1990s, when a few scholars working on issues related to the curriculum and experts from the Ministry of Education met for joint seminars. The researchers were challenged to present alternatives for the then applied manner of constructing the national framework curriculum, and the alternatives they presented in the seminars unambiguously emphasised the demand for the strengthening of the role and power of the schools in composing the curriculum. In their view, the schools were to compose their own curricula taking into consideration their own starting points, and in this the schools were to have considerable autonomy.

The researchers also emphasised the fact that both the content and the form of the curricula could vary considerably from one school to another, depending on the interests and ability for innovation in each school. It was considered essential that the planning would be a shared process which would commit all actors to follow a plan that was to be constructed together, while the national curriculum guidelines were only to provide schools with trends to follow and sufficient tools for carrying out the process.

The reactions from the experts from the National Board of Education towards the researchers' proposals were rather mixed, as they were used to keeping a tight reign on the composition of school curricula. The new ideas also challenged the administration experts to reconsider their own expertise, attitudes and the possible need for developing them. The fear of losing one's own expert power would also clearly become an issue in case the composition of the curricula was to become to a great extent the schools' responsibility. On the other hand, the central key figures involved in the process considered the time and the political situation as favourable to a fundamental reform of curriculum work.

In the next stage schools and their different stakeholders were challenged to engage in a dialogue about the new way of composing the curriculum. Teachers' in-service training, writing into papers and different expert meetings were all used as means for provoking discussion. Teachers' professional magazines in particular were used to encourage teachers to take part in the discussion concerning the guidelines and the practical implementation of the reform.

The strong support of the top administration in the National Board of Education was essential for the reform of the national curriculum framework process and the empowering of schools and teachers. The National Board of Education itself had undergone considerable changes and the reform of the national curriculum framework was its first extensive and widely publicised endeavour. The new top administration of the National Board of Education strongly emphasised in many contexts the expertise and the central role of teachers in guaranteeing teaching of good quality. Moreover, the new director of the Board underscored that administration should trust the teachers, avoid excessive control over schools and provide schools and individual teachers with enough space for them to be able to make their own innovative pedagogical solutions. Prior to this, Finland had already given up of the inspection system which had earlier been considered as a prerequisite in ensuring that education was to be equal and of high quality. (Hirvi 1996.)

It was therefore quite natural that the freedom of schools in making decisions concerning their own curricula and utilising the teachers' expertise became a central guideline also in the national curriculum work. The strengthening of the role of teachers and schools in the process well served the ideology of the new administration in the National Board of Education as well as their profiling in relation to political decision-makers and the field of education on the other hand.

### 3.2. Expert groups and network of experimental schools

For the preparation of the curriculum guidelines, the National Board of Education set up c. 20 groups of experts, most of which focused on the reform of a specific content area (e.g. mathematics, natural sciences, foreign languages, environmental education). These expert groups consisted mostly of teachers and representatives from universities and educational administration. Other members included for instance representatives of the teachers' organisation and working life.

The National Board of Education supervised the preparation of the curriculum guidelines, and the participation of the working groups was to ensure the implementation of the principles of the school-based curriculum into the national curriculum framework in practice. Therefore, the chairs nominated by the National Board of Education to lead the expert groups were all officials from the Board. The search for shared guidelines for the work of all the expert groups mainly took place in discussions among the chairs, also sometimes in cooperation with the administration of the National Board of Education. The feedback received from the members of the working groups on the progress made was also used as material in the discussions carried out within the National Board of Education.

In the chair meetings, the expert groups were encouraged to radically condense the descriptions of their own content areas compared to the earlier national curriculum from the year 1985, and to structure their own areas of responsibility in the national curriculum framework using and clarifying only the most central concepts. For instance, the groups were asked to name those basic concepts that were considered necessary for the

understanding of the fundamental phenomena in physics. In other words, the detailed description of the content of teaching itself was to be avoided, and instead teachers would be provided with the central concepts in each area which they would use as building blocks in their pedagogical planning. Furthermore, these central concepts would be used by the teachers in the curriculum work carried out in their own schools, also in defining what they considered the central contents in their teaching. This strategy would also be applied in the curriculum training provided to the teachers.

To promote schools' readiness for curriculum work, the National Board of Education made an open invitation for schools to participate in a national network for the development of schools. The schools to be included in the network should be able to present a clear plan for the development of their own curriculum work as well as a special theme on which the content of their teaching would concentrate. Based on the themes suggested, the schools included in the network were divided into ten subgroups. The themes ranged, for instance, from the rationalisation of special education to the development of teaching in natural sciences, and from the diversification of teaching methods in foreign languages to study counselling. For each theme, training aiming at providing support for curriculum work was organised. Furthermore, attempts were made to have the schools build networks among themselves by providing them with, for instance, electronic platforms for engaging them into dialogue, and by encouraging and giving resources them to exchange experiences and materials and to find new means for teachers' in-service training.

The schools selected for these development networks were to be called 'aquarium schools', as the processes in the schools were to be as transparent as possible. The aquarium schools were provided with significant amounts of resources for their development work. In return for this they were required to be open for visiting teachers from other schools who were willing to utilise their experiences in curriculum work. The aquarium schools also had the responsibility of acting as trainers in teachers' meetings, and they were to submit written reports on their development work and its results.

### 3.3. Values, views on learning and information-guidance as central elements in the development of curriculum

In the compilation of the 1994 national curriculum framework, the centre of attention had been those scientific and philosophical guidelines on which the construction of the new curriculum was founded. Based on the view that values determine goals and the means with which these are materialised, it was considered to be of utmost importance in starting the process that schools would engage in a discussion on values. In the end, values determine also the ways in which schoolwork is organised, the methods and materials used and their evaluation. Thus, making the underlying values as visible as possible and finding a shared understanding of the values guiding schoolwork through open discussion was considered essential.

The national curriculum framework contained general guidelines considering the values that were seen as central guiding principles in basic education on national level,

including, for instance, equality, individuality and providing support for pupils with learning difficulties. Unlike in earlier curriculum reforms, the most important aspect was considered to be the discussion on values carried out in schools and hence schools were instructed to start their curriculum work with a wide discussion on values, which would bring together the school staff and at least the pupils and their parents. The inclusion of other parties, such as organisations, the church and companies, in the discussions concerning the school's mission, goals and the values underlying these was recommended.

The discussions varied greatly from one school to another, with some schools engaging in very lively and at times passionate dialogue on the values on which school work was to be built upon, and even conflicts could not be avoided. On the other hand, in many schools the discussion remained rather superficial and consisted mostly of listing different value statements and the presentation of the national curriculum framework texts.

The nature of these processes was largely dependent of both the skill and willingness of the teachers and the school administration to bring about an active curriculum planning process that would suit their own school. Furthermore, the willingness of the school administration and teachers to attract parents, pupils and other interest parties to engage themselves in discussing the values, as well as to guide the process in a manner, which would promote and support the process of composing a curriculum, varied greatly.

Many schools lacked previous experience in conducting such discussions, as contacts to parents and the wider operational environment had been conducted unilaterally by simply informing them of those issues that were considered important enough. Hence, many schools had to create completely new forms of interaction and dialogue in constructing their own curricula. Furthermore, for many schools their success in creating these new practices depended on the willingness of parents and their associations to openly and critically discuss the issues with the school.

To generalise, it can thus be stated that the nature and intensity of the process of constructing a curriculum varied greatly from one municipality and school to another despite the fact that national guidance aimed at creating uniformity on the national level. Considerably more training would have been required, and especially the school administration should have been familiarised with possible ways in which the dialogue on values both within schools and between the schools and their different interest groups could have been carried out.

The formulation of the new national curriculum framework was preceded by an extensive discussion on the national level on the nature of knowledge and learning. The existing, diverse research on learning that introduced the constructivist view on learning to large numbers of teachers functioned as a backdrop for these discussions. Consequently, the discussion on national level crystallised into a new view on learning which became the central building block for the new curriculum. (Voutilainen et al. 1989.)

The new conception on learning highlighted the learners' active role as recipients and interpreters of knowledge and as producers of their own knowledge. Thus, research findings were central in the national curriculum framework as well as in efforts to have an influence on the teachers' conceptions of the fundamentals of their own work. The teachers' central role in guiding the pupils' learning processes and in building an effective and successful learning environment was emphasised instead of viewing them as simply distributing ready-made knowledge. To put it otherwise, the teachers' task was to create an environment favourable for learning and to pedagogically guide the pupils to work in this environment in a manner, which would take into consideration the goals defined in the curriculum. Furthermore, the role of and methods for evaluation were seen in a new light. Thus, there was a desire to have the latest research on learning become an essential element in the teachers' planning of the new curriculum for their schools. (Lehtinen et al. 1993)

From the teachers' perspective, the curriculum was thus seen as a tool with which, firstly, the school community would be able to lay the foundations for building an effective learning environment and guiding the pupils' learning process and, secondly, with the help of which their visions would find their concrete realisations. According to the conception on learning adopted, this could only succeed if the teachers would actively participate in composing the curriculum; goals would not be achieved by applying the traditional approach where teachers were provided with specific models and instructions on how to do it. The teachers were now forced to reflect on the underlying values of school work and discuss them with their pupils, teachers and other interest groups. Moreover, they were to clarify their own goals and reflect on the regularities of learning, and search for means to guide the pupils' learning towards the goals set and carry out their evaluation accordingly. From this it was to follow that the teachers would learn themselves, and internalise their new role as guiding the pupils' learning and, consequently, to become more capable than before to help their pupils become active and independent learners. This is also the foundation on which the needed skills and motivation for lifelong learning are built in. (Tynjälä et al 2005.)

### 3.4. Feedback on the new national curriculum framework

The first draft of the national curriculum framework was published and thus became subject for open discussion more than a year before it was expected to be ready. The published draft was in many ways different from the guidelines from the year 1985 which schools had used earlier to plan their work.

The first remarkable difference was in the language used in the two documents. The earlier 1985 guidelines were written for municipalities and schools to be used as binding norms and instructions, which were to be strictly followed. The style of the document was that of a juridically binding text, as its function was to specify and to offer a detailed interpretation of the goals and responsibilities defined in educational laws.

In contrast, the new national curriculum framework was more like a description of the procedure that was to be followed in municipalities and schools as they were working on

their curricula. The text, therefore, focused on specifying the steps in the process and making it more concrete as well offering research-based justification for it. Moreover, it offered teachers and schools with alternative ways of proceeding in their planning, and highlighted the importance of engaging in discussions on values concerning learning and the production and selection of knowledge. The new framework was, therefore, more in the form of a dialogue and focused on presenting arguments for the guiding principles, drawing on existing research for justification. In the end, many central issues, such as the selection of what was to be taught and how, as well as methods of evaluation, were left to be decided upon in schools. That is, in the new framework the significance of the school community in making decisions was highlighted instead of having authorities impose rules from the outside.

The two documents also differed from each other in terms of their length. While the earlier national curriculum framework for comprehensive school was nearly 400 pages long, the new one consisted of only roughly about 100 pages. A similar development occurred with the national curriculum for upper secondary school. Especially the detailed descriptions of the content of individual subjects had been strongly condensed. This was done in order to give more freedom to municipalities and schools to make their own decisions.

Thirdly, the drafting of the curriculum guidelines was to be an open and dialogic process. Before the final version of the document was to be formulated, as many different perspectives, comments and suggestions as possible were called for and for this purpose the first draft was widely distributed and a request for a statement on it sent to every Finnish school (at the time there were more than 5000 of them) as well as to a number of organisations and other interest groups. Of specific interest were the comments from schools and other interest parties on the readiness and willingness of schools to have more power over the drafting of their own curricula.

The feedback received, roughly from 1000 schools and other parties, was analysed and a summary of it was provided to the groups working on the curriculum guidelines. A majority of the feedback was positive on the suggestion to provide schools and teachers with more power over the drafting of their own curricula. In the feedback, some suspicion was voiced concerning the teachers' readiness and motivation for curriculum work, based on the assumption that in their planning they had become used to focusing only on their own teaching and reflecting on learning practices only from the point of view of the subjects they themselves taught. However, the feedback also highlighted the teachers' high level of education and willingness to develop teaching in their own areas. With the new flexible national framework, those teachers and schools most willing and able to focus on pedagogic development were now offered a chance to do so. Although it was suspected that most schools would still resort to copying the national guidelines almost verbatim for their own curricula, it was considered important to open up possibilities and encourage those schools with enthusiasm and innovative ideas to reform their work.

### 3.5. Training, teachers' familiarisation and supporting materials

To support the curriculum work carried out in schools, the National Board of Education organised extensive training across the country where all the central principles of the reform were discussed. The schools and teachers were above all encouraged to assume an active role in the curriculum work, and the significance of engaging pupils, parents and other parties into a discussion on the values embraced in school work was emphasised.

Furthermore, an extensive material package was compiled to support schools in this endeavour, and these supporting materials were used in training teachers. Their function was to make the matter more concrete to the teachers, for instance by deepening their understanding of the practical implications of having a school-based curriculum through examples. (Apajalahti et al. 1996)

#### 4. Teachers' role in decision-making concerning the curriculum

In practice, the strengthening of the school-based curriculum ideology has meant that since the 1990s, teachers have had more power over curriculum work. In Finland for instance school boards have never had a strong role in reforming curricula or in decision-making in a more general sense. The school principals' power in Finnish schools is also considerably more limited than it is in many other countries.

Comparisons made in the PISA survey concerning decision-making in different countries clearly show the teachers' strong role in matters related to curriculum planning in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Finnish schools (OECD 2004; 2007). This can be partly seen as a result of curriculum planning having become more and more the responsibility of individual schools in the 1990s, although even prior to this development the teachers had quite a strong autonomy in planning their own work. In the PISA survey, school principals evaluated the national and local decision-making power over schools' activities. In their evaluations they focused on 12 essential factors bearing major influence on school activities. In the figures attached, these aspects are marked on the y-axis. For each factor, the principals were asked to evaluate who in their view has considerable power on decisions concerning the factor in question.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE [Teachers' responsibility]

Figure 1 shows that it is characteristic of Finnish schools that teachers play a central role in making decisions about general matters having to do with school activities. In most other countries the teachers' role is much more limited in such decision-making, while the power rests more distinctly with the principal and the school board (OECD, 2001; 2004). While in about 80-90% of Finnish schools the teachers have the main responsibility on decisions made concerning the courses to be offered, course contents and textbooks, in OECD countries teachers can rather rarely decide on these matters. A similar difference between the roles of Finnish and OECD teachers on average can be seen in decision-making on the school's assessment and disciplinary policies.

As opposed to teachers' strong power, the role of principals in Finnish schools is weaker than in many other countries. Compared to Finland e.g. Japanese principals have much more decision-making power on school matters. Especially in course content and textbook issues the Japanese principals play a pivotal role when compared to their Finnish colleagues, while in Finland these matters are usually decided on by teachers. By the same token, in Finland it is clearly more unusual than in Japan that school-based assessment policies are for the principal to decide. On the other hand, Finnish principals have considerable power in comparison to their Japanese colleagues when it comes to budget allocations and selecting teachers. However, the principal can extremely rarely influence teachers' salaries in Finland, though it is fairly rare in Japan, as well.

It is not an overstatement to suggest that quality assurance in the Finnish education system is largely based on trust on teachers and their expertise. We believe that academically educated teachers are the best experts to design their teaching practices within the fairly loose frame of national curricula. We also trust that they do their best in the classroom to promote learning. This may sound quite idealistic, but in view of the results of the recent international studies at least, the teachers have deserved this trust. It is also important to keep in mind that in terms of educational investment Finland has clearly made a choice different from most other European countries. Instead of external evaluation, Finland has invested heavily on teacher education. It seems that these investments have yielded good results and helped maintain the high esteem and popularity enjoyed by the profession.

Many international surveys carried out on learning results illustrate that the approach assumed in the 1990s, with emphasis placed on the autonomy of schools in curriculum design and trusting teachers' expertise, has yielded good results. While learning results in Finland are on average the best in the world, the variation between pupils' and schools' results are also the smallest in the world. These results suggest that Finnish schools have been more successful than those in other countries to combine excellence with equity. This has been successful because schools have been flexibly provided with possibilities to find their own curricular and pedagogical solutions that are optimal for the pupils. The teachers' high level of education (a Master's degree held by every teacher) and their strong commitment to their work are necessary prerequisites for the pedagogically expedient and ethically sustainable application of this flexibility. This has also guaranteed that differences in learning results between schools have remained smaller than in any other country, although Finnish schools have had considerably more freedom in deciding on their own practices than was the case during the centralised curriculum.

Unlike most other countries standards and standardized national tests play a very limited role in the Finnish education system. Standards have often been seen in Finland as restricting teachers' innovative thinking and pedagogical freedom in developing curricula and their methods. To set standards for educational practices and student outcomes is a task quite different from, say, setting standards for industrial products or services. To achieve certain educational goals there are always many alternative routes to follow which can be equally effective, and the resulting effectiveness largely depends on the context in which teachers and schools do their work.

The role and significance of standards in Finnish education is determined largely in relation to teachers' work and pedagogical development, not so much to specified targets set in curricula. There are nationally set subject-specific standards for good mastery, the purpose of which is, above all, to help schools and teachers in planning their own work. These standards are not binding in the sense that their realisation would be specifically controlled or evaluated. In Finland there are no national tests for all schools and all students at the end or during the comprehensive school. That's why there are no public league tables of the schools either. The learning outcomes of the nine-year comprehensive school are monitored by national and international (e.g. PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS, ICCS) sample-based surveys. Yet, also these results are published on the system level only, while the results of individual schools are delivered only to the schools in question.

#### 5. New national curriculum framework in 2004

In 2004, the new national curriculum framework was introduced in Finnish schools. The new framework is more binding and more detailed than the one from year 1994. This reform meant a partial return to the nationally centralised curriculum despite the fact that based on learning results, the earlier national curriculum framework seemed to have worked brilliantly. However, the political climate and the operational environment of schools had changed.

On the other hand the new framework places the school and teachers' work into a larger social and pedagogical context than the national curriculum from year 1994. This for its parts reflects the school's changing social role and the widening of its social responsibility, a consequence of the changes in its operational environment. This change, which in many ways can be seen as negative for the wellbeing and balanced development of children and young people is reflected in children's experiences and behaviour and therefore clearly visible in everyday school work. Thus, when individual schools reform their own curricula they will increasingly and in more depth have to take into account developments in the surrounding society. ( Huusko et al. 2007; Kartovaara 2007)

Discussion on the accountability of schools and their responsibility in using tax payers' money has increased also in Finland. Demands for the use of standardised national tests appear from time to time but the topic is not very popular in the public debate. Instead, each school is responsible for the evaluation of its own pupils. Some consider this as a serious problem in terms of pupils' equal treatment, while others call for the use of standardised tests so as to be able to provide parents with information they could use in choosing the school their children should go to.

Thanks to the excellent PISA results, Finland has, however, been able to avoid the "testing hell" that most other countries seem to be victims of. In Finland teachers are also appreciated, and the profession enjoys popularity among young people. A central reason for why becoming a teacher remains a popular career choice seems to be the experience that, unlike in most countries, teachers have a high degree of autonomy in their work,

which along with their considerable professional skills is highly respected. The new 2004 national curriculum framework to some extent threatens to encroach on teachers' autonomy, but its effects in this respect are still likely to remain rather limited, and hopefully temporary.

### **Designing school-based curricula in practice**

The school-based process for designing a school curriculum took place first time in the 1994 curriculum reform. In that reform schools and teachers were first time involved in the design process they had very little experience in the past. According to some empirical studies on the design processes at the school level it is quite clear that schools experienced changes at least in five levels (Ropo & Huopainen 2001). The first level related to changes in the role of the principal or rector. School principals' role seemed to change from pure administration to pedagogical coaching. The school-based design of the curriculum required a lot of teamwork from teachers, which was based on the delegation of power from the principal to teachers. Second, also teachers' position in the schools changed towards being a mentor or tutor of their students. Teachers were delegated the work to design the school curriculum and this effort was mentioned by the teachers to change their framework for teaching towards more holistic perspectives. Third change took place in the teaching methods towards more student centred approaches and cooperation between teachers. Concurrently with the curriculum reform changes related to thinking about learning gained popularity in Finnish schools. For instance, constructivistic learning models emphasized the role of students as subjects of their own learning. Teachers were supposed to coach and mentor these processes. Fourth change related to interaction and discourses between the school and its stake holders, such as homes and parents and the community at large. It was, for instance, necessary to discuss the values of the school as part of the curriculum development process. The fifth change seemed to relate to the contextualization of the goals and purposes of school education. Teachers expressed in the interviews that they have started to think in deeper levels both the goals and the achievement criteria of the learning goals. (see Ropo & Huopainen 2001.)

The 1994 reform changed Finnish schools a lot. Therefore it was natural that teachers also wanted training for new duties they were required to accomplish as part of their teaching work. In many cases the experiences of the training process organized, for instance, by the National Board of Education were quite poor and too theoretical (Ropo & Huopainen 2001.)

In 2004 the idea of the school-based curriculum was familiar with teachers and schools. They were also experienced the amount of work needed for the process. Consequently, the process was organized and directed better by the municipalities than the earlier design process.

As an example how school-based curricula have been implemented in the schools in 2004 we will present a case. The case is from the city of Tampere, which is in the Finnish context one of the largest municipal school districts.

Tampere has a population of 200,000 inhabitants. There are a little over 50 primary schools and 14 high schools in the city. Number of teachers in primary education was

1190 in 2005. Three primary schools are private and the rest are operated by the city. Eight high schools are city owned and operated. The rest are private or owned by the state (the Tampere University practice school). The number of students in basic education, comprising grades 1 through 9, is about 17,000. About 55% of the primary school graduates continue their studies in high schools and 35% in vocational education. The number of students in high schools is about 4000 and out of those 800 students go to the evening classes. The number of tenured teachers was 197 in high schools in 2005.

Finnish school system is similar in different municipalities. Schools are administrated centrally. For instance, teachers and personnel are hired by the city, although rectors usually interview the applicants and give their recommendations for the nominating school board.

Curriculum system can be described, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, as a three-level planning process. First level is national and it means that basic values, aims of education and subject matter level overall learning goals are expressed as a core curriculum. At the municipal level curriculum planning teams add aspects and details that are selected to be common for all the schools in the administrative area. Third stage is school level planning. Schools add their own special focuses into the curriculum to emphasize their own educational profile. This structure prevails both in primary and secondary school curricula.

### **Municipal and school curriculum planning in primary education in Tampere**

As mentioned earlier the last curriculum reform in Finland took place in 2003-4. The new national core curriculum was approved in January 2004. According to the official decision the curriculum could be taken in use in the beginning of new school year between 2004 and 2006.

The so-called aquarium school in Tampere had an opportunity to start using the new curriculum a year earlier than other Tampere schools. Their experiences were important for other schools in implementing the new ideas for schoolwork.

Municipal curriculum development was organized in Tampere by inviting primary school a task force of school rectors, teachers and planning staff into the coordination board that organized the planning process in the fall 2003. Two of the members of the board specialized to process mentors whose main duty was to help schools in planning those parts of the curricula in which school decisions were needed.

The coordination board set the main schedules for the work, coordinated the work and provided help for the subject groups and schools. Subject groups were set up to design subject curricula for the grades 1 through 9. Members of these groups were both primary (grades 1 through 6) and secondary teachers (grades 7 through 9). There were only 2-4 members in those groups in each school subject from the whole municipal area. In addition to designing the municipal flavour to the subject goal and instruction they were also asked to plan the instructional connections between the subject goals and the six cross-curricular themes. The same group also made connections between the subject goals and the city strategy.

The cross-cultural themes in the core curriculum were named as follows: (1) *growth as a person*, (2) *cultural identity and internationalism*, (3) *media skills and communication*,

(4) *participatory citizenship and entrepreneurship*, (5) *responsibility for the environment, well-being and a sustainable future*, (6) *safety and traffic* and (7) *technology and the individual*. All of the cross-cultural themes are large and complicated but at the same time important for the personal growth of students. For different school subjects they can be integrated differently. In the Tampere school curricula these themes are typically operationalized into a list of topics that are taught in the school. For instance, the Aleksanteri school has formulated a list of topics to be taught in different subjects (e.g. environmental education, international education, traffic education, health education, work life education, growing as a person, and cultural identity and international issues). Connections to different school subjects are not well specified in this curriculum.

The connections between school curriculum and the city strategy were restricted only to mentioning the ICT (information and communication technology) strategy of the city. It was stated in the city strategy that all teachers should have a specific level in ICT skills and that these skills will be taught to all students, as well.

The national curriculum gives local school authorities space of localization although the 2004 version of the national curriculum is tighter in sense that there is less space for local design compared to the 1994 version of the curriculum. Locally or partly locally designed general issues in the national curriculum were the following: Local values of education, conceptions of learning and learning environment, local cultural context of education, instructional methods, students' health care, counselling, mentoring and supporting students in their special needs to be planned together with social work and health care organizations, cooperation between homes and schools, special education, prevention of social problems, and safety in the schools. Also extra hour activities after the school belonged to the category to be planned locally. Parts of these plans are municipal and the rest designed by the schools themselves (such as extra hour activities for students). Also common guidelines for student evaluation and assessment were to be designed locally.

These parts are all written as an additional text into to document in which the national curriculum is the basis. The nationally core curriculum is about 300 pages long, the municipal text comprises about 400 pages (including the national core curriculum) and the additional school level text makes about an extra 100 pages to the text of the school curriculum. The school level work in the design was important and also extensive. There are no empirical data on the teachers' experiences of the work, but overall it was extensive. The basic work took a year and some adjustments have been made later on because of the changed decree to the language program and the lesson hour division. The decisions of the general goals and lesson hour division in primary education are made by the Parliament. As a conclusion it can be said that curriculum planning and decision making has become an important part of every teachers' work. It is, however, periodic in the sense that intensive work actualizes every five to ten years.

### **Municipal curriculum planning in secondary education**

High school (gymnasium) curriculum reform in 2003-5 followed basically the same timetable as the primary education curriculum reform. The national core curriculum for

high schools was approved and published by the National Board of Education on August 27, 2003. As mentioned earlier the core curriculum was stricter in the sense that it was binding and to be followed in designing and planning the school curricula at the municipal level. The national core curriculum for high schools is 254 pages long.

In Tampere the municipal planning group was initiated in spring 2003 and the director of upper secondary education chaired it. There were eight members and they represented each high school (8). They were also selected from different subject groups to represent the major subject groups. The secretary of the group represented the school administration and she was a specialized in the curriculum development. It was mandated at the national level that the new curricula were to be taken in use in August 2005.

The above municipal group was nominated to design the municipal level common curriculum. Consequently, their basic task was to decide how Tampere is taking care of the open questions described in the first four chapters of the core curriculum. First one of those questions deals with fitting the core curriculum into the local context and conditions. It was encouraged to include local history, nature and environment, mother tongue and local language variation and business and industry in some ways to the local curricula. In the localization of the curriculum those aspects formed a framework in which goals and programs of were to be designed. Second aspect was to specify the values of education to fit the municipal and school context from those presented in the national curriculum. The third task of the group was to make instructions for the school-based design of the municipal curriculum. Fourth, it was instructed that the municipal task force has to plan a local system for cooperation between homes and the school, student mentoring, counselling and health care. Also plans for preventing social problems in the schools and providing support in learning, social or health difficulties were to be designed as part of curriculum planning. It was also necessary to decide about the evaluation of student learning in the municipal area.

Basically the structure of the school-based curricula is the same in every school. The national core curriculum is the basic document. The municipal group added text in each chapter according to the above-mentioned requirements depending how much the group wanted to specify the nationally mandated text. For instance, in the local values section the group added the following text:

In Tampere high school education aims at the following goals:

- High school supports the students' growth into harmonious citizens
- High school education provides students with good qualifications and motivation for further studies and continuing self-development
- Teaching, instruction and learning results are nationally and internationally high quality
- Every student learns and adopts the principles of sustaining development
- School offers a safe and socially healthy environment that nurtures creativity and development of social communities in the local area
- High school education promotes the development of ICT and media skills and critical evaluation of information.

The above type of specifications to the general parts and the subject matter goals comprise about 17 pages of text (out of 271 pages). Subject matter localization into the goals and course contents were designed and specified by the subject groups in which every school participated. These groups started in spring 2004 and they finished their work in October 2004 when the municipal curriculum was accepted in the city Education Board. Subject matter groups (15 groups in total) comprised of five to seven subject teachers from different schools. The total of 74 (out of 197) teachers participated the work in the subject groups. This means that about 38 percent of tenured teachers participated the municipal planning. According to one rector this benefitted a lot the curriculum development in the school level (oral information May 2009).

### *School level planning of the curriculum*

School curricula are based on the municipal curriculum document. However, all high schools have a special orientation in their education. The specialization areas are, depending on the school, music, sports, media education, mathematics and computer science, arts, or IB (International Baccalaureate). At the schools curriculum planning has focused on defining and describing the school level values, study program and courses offered in different subjects. For instance, every school has, in addition to the basic and advanced level courses listed in the national curriculum, also their own advanced courses depending on the resources and specialization of the teachers. School curricula specify the objectives and evaluation of those courses.

School level experiences have shown that teachers are active in revising the subject matter courses. It is possible to add new courses or cancel old courses to and from the school curriculum by the decision of school. These decisions are made annually during the spring term when fall term course offerings are planned. Also in secondary education teachers' work load has increased because of curriculum work, but this change has also increased cooperation between the same subject teachers in both municipal and school level.

### Conclusions

The change of the curriculum seems to be, in the long run, like a pendulum: first it moves to one extreme and after that it irrevocably starts to move towards the opposite end. In the 1990s Finnish education policy and national framework curriculum moved strongly towards the idea of de-centralization. After that the pendulum has started to move backwards, towards more specific and more centralized national curriculum. However, Finnish teachers are still considered autonomous pedagogical professionals who are allowed to work with their students free of the pressures of strict standards, external national tests, public league tables or inspection systems. It is still allowed to use pedagogical deliberation in Finnish classrooms although many external interest groups would like to see more standardized learning environment in Finnish schools. We hope and that pendulum does not again move to another extreme because, so we believe, this would be harmful for the excellent Finnish PISA-results.

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