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Pondering the Future of Basic Education

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Introduction

The theme of this paper is the future of basic education. My perspective as a writer is mostly from Finland's point of view, only because I have been fortunate enough to work on different levels of education in Finland for more than 25 years. During those years, I have gained experience and knowledge from national, local, and school levels—and witnessed many changes along the way. However, I am also reaching wider with my ponderings, because internationalization and cooperation between countries is an important and continually increasing aspect of education. Also, according to my own perception, many issues are common between countries, and we have a lot to learn from each other.

Currently, I work at the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture as a senior ministerial adviser. Prior to this, I served as a counsellor of education at the Finnish National Agency for Education, the head of education in one of the Finnish municipalities, a principal, and a special education teacher. After completing my master's degree in 1992, I continued on to study educational administration and leadership. Currently, I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Helsinki, researching the future of Finnish basic education according to the directors of education in Finnish municipalities.

Both education and the teaching profession have traditionally been held in high regard in Finland (OECD, 2003a). Finnish basic education has received international acclaim and attention over the years for its high quality and good results, particularly after the publication of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results (OECD, 2001, 2003b, 2007, 2010, 2014, 2016). Part of this success can be explained by Finnish culture, where education and learning are considered to be an important resource to a small country (Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi, 2006). But obviously there are also other explaining factors.

All Finnish cohorts go through nine years of basic education, so it has a large impact on both individuals and society. Publicly funded comprehensive education to the whole age group is a fundamental right for every child (Ministry of Justice, 1999). This compulsory education begins in the year during which the child turns 7. Municipalities provide most of the public services (Etelälahti, 2008). They are economically independent actors who have responsibility for their operations and finances. They are not operated for profit, but their main function is to provide services for tax revenues (Etelälahti, 2008). The Basic Education Act (1998) defines that local authorities have an obligation to arrange basic education for children of compulsory school age residing in its area. Legislation leaves municipalities rather broad possibilities for the implementation of education (Arajärvi & Aalto-Setälä, 2004). According to Statistics Finland's

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education statistics, at the end of 2017, there were 2,276 basic education schools in Finland, and most of them are maintained by the municipality (Suomen Virallinen Tilasto, 2018).

Equality and nondiscrimination are key aspects of Finland as a nation (Constitution of Finland, 1999) and our education policy (Basic Education Act, 1998; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2012). Finland is such a small country, and cannot afford to leave

anyone behind. All children are offered the same opportunity for high-quality education. The whole schooling system is based on inclusion, and professionals in education, health, and social services work closely together. We have strongly invested in our support and pupil welfare systems, and when we create a school environment suitable for the children who need support, we at the same time create a school that is good for everyone.

Choices in education are made by the pupils themselves; no one can make choices on their behalf. Career counseling is available to help young people consider their alternatives. Also, job shadowing is arranged during basic education to support their choices. At the end of the 9th grade, each pupil chooses to continue either to upper secondary or to vocational education and training. If this decision later proves to be mistaken, one can always change the chosen path. There are no dead ends in the Finnish education system (Ministry of Education and Culture & FNAE, 2017)—whichever route you choose, there is always a way to continue studies as far as you want to go. In addition, attention will be paid to flexible transitions from one level of schooling to another.

Teachers in Finland are an essential resource for learning, and they all have a master's degree. They are trusted and respected in society, and they have strong professional autonomy (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018). Teaching is an appreciated profession, and teacher education is popular among young students. This leads to the situation where the universities offering teacher education can select the best among good candidates to become future teachers (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016). This is done by a selection mechanism that measures academic abilities, but also personal suitability and motivation for teaching.

Reforming Basic Education by National Core Curriculum

As it is widely known, Finnish basic education is guided by a national core curriculum (Basic Education Act, 1998; Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). The curriculum holds great importance, because unlike many other countries, we have no national tests, no rankings, and no inspections in basic education. The task of the curriculum is to support and guide the provision of education and the work in schools both nationally and locally, and by doing so to promote equal opportunities in education. The education provider is responsible for the preparation and development of the local curriculum (Basic Education Act, 1998). It complements the objectives, policies, and key contents defined in the national core curriculum, and has the power to add aspects important from a local perspective.

Core curriculum is renewed approximately every 10 years in wide cooperation with society as a whole. Curriculum reform is a pedagogical reform that builds wholeness in basic education. The latest curriculum reform was carried out recently, with a new basic education core curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014) implemented in Fall 2016. The most important issues in education, such as working culture, pedagogy, learning environments, support for pupils, pupil welfare services, cooperation, assessment, as well as objectives and contents of the subjects, are all defined in the curriculum. There are also seven transversal competence areas (i.e., 21st century skills) and multidisciplinary learning modules (cross-curricula activities) that are planned and implemented in cooperation between several subjects. These learning modules contain integrative instruction techniques; give space for intellectual curiosity, experiences and creativity; and challenge pupils to engage in many types of interactions and situations. The goal is to increase knowledge, but also to support individual growth, creativity and skills.

There are many options for how to describe the skills needed in the future. Based on my own experience, these skills can be divided roughly into three categories. First, you need to be able to manage yourself. This means that one should have life skills, self-control, responsibility about oneself, an ability to innovate, creativity and the ability to perform in different situations, confidence for the future, and analytical and critical thinking skills. On the other hand, you need to have social skills and be able to work with others—be part of the community, appreciate and respect others, and have cultural sensitivity, interaction, and cooperation skills. The third category includes academic and extensive skills such as global competence, multiliteracy, language skills, entrepreneurship, and technological skills.

When we Finnish educators and parents want to support our children to develop these skills needed in the future, it is not enough just to tell them what to do. They need to be in the center of their own learning and take ownership and responsibility for it. The learner has an active role in setting targets, reflecting, analyzing, and solving problems. Learning also takes place in interactions with others and in different environments. Pupils need to learn how to learn, recognize their own ways of learning, and develop their self-conception and confidence. They should have opportunities to practice things—alone and together—and they should have adults around them who lead by example.

Finding a Balance

The education sector is wide, and holds an importance for everyone in every age group. There are continuous changes going on both in content and in ways of arranging education. These changes need to be planned, managed, and well justified—and they have to serve the interests of all parties. In such a situation, finding balance is particularly relevant, and can be approached from several perspectives.

The issue of balance has emerged in educational conversations between European education system leaders. As a part of the European Commission Education and Training 2020 work, a working group for schools has been working for the last two years on issues of quality assurance, continuity and transitions, teachers and school leaders, as well as networks across school education systems (European Commission, 2018). I personally have been working closely with this working group, and my interpretation of the underlying themes connecting these official

mandates has been centralized control versus decentralized responsibility, top-down versus bottom-up steering, tightening control versus adding autonomy, rankings versus self-assessment, and competition versus cooperation.

Balancing autonomy and accountability is a significant and ongoing challenge for education systems (European Commission, 2018). Ministries at the national level have a responsibility to steer and regulate education in their countries, but the models they use vary. These steering models have an origin in the history of both the state and the tradition of organizing education. National governments, even in countries with a highly centralized system, have a desire to give more autonomy to the local level (European Commission, 2017a). One reason for this is trying to help schools respond better to local and individual needs. But still most European countries use frameworks where centralized forms of control—inspectorates, national student assessments, and teacher appraisals—are part of quality assurance mechanisms (European Commission, 2017b).

On the other end of the spectrum, there are countries like Finland who have chosen a more decentralized, bottom-up model, giving responsibility to the education providers themselves. In these countries, there are strong traditions of local ownership, and a high degree of autonomy is granted in school policies, curriculum development, evaluation, and assessment (OECD, 2013).

Whatever the steering system is, communication and interaction between people and educational structures, levels and sectors, is always important. Coming from my own experience, the top-down kind of steering, the state regulating the local education providers, is quite common and used a lot. But the other part—hearing what the regions, municipalities, and schools have to say and what they need—may more often be forgotten. But there should be an appropriate balance of top-down support and bottom-up action (European Commission, 2017a).

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European Union member states agree on wanting to increase the quality of education everywhere and continuously (European Commission, 2017b), but there are different opinions how this should be done. Change can be empowered through enhanced autonomy (Schleicher, 2018), and there is a trend in education towards that. According to the OECD Report on Evaluation and Assessment (2013), however, this in many cases leads to an increasing need to monitor how schools are doing (OECD, 2013). In the discussions I personally have had over the years, for some people this means tightening control by creating new standards and checklists or adding inspections as a way to increase and secure quality. The OECD report confirms this notion by stating that in most of the OECD countries, the focus is now broader and includes greater use of external school evaluation, appraisal of staff, and expanded use of performance data (OECD, 2013).

As a part of the evaluation system, many countries set educational standards for what students should know and be able to do. This has encouraged monitoring to determine if students are meeting the standards set. When education systems are focusing more on measuring student

outcomes, it also allows comparisons of performance between schools and regions over time. Many countries publish those national tables of results (OECD, 2013). However, national evaluation policy should serve the equality of educational opportunities, not the competition between schools. Adding control through national tests may have a negative effect on the working culture, and those tests should not be used as a tool to narrow the pedagogical autonomy of the school (Ouakrim-Soivio, Rinkinen, & Karjalainen, 2015). In Finland, we believe in steering instead of controlling, and there is a strong focus on self-evaluation of schools and education providers (Ministry of Education and Culture & FNAE, 2017). In this approach, while adding autonomy, more responsibility is also expected from the local level. Decentralization adds the need to develop ways to support local education providers in their work. This support may include different kinds of tools, and networks are one example of supporting interactions between key actors. Networking has a particular significance within highly decentralized education systems (Ministry of Education, 2017a).

Competition between actors can undermine the benefits of networking. If the steering system makes schools compete with each other, it hampers cooperation. A competitive attitude is a real barrier to cooperation. Building trust, on the other hand, increases the likelihood that people will invest in cooperation and developing relationships, and it also supports exchanging ideas (European Commission, 2017b).

The discussion about balance leads us finally to the world of evaluation and assessment. Based on my own experience, quality assurance is often considered to be solely an issue of assessment, and more focused on evaluating the outcomes than the processes. If the education system shifts from centralized control to more decentralized responsibility, adds more bottom-up approaches, and increases local autonomy, then it is natural that evaluation also shifts more from external to the self-assessment. If local education providers and schools are given more opportunities to plan their education to meet their own needs, it would be logical also to give them the responsibility to self-evaluate and be accountable of their own activities.

Concluding Thoughts

Many of the issues mentioned above raise from my personal experience in education. Some of them should be investigated closer, for example, the mechanisms of external and internal accountability. Playing it safe and keeping the status quo is not the best way to reform education. From my point of view, educators need to have the opportunity to innovate and experiment with a variety of new ways of doing things. These experiments will allow them to find ways to renew and evolve education, without having to change the entire system at once. It is possible to pick and share the best pieces of new practices. There is really no such thing as a failure—there is only information collected through experimentation and lessons learnt from that.

Keeping that in mind, changing the whole system at once can be challenging or even unnecessary. In education systems where traditionally the top-down approach in quality assurance is in use, it will likely take even more time to shift the mindsets of the actors involved (European Commission, 2017b). However, from my own experience, if a country wants to move toward a more decentralized model and share responsibilities, actions to make that happen can be taken gradually and one matter at a time.

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