

CHAPTER 6

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THE NEW EDUCATIONAL CURRICULUM IN FINLAND

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ABSTRACT

The chapter examines the starting points as well as the main goals and guidelines of the extensive curriculum reform process at all levels of education that Finland has just completed. The reforms were based on the existing strengths of the Finnish education system. Simultaneously, these reforms were focused on working against negative trends in education as well as meeting the challenges of the rapidly changing world and the unknown future. The actual process of the reforms is described in this chapter. The process was equally important as the final products, i.e. the core curricula documents. The process has had a strong influence on how the changes are now understood and accepted by all stakeholders in education and society, and how people are committed to carrying these out.

The focus of the article is on students' roles and experiences, especially in compulsory education. In the text the word 'student' is used to refer to children and young people from early childhood to the end of upper-secondary education (at the end of upper secondary school students are 18 to 19 years of age). The chapter discusses which elements in the curricula are especially important for promoting student agency and students' opportunities to experience the joy of learning. The chapter also indicates how important it is that teachers are ready to change their own mindsets and practices in order to promote the meaningfulness of learning and to enhance the development of their students in exploring, thinking, collaborating, creating, and working towards a sustainable future.

Keywords: curriculum reform; curriculum process; student agency; sustainable change

INTRODUCTION

From 2014–2017 Finland reformed the national core curricula at all levels of education: early childhood, pre-primary, basic (primary + lower secondary), and upper secondary. As a result, the core curricula now form a coherent line throughout the entire education system.

The aims of the reforms were to build on the strengths of the Finnish education system and, at the same time, to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing and complex world. There were issues connected especially with meaningfulness of learning, the engagement and well-being of students as well as with educational equality, for which new approaches were developed. The leading principle in the Finnish educational thinking is that equal and high-quality education is the best way to respect children and childhood, and to build a sustainable future for both individuals and the whole country. The purpose of education is to promote life-long and life-wide learning, holistic development and well-being of all learners, as well as to improve their skills for living in a sustainable way.

Transparency and extensive participation, a strong knowledge base and future orientation, supported by futures' research (Airaksinen et al. 2016), guided the national reform process. Based on the national guidelines, all municipalities

and schools constructed their local curricula. Teaching and learning based on the new curricula began in the autumn of 2016 (pre-primary, basic and upper secondary education) and in the autumn of 2017 (early childhood education and care).

From the learners' point of view, the focus of the reform was to improve the joy and meaningfulness of learning and student agency, enhancing thinking and learning to learn as well as other transversal skills, and to support the development of schools as collaborative learning communities. An integrative, multidisciplinary pedagogical approach was emphasized, and new tools for crossing the boundaries of subjects were developed.

Finland has now experienced nearly two school years of teaching and learning based on the new curricula. The reforms seem to have had a strong influence on school practices, on the provision of education in municipalities as well as on teacher education. It has also activated new school development programmes and educational research in Finland (OKM 2018; Vesterinen et al. 2017; Pietarinen et al. 2016, 2017; Krokfors et al. 2016; Vitikka et al. 2016).

THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE FINNISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

Finland is known for its equal education system and for the high quality of teaching and learning. Equity and equality are promoted by providing equal access to education for everyone, by encouraging and supporting every student's learning and well-being as well as by ensuring, by means of high-quality support systems, that everyone has opportunities to be successful in learning. Differences between schools and municipalities are small.

Education is free of charge in Finland, even at the university level. The education system is flexible and always provides a way forward for students who want to study and move from one level to another. There are no dead ends in the system.

Having good and motivated teachers is probably the most important factor influencing the quality of education. In Finland, teachers are highly educated and valued professionals. The teaching profession is very popular among young and talented people because there is much room for autonomy and creativity in teachers' everyday work. Teachers are not stressed by inspections or high stakes testing. Instead of controlling systems, the culture of trust, support and collaboration is central (Halinen et al. 2016b). Teachers are trusted as the best experts in their own work. Teachers in basic and upper secondary education need to have Masters' Degree either in Education science or in their main teaching subject. Class teacher education (teaching all subjects from grades 1-6) is so popular that the teacher education faculties of universities can take in only approximately 10% of applicants (Halinen et al. 2013).

The high quality of teachers was also an important factor in the reform of the curriculum. It was possible to count on and build on teachers' experience and their strong knowledge base as well as on their willingness to participate in the reform process.

In the last few years, new challenges for the municipalities have been emerging with regards to learning results and equality. Municipalities are autonomous education providers, and practically all schools in Finland are municipal. As a consequence of national budget cuts in education, some municipalities have not been able to cover the cuts with their own money, and gaps in the provision of education have been widening. This can be noticed, for instance, in the differing numbers of lesson hours that the municipalities provide for students: some only offer the national minimum and others offer several hours more. At the same time, we have seen a decline in the level of learning results and an increase in differences between students (FINEEC 2017; Salmela-Aro et al. 2008).

Another issue that was much discussed before the curriculum reform was the engagement and well-being of our students. For instance, OECD's PISA research (OECD, 2013) indicated that students' sense of belonging at school and their attitudes towards school were not very good in Finland compared to many other countries, and that this had been on a downward trend from 2000 to 2012. This, connected with the experiences shared by both students and teachers, profoundly influenced the direction of the curriculum reform.

In the reform of the curriculum, the main goals were to tackle the issues which had emerged during the consultation processes and to develop education with respect to the goals of equity, equality and high quality and students' engagement and well-being at school (Halinen et al. 2013). It was important to describe the main values and principles for providing education and the objectives of teaching and learning more precisely than before as well as to support the positive development of all municipalities and schools. Equally important was the participation of municipal education authorities, school principals and teachers, and parents and students in the reform process, where common goals and guidelines were created both at the national and local levels. As Vahtivuori and others say, the emphasis of the Finnish curriculum is on the holistic mission of guiding the educational thinking of schools and municipalities. The core curriculum can be understood as an extensive ecosystem where different areas are linked together, as a teaching-studying-learning environment with several dimensions (Vahtivuori et al. 2014, 24).

THE CURRICULUM REFORM PROCESS

One of the decisive factors in the success of the reform was the collaborative reform process. The process was open and transparent from the very beginning and engaged huge numbers of people. The process was based on a real dialogue and shared learning between three levels of education: national, municipal and the schools. Teachers played a central role. Their experiences and ideas influenced the planning and direction of the process as well as the formulation of the reform goals. Students, parents, researchers, teacher educators, various civil society organisations and other interest groups were also invited to participate. This seems to have resulted in a high level of commitment to the local and school-based curriculum work by the municipal authorities, principals and teachers, and their sincere striving to reach the goals of the reform is evident (Halinen et al. 2013, Pietarinen et al. 2017).

The phases of the reform process

Based on the renewed Government's Decree of 2012, which defined the main goals for pre-primary and basic education and the allocation of lesson hours in basic education, The Finnish National Agency of Education (FNAE) launched the national core curriculum reform process in the autumn of 2012. It invited teachers, principals, local education authorities, teacher educators and researchers from all over the country to participate in the design process of the core curriculum. Representatives from various ministries, the municipal workers and teachers unions, labour unions and industry groups, associations of parents and textbook publishers, different ethnic groups, etc. were invited to form an advisory group for the reform. The process lasted from autumn 2012 until the end of 2014 when the FNAE made decisions on the new core curricula for pre-primary and basic education. The core curriculum for upper secondary education was prepared via a similar process and published in 2015 and the core curriculum for early childhood education and care was published in 2016. Based on these national documents, municipalities and schools started to draw up their own local curricula. These local curricula needed to be ready before the school year began in August 2016. From the 2016 autumn term onwards, teaching and learning has been based on the new curricula. Early childhood education and care followed one year later.

In the curriculum reform process, the results of various research, evaluations and development projects were collected, analysed, and shared with the curriculum working groups. The material formed a good knowledge base for the work of the groups. The FNAE also developed a new tool, called the Learning Barometer 2030, for predicting and anticipating the future (Airaksinen et al. 2016). Discussions with municipal authorities, principals and teachers, students and parents helped the national authorities to recognise strengths, weaknesses and needs of everyday school work. Important support for the reform process was provided by various organisations and other people from civil society.

The FNAE formed thirty working groups which produced the drafts for the core curriculum. Many expert hearings were organised. The drafts were published several times during the design process on the open websites of the FNAE and, with various surveys, municipalities and schools were asked to give feedback as were other interest groups. Practically anyone interested could read the drafts and give feedback, using a digital system which was designed for this purpose. Several organisations, groups and individuals were eager to present their ideas on how to further develop the draft. The feedback was published on the websites and taken into account when refining the drafts. Civil society organisations played a most active part in the process and their voices were also taken into account (Halinen, 2017; Halinen et al. 2016a; Pietarinen et al. 2016; Vahtivuori et al. 2014).

In addition to the curriculum working groups and digital feedback systems, the FNAE also published the Curriculum Road Map at the very beginning of the process. The Road Map described the phases of the national process and suggested the steps to be taken at the local level during the process. It also included the most important topics to be discussed. With the Road Map, the municipal education authorities and schools were able to see the curriculum

reform process as a whole, and to be aware of the most important issues to be addressed during the process. It helped the municipalities and schools to begin their local curriculum process at the same time as the national process and to reflect upon and to develop their own thinking and ideas along the way. All this promoted extensive participation and was important in creating the atmosphere of unhurried work, cooperation and trust (Halinen, 2017; Pietarinen et al. 2016; Halinen et al. 2016a).

The character of the reform process

According to the follow-up research which looked at the Finnish curriculum reforms (Pietarinen et al. 2016) the strategy in the curriculum reform process was identified as being a combined top-down-bottom-up approach. This means that the National Agency of Education utilised its state-level capacity to provide the framework, direction and resources. It also brought people together and built networks in order to reach the goals. In the process, the local-level actors' capacity to be critical and give feedback, to create and find the best practical solutions was also drawn upon.

Pietarinen and others (2016) indicated that the reform strategy constituted of two distinctive strategic elements: a participative element of extensive knowledge sharing that increased transparency, and a strong steering element in terms of change management. In peoples' minds, this approach was associated with successful reform in terms of the perceived educational impact of the reform as well as curriculum coherence in terms of alignment within the curriculum. In the reform process, people felt that the expertise of the participants and the different interest groups was appreciated and that contradictory views were valued. They felt that the leadership steering the curriculum reform acted in a transparent and participatory manner, developing structures to foster participation and utilising the expertise of all participants. This kind of approach helped people to make sense of what would be happening and how the changes could be beneficial for their work.

The researchers emphasised that implementing a curriculum reform always entails translation of the new ideas into new educational practices, which brings forth complex sense-making processes in those involved. Collective sense-making is likely to facilitate shared interpretation of the reform, and therefore provides a tool for building curriculum coherence and strengthening the sustainability of the reform (Halinen, 2017; Pietarinen et al. 2016).

CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD AT THE CENTRE OF THE REFORM

When defining the direction and goals for the reform, it was important to reflect upon students' (children's and young people's) experience by asking where, how and why do good or bad experiences of learning take place. How could we create the best possible circumstances for a good childhood and learning? What can we do better in organising teaching and learning processes and developing learning environments? What would be meaningful and motivating to learn at school? What kind of school culture could enable students to experience meaning and promote holistic development during their school years? All these questions were discussed in the context of the rapidly changing world.

Students' roles in the reform process

Before starting the actual curriculum reform process, students' views were garnered through an extensive survey. A digital, user friendly questionnaire was created and sent to the schools by the Finnish National Agency of Education (FNAE). The target group was students in grades 7-9 (aged 13 to 15) in basic education and in the first year of upper-secondary education (aged 16) across the whole country. Teachers were asked to provide opportunities for their students to complete the survey and to encourage them to respond. The FNAE received responses from 60 000 students, representing approximately 26% of the students in those grades. Students described their views on the school culture in basic education, and on the meaningfulness of the learning content and the various subjects in terms of the skills they thought they would need in the future. They also expressed their ideas on how to develop their school and their studies. The data from this survey provided much food for thought, were explored in depth in the expert discussions which then influenced the curriculum reform (Perusopetus 2020).

During the reform process, municipal authorities, school principals and teachers were asked to discuss the central issues of the reform with their students: for instance, what the basic values of education should be, what is important in the school culture, how student participation should be improved, etc. Some schools provided their students with opportunities to read the drafts of the core curriculum, to evaluate the text and give feedback. This feedback was then sent to the FNAE. Some municipalities organised extensive discussions with students. For instance, Helsinki City Education Department invited 550 students, representing all the schools in Helsinki, to discuss and define what the most important factors were in helping them to learn and to enjoy themselves at school. The results surprised many of us and helped us understand the importance of school culture. What students valued most were factors such as friendship, respect, friendliness, trust, equality and a peaceful working atmosphere.

At the upper-secondary level, representatives of the National Union of University Students in Finland were members of the advisory group of the reform process.

The importance of children and childhood in the new core curricula

One of the main purposes of the reform was to improve students' opportunities for experiencing the joy and meaningfulness of learning and to develop their active agency and sustainable well-being. Key aims of the reforms were to enhance students' motivation for deep learning and to achieve good grades as well as to learn to live a sustainable life. It was necessary to rethink practically everything in education in order to enhance students' holistic development and to provide better circumstances for them to learn to live in this complex and fast-changing world and to meet the challenges of the future.

Students' central position in the new curricula can be clearly recognised in the values on which the education is based, as described in the national core curricula. The basic education is founded on four value pillars (Figure 1):

- 1 Respecting the uniqueness of each student and guaranteeing the right to a good education,
- 2 Promoting each student's growth as a civilized/educated human being and as an active citizen of a democratic society
- 3 Valuing cultural diversity and regarding it as a source of richness,
- 4 Understanding the necessity of living sustainably. Every school is expected to build its operating culture and functioning as a learning community on these four pillars.

(National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, 15-17).

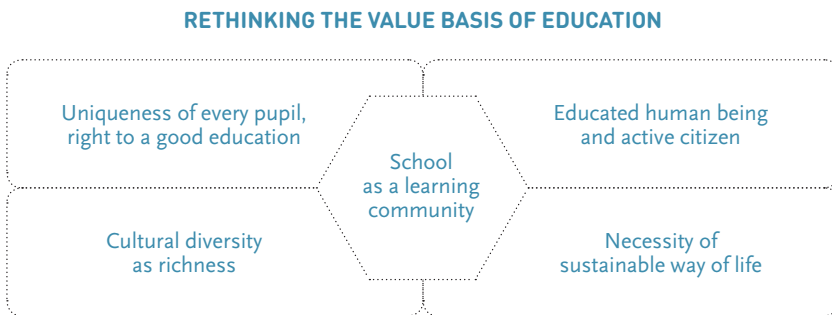


Figure 1: The values on which basic education in Finland is based

The first of the four value pillars emphasises the uniqueness of every child and the specific value of childhood as well every child's right to a good education. The second value pillar defines what it means to be educated, to be a person with "Bildung"¹:

The uniqueness of every student, a right to a good education:

- Basic education is underpinned by an understanding of the specific value of childhood. Each pupil is unique and valuable just as he or she is. Each pupil has the right to grow into his/her full potential as a human being and as a member of society. To achieve this, pupils need encouragement and individual support and need to experience being heard and valued by the school community. They also need to be given the opportunity to feel that the community cares about their learning and well-being. Equally important are experiences of participation and opportunities for collaboration in order to advance the welfare of the whole community.
- Each pupil has the right to a good education and to achieve success in his/her studies. While learning, pupils are building their identity, their understanding of life and of humanity, their worldview, and finding their place in the world. At the same time, they learn to understand themselves, other people, society, the environment, and different cultures.

An educated human being and an active citizen:

- Basic education supports the development of every pupil as a human being who strives for truth, goodness, beauty, justice, and peace. In individual growth, discrepancies between aspirations and the current reality unavoidably arise. Being able to address such conflicts ethically

and with empathy, and having the courage to stand up for what is good, is important. Becoming educated means that individuals and communities are capable of making decisions based on ethical reflection, empathy and knowledge (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, 15-16).

Student agency in the process of learning

In the Finnish curriculum reform, much discussion about learning was required. The following questions were discussed at the national level and municipalities and schools were encouraged to reflect upon the concepts they held about learning: What do we understand by learning? What is a good learning process like? What would promote motivation for learning? How should we develop learning environments? Should there be changes in the teacher's role? How about the student's role? How are learning and thinking interconnected? Why are thinking and learning to learn so important in today's world? etc. These questions were supposed to be discussed with students and with parents in order to build a common understanding of how teaching and learning processes should be developed. How learning is understood also has an influence on how learning is assessed.

Our understanding of learning was discussed openly, shared and then made visible in the core curricula and in the local curricula. In discussions and in the designing of the curricula, the latest knowledge from brain research and research into learning was utilized. The significance of positive emotional experiences and motivation in learning, as well as the importance of interaction and collaboration was taken into account. The conception of learning included in the national core curricula emphasized pupils' active agency and the awareness of their own learning as parts of a high-quality, goal-oriented learning process (Halinen, 2017; National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014).

The importance of school culture

Schools teach best by their own example and, therefore, the way they actually function is important. According to the National Core Curriculum, the school culture always influences how students experience the quality of their everyday work at school. School culture has a big impact on the well-being and learning of all people working in a school. The culture of a school is built up by its practices which, in turn, are shaped by its history and culture. Thus, the culture may be developed and changed. This was one of the focus areas of the curriculum reform in Finland.

All elements of school culture were examined from the viewpoint of students' development, well-being and learning. It was important to notice that the culture of a school is shaped by both conscious and unconscious factors. For instance, the school culture affects those who are within its sphere, regardless of whether its impacts are recognised or not. It was emphasised in the core curriculum that the manner in which adults act is transmitted to students, who adopt the values, attitudes and customs prevalent in their school community. For example, models of interaction and language use as well as gender roles or ways of using and recycling materials are passed on to the pupils. Considering the impacts of the school culture and recognising and rectifying its undesirable features are an important part of bringing about culture change (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014).

According to the National Core Curriculum, the basic precondition for developing the culture of a school is an open and interactive discussion, characterised by respect for others, which ensures the participation of all members of the community and inspires trust. Learning environments and working approaches used in teaching and learning are also important dimensions of the school culture, and their development and use was also discussed. Local and school-based curriculum design processes provided excellent opportunities for these discussions.

The core curriculum includes seven basic principles for the development of an operational culture in the municipalities and in every school. The heart of the culture is a school as a learning community (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, 27-30). The guiding principles are described in Figure 2.

RETHINKING THE SCHOOL CULTURE – SCHOOLS AS LEARNING COMMUNITIES



Figure 2: The main principles guiding the development of school culture in basic education in Finland

The main principles have the purpose of supporting the education providers and schools in directing and developing their activities. They should be actualised in the day to day work in the school.

A learning community develops through dialogue and encourages learning together and learning from each other as well as exploration and experimentation. It appreciates empathy and friendliness and promotes well-being and safety. School as a learning community is multilingual and connects to the surrounding area. It is part of a culturally and diverse society where the local and the global, different identities, languages, religions and worldviews

coexist and interact. It promotes understanding and respect between individuals and groups as well as responsible action.

The school as a learning community emphasises participation and involvement, realises human rights and operates democratically. It also enhances and strengthens equity and equality. The school demonstrates its responsible attitude towards the environment by its everyday choices and activities. The school's task is to inspire hope for a good future by laying the foundation for eco-social knowledge and abilities. Students' active involvement in planning and implementing sustainability in everyday life is regarded as crucial. Teachers promote students' realistic and practical attitudes towards shaping the preconditions for a good future which thus reinforces the students' growth into responsible community members and citizens. Students are encouraged to encounter the world's diversity with an open mind and curiosity and to act for a more just and sustainable future (Halinen, 2017; National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014).

Student agency is important in all areas of the school culture. The aim in the reform was to develop a friendly, unhurried atmosphere as well as structures, procedures, and ways of working which inspire learning and support the all-round development and well-being of students.

STRENGTHENING THE INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

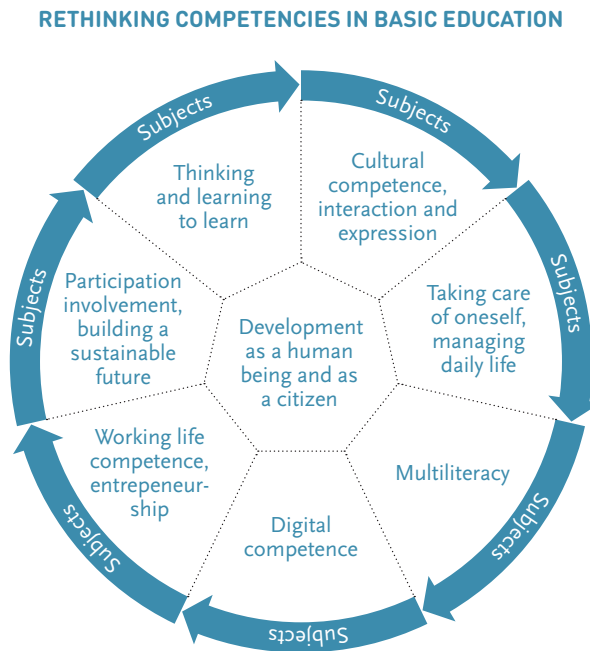
One of the main goals of the curriculum reform was to promote an integrative approach to teaching and learning. The purpose of this approach was to enable students to see the relationships and interdependencies between the subjects studied at school and the phenomena of life outside school. This approach should help students to link the knowledge and skills from different disciplines, to structure their learning into meaningful entities, come up with new questions as well as to create new knowledge by working together. The most important tools for this purpose, defined in the core curricula, were transversal competencies, multi-disciplinary learning modules, and pupil assessment (Halinen, 2017).

Transversal competences

According to the national core curricula (2014, 2015, 2016) a transversal competence refers to an entity consisting of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and volition. Competence also means the ability to apply knowledge and skills in a given situation or context. The manner in which students use their knowledge and skills is influenced by their values and attitudes, and their willingness to take action (volition). Transversal competences cross the boundaries of disciplines and link together different fields of knowledge and skills.

The seven transversal competencies of basic education were defined based on the four value pillars, on the seven development principles of the school culture, and on the conception of learning. All seven competencies are interconnected. They are presented in [Figure 3](#) (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, 21-26):

- 1 Thinking and learning to learn
- 2 Cultural competence, interaction and expression
- 3 Taking care of oneself, managing daily life
- 4 Multiliteracy
- 5 Digital (ICT) competence
- 6 Working life competence, entrepreneurship
- 7 Participation, involvement, building a sustainable future



Transversal competencies (promoting students' growth as human beings and as citizens) demand: knowledge · skills · values · attitudes · will/volition

Figure 3: Transversal competencies in basic education in Finland

It is emphasized in the core curricula that it is particularly important to encourage students to recognize their uniqueness and their personal strengths as well as their potential for development in all of these areas of competence, and to appreciate themselves.

The seven transversal competencies have been taken into account in defining the objectives and main content areas of the compulsory school subjects. The content load has been reduced in all subjects. The subject descriptions also point out the links between the objectives of the subject and the objectives of the transversal competencies.

Multi-disciplinary learning modules

Multi-disciplinary learning modules became obligatory with the new curriculum in basic education: schools must provide these modules for students at least once every school year. The modules are enquiry-based,

exploratory study periods and projects which provide opportunities for applying knowledge and skills learned in different subjects, and experiencing participation and democratic action, shared problem solving as well as constructing new knowledge. This should allow students to perceive the significance for their own life and community, and for society and humankind of the subjects that they learn at school. In the learning process, students are supported to expand and structure their worldview. The learning modules offer excellent opportunities for cooperation between different study groups, between students of different ages and between the school and the community around it (Halinen, 2017; National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014).

Teachers collaborate in planning and implementing the modules. Students participate in the planning, implementation and assessment processes of these modules. The objectives and content of the modules must be interesting and meaningful from the students' perspective. The modules must be based on the values and development principles of the school culture and promote the development of transversal competencies.

Everything else – the number of modules, the actual objectives, content, ways of working, use of learning environments and materials, organizing the cooperation, planning and assessment procedures etc. – is planned and decided at the municipal or school level. Multidisciplinary learning modules do not increase the learning time of students but instead themes covered in the subject lessons are incorporated into the planning and implementation of the module.

Assessment

Student agency and experiences of meaningful learning can also be promoted by assessment. In Finland, especially in basic education, the focus is on formative assessment and giving supportive and encouraging feedback. In addition to the assessment of learning, more and more assessment for learning and assessment as learning takes place. The development of skills for self-assessment and for peer-assessment is promoted during the school years. This means that students learn, step by step and supported by their teachers, to set goals for their own learning, to discuss the assessment criteria, to plan and reflect upon their working processes, and to assess the results of their own work.

For teachers, assessment is an effective pedagogical tool for guiding and encouraging their students' learning and development. For students, learning self-assessment skills also improves their capacity for self-reflection, self-directedness and responsibility.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

The National Core Curricula are written documents which as such do not change anything. The collaborative and extensive design process was important in order to reach a common understanding concerning the basic questions of the reform: Why do we need change? What should we do differently? How shall we do it? This participatory approach also secured the

commitment of all those whose input was needed to carry out the reform. In Finland, we seldom use the phrase ‘implementation of the curriculum’ but instead, talk about teachers who construct their own professional guidelines based on the local curriculum. They are the ones who bring the curriculum into reality.

Work on transforming the curriculum at the local level required similar elements of knowledge sharing, participation, and leadership to the national process. Besides, it was important to prioritize and localise, to find a balance between the external and internal forces for change as well as to take care of capacity building in order to support people in making sense of the reform (Pietarinen et al. 2017).

The second school year based on the new curricula has already got to the spring term. The first experiences have been good but have also been challenging. Teachers seem to be inspired by the new curricula but they also express the need for more support and, for instance, for in-service training in order to do their best to achieve the goals of the reform. Most municipalities have done well in carrying their responsibility for the local curriculum process and have provided school staff with opportunities to become familiar with the new guidelines, for networking, mutual learning and developing new ways of working together. Unfortunately, there are also municipalities where the in-service training and support provided for teachers has been minimal.

The public debate in traditional and social media reveals how difficult it is to perceive the eco-systemic character of education or the curriculum. Very often, the discussion focuses only on one element of education and does not promote the ability to see the connections between different elements: for instance, discussing student assessment without understanding its connection to the new learning conception, or discussing goals and competences without connecting these to the agreed value basis or the school culture. One of the central strengths of the Finnish curriculum development is its explicit eco-systemic approach to education.

It is also interesting how much debate there still is concerning the role of teachers. For some, it seems to be difficult to accept the concept of student agency or to figure out what it means in practice. Some are afraid that teachers are not allowed to teach anymore or that students are left alone, without support and guidance. But again, the majority seem to agree that some change is needed. They think that teachers should talk less during the lessons, and instead, focus more on encouraging and guiding pupils to think and talk, formulate and ask questions, search for information, create new knowledge and ideas, and collaborate. They believe that already in pre-primary and basic education, students should learn to think about what they are trying to achieve, to plan, reflect and evaluate their own work, and slowly take more responsibility for it. Most teachers are also ready to open the doors of their classrooms and collaborate more with their colleagues, other school staff, parents and experts outside the school in order to provide better circumstances for their students’ learning and development. New approaches can also be seen in the school buildings: learning environments are developed as open and flexible spaces.

All in all, establishing real student agency and students' active participation in the everyday life of the school seems to be one of the biggest challenges. This becomes visible, for instance, in planning multidisciplinary learning modules where student participation is expected according to the guidelines of the national core curriculum. The traditional roles of teachers and students as well as the way schoolwork is organised should be changed in order to enhance the development of transversal competencies and to create a school culture where students have enough space to explore, think, collaborate and create. Teachers are committed to these goals but they still look for good and manageable ways to achieve them.

Teachers who are ready to face changes in their own work are better equipped to educate students who are able to *“encounter pressures for change openly, assess changes critically and assume responsibility for making choices that build our future”*; students who are *“capable of acting and making decisions based on ethical reflection, on empathy towards others, and on knowledge-based considerations... as well as able to reflect what is valuable in life”* (National Core curriculum for Basic Education 2014, p. 16, 19).

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BIOGRAPHY

Ms. Irmeli Halinen, has been the Head of the National Curriculum Development and a Counsellor of Education at the Finnish National Agency for Education. Ms. Halinen was the coordinator of the national curriculum reform from 2012–2016. She retired in August 2016, having gathered extensive national and international experience in the field of education. She now works as a curriculum expert for OECD and UNESCO, and as an independent lecturer, teacher educator, and author for the research and consultation company Metodix Oy (Ltd.).

Ms. Halinen has been a member of several national education committees as well as a member of national and international development and evaluation projects since the 1970s. In the beginning of her career, she worked as a teacher and as a school principal in Helsinki, and then as the Head of Instruction and Education Development at the Helsinki City Education Department. For many years, she was a member of the Finnish National Commission for UNESCO, as well as a member of the National Evaluation Council of Education in Finland. She has been active in IBE-UNESCO, and worked as a curriculum expert and lecturer all over the world. She belongs to the international Steering Committee of High Quality Problem Based Learning (by BIE). She is the author of several books and articles about education.

ENDNOTE

- 1 What is meant by “Bildung” in this context is that a person or a community is educated and civilised and is able to act in a human manner.