

Twenty- five Years of Educational Reform Initiatives in Finland

Ari Antikainen & Anne Luukkainen
Department of Sociology, University of Joensuu, Finland

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"Educational transformations are always the result and the symptom of the social transformations in terms of which they are to be explained." (Durkheim 1969; 1977, 92.)

“Educational reforms are part of or consequences of socioeconomic change.” (Husén 1986, 51)

"Equity, participation and welfare state have been known as the major socio-political attributes of the Nordic model." (Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research vol. 50, 3, 2006.)

Overview

Finland is known for its Sauna, Jean Sibelius, Finnish tango, Nokia's mobile phones and success in the PISA assessments. This Nordic country with a population of only 5.3 million inhabitants spread on a large and sparsely populated land area — though there is a clear migration tendency towards the capital region and other large cities in Southern Finland — , and with a small but developed national economy has been very successful in international comparisons of education and economy, like in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment in 2000 and 2003, and in the evaluations of the World Economic Forum (OECD 2001; 2004). As late as in the 1960s, Finland was more agrarian and less industrialized than other western European countries, but it was drawn into the capitalist world economy mainly by foreign capital and businessmen already at the end of the 19th century because of its forest resources and pulp and paper industry. Forests were largely owned by small and medium size farms. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Finnish society underwent one of the swiftest structural transformations in Europe to become an industrial Nordic welfare state according to the Scandinavian or social democratic model. Comprehensive education rationale was a part of this welfare state model. In the 1980s, the economic boom continued, but it was followed by a deep economic depression of the 1990s, which in relative terms was deeper than the depression

of the 1930s. The success of electronics, especially Nokia's mobile telephone industry, made the financing of the welfare state still possible, although with severe cuts and restructuring processes. Since the 1990s, the welfare state has transformed in the direction of a competitive state.

(Antikainen 2005; 2006.)

The present Finnish education system consists of pre-primary education, 9-year comprehensive school, post-compulsory general and vocational education, higher education and adult education. In the discussion of the PISA results, the significance of the principle of equity and the status of the comprehensive school system have been stressed. A Nordic group of PISA researchers present this as follows:

The Nordic strategy for building up high quality and equality in education has been based on constructing a publicly funded comprehensive school system without selecting, tracking or streaming students during their basic education until the age of 16. Part of the strategy is to spread the school network so that pupils have a school near their homes whenever possible or if this is not feasible, e.g. in rural areas, to provide free transportation to more widely dispersed schools. Inclusion of special education and instructional efforts to minimise low achievement are also typical to Nordic educational systems. (Lie, Linnakylä & Roe, 2003, 8.)

After the establishment of the present Finnish comprehensive school system in the 1970s and early 1980s, the administration of comprehensive schools and the entire education system was very centralized. Centralization was considered as a means to carry out the comprehensive school reform despite the opposition of right-wing parties and the association of secondary school teachers. In the late 1980s, a significant change occurred as an incremental planning paradigm gained ground and the system was decentralized. Schools became more responsible for their own management and were supposed to make their own curricula according to the guidelines given by the National Board of Education. Teachers could choose the pedagogy they applied. Thus, there was a great emphasis on the professional expertise of teachers. These measures generated resources for a new development (Antikainen, 2005, 21-32).

The basic values and the vision of education as a public service have remained unchanged since 1968, but in the 1990s and 2000s, there has been a trend towards school-based profiles, stronger parental choice, 'customer' orientation and systematic school evaluation in particular. The consequences of these more or less neo-liberal changes and public management measures are under debate. In Finland they have been more modest than in many other countries, yet Simola, Rinne and Kivirauma (2002) argue that they represent a historical shift in education governance in Finland and other Nordic welfare states. We have called the period from 1995 onwards an age of restructuring (Antikainen 2006, 238)¹. However, it is also justified to argue that the Finnish case of comprehensive education demonstrates that it is possible to introduce greater flexibility and local autonomy without threatening the wider goals of minimizing inequalities (Antikainen *ibid.*). This issue is currently under debate.

Comprehensive Education Reform

In the 1960s started the biggest educational reform in the history of post-World War II Finland, namely the comprehensive school (basic school) reform. It is necessary to start from this reform, because it has had and still has a very deep impact on the educational development in Finland. It has been argued that the sustainable political and educational leadership of the 1960s has enabled schools and teachers to concentrate on developing teaching and learning (Aho, Pitkänen & Sahlberg 2006; cf. Hargreaves & Fink 2005)².

Up until the 1970s, compulsory education was provided in the seven-year civic school. After four years of civic school, a part of each age group moved up to the secondary school (grammar school),

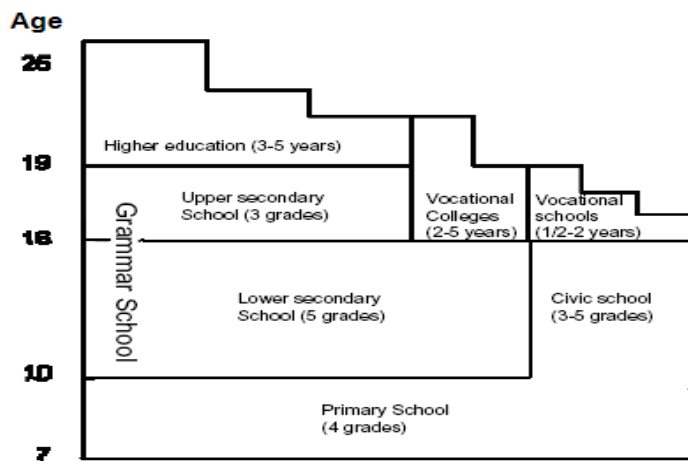
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²1. On restructuring as a world movement and in seven European countries especially from the perspective of teachers' and nurses' profession see the publications of the Profknow-project (Norrie & Goodson 2005; Beach 2005; Houtsonen, Lindblad & Sugrue 2007; Finland Kosonen & Houtsonen 2007).

2. We use this report as our major reference to comprehensive education reform and secondary education reform, because of its extensive and reliable data, but we have used also Lampinen 1984; Lehtisalo & Raivola 1992; Niikko 2001 and Ministry of Education 2007 as our information base. Erkki Aho was a general director of the National Board of General Education in the 1970s and 1980s. He has a social democratic background and he defended the reforms in public debate nearly on a daily basis.

which was divided into the five-year lower secondary school and the three-year upper secondary school (Figure 1). Thus the school system operated by the parallel school principle and divided the people into three unequal groups. This system was considered inadequate in an industrializing and democratizing society both from the social and pedagogical perspectives.

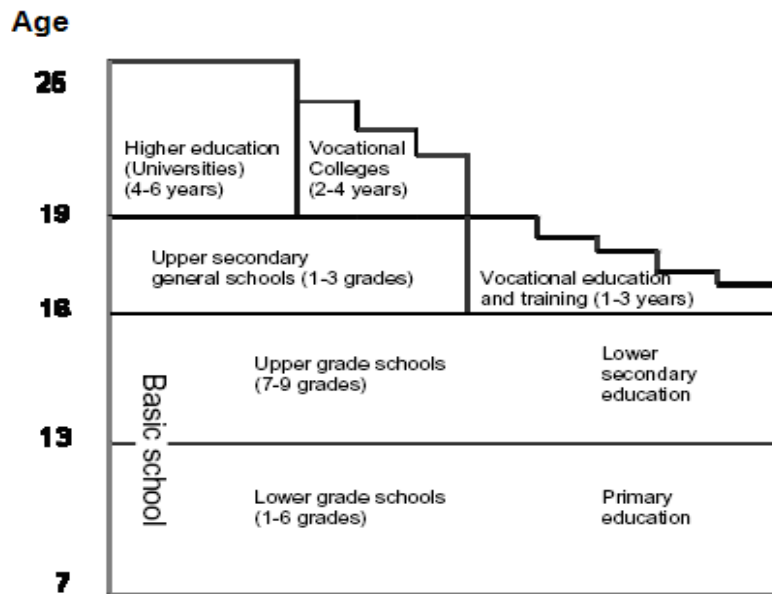
Figure 1. Finnish education system before the 1970s (Aho, Pitkänen & Sahlberg 2006, 29).



A new, integrated comprehensive education system was the goal of the coming reform. In 1963 the first principal initiative was accepted by the Parliament, and in 1966 the majority Government, formed by a coalition of the left-wing and centre parties, the Finnish Social Democratic³ Party, the Agrarian Party (later the Centre Party) and the People's Democratic League of Finland, incorporated the comprehensive school reform in the Government's political agenda. The 1968 School System Act was approved after careful preparations in state committees, negotiations with the teachers' trade organizations and other labor organizations, and experiments of regional and local governments. Civic school and middle school (lower secondary school) were integrated to form a unified comprehensive school, and upper secondary school (grammar school) was separated to its own school form. (Figure 2; explained in more detail in the chapter on secondary education).

Figure 2. Finnish education system after the basic school reform (Aho, Pitkänen & Sahlberg 2006).

³The Finnish Social Democratic Party is a left wing party with a socialist tradition in Finland and in Scandinavia.



The realization of this comprehensive school (basic school) reform followed the principle of equality and started from the remote and rural areas of Northern and Eastern Finland in 1972 and was finished in Southern Finland in 1977. Aho, Pitkänen and Sahlberg (2006, 39-40) present the following list of the key preconditions for success of the reform process:

- The common hardships and experiences of the World War II created consensus and eased tensions between social classes and political parties.
- The simultaneous emphasis on social equity and economic growth had solid grounding in Keynesian economic doctrine and was backed up by economic and social theories.
- The multi-party system was fostering compromise and consensus-building.
- Involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the reform process was essential.
- The Parliament launched the reform by issuing a School System Act that included all the major elements of the new basic school system as well as a plan for implementation, which established the framework for future reforms.
- Finnish civil servants might be more pragmatic and specialized than they are in some other countries.
- Strong administrative structures at the national, regional and local levels guaranteed the sustainability and consistency of the reform process.
- The restructuring of the education system made it possible for municipalities to raise the level of education among young people and to invest in educational institutions. State subsidies were high.

- The reorganization of school administration destroyed the old elitist interests and administrative structures and was building confidence in the feasibility of the reform.

During the comprehensive school's five first years, teachers had five days of in-service training for comprehensive school pedagogies including the social and administrative implications of the reform. National and regional networks of instructors were established to give this training. The training was also criticized as too superficial and official, but still it assisted teachers to adapt to the new school culture. The development of teacher training was based on the following guidelines (Aho, Pitkänen & Sahlberg 2006, 50):

- All teacher education is to be based on the Matriculation Examination (the national examination of the upper secondary education).
- All teacher training must last at least three years and result in a Bachelor's degree at the minimum.
- Pedagogical training for class teachers and subject teachers must be given in the same institutions.
- Wages must be tied to teachers' degrees.
- Teachers are more of advisers and guides of learning than deliverers of information and lecturers.
- Teachers' suitability for the profession should be examined.
- Teachers' studies have to include general studies, subject studies, pedagogical studies, and training in schools.

The reform advanced rapidly. In 1971, the new organization of teacher training was codified in an Act, and universities began to establish teacher training units in their faculties of education. In 1978, the degree of the Master of Science or Arts became the basic teaching degree for class teachers as well.

During the transition period, an ability group system defining the student's eligibility for further education was used in the upper grades (7-9) of the comprehensive school. However, the pressure to abolish the tracking system grew very soon after the social selectivity of the system was confirmed and the upper-secondary education reform came closer. The tracking decision was the most difficult phase in the entire reform process. To win teachers' support, a class-size reduction and increase in funding for teaching at the upper grades was given. In 1983 the Comprehensive School Act stipulated the new grouping principles without tracking codified, but the financial problems postponed the law's implementation until 1985. According to the new legislation, disabled students were also included in compulsory education. Special education was rapidly developed, and it has been seen as one of the factors behind the PISA success.

Secondary School Reform

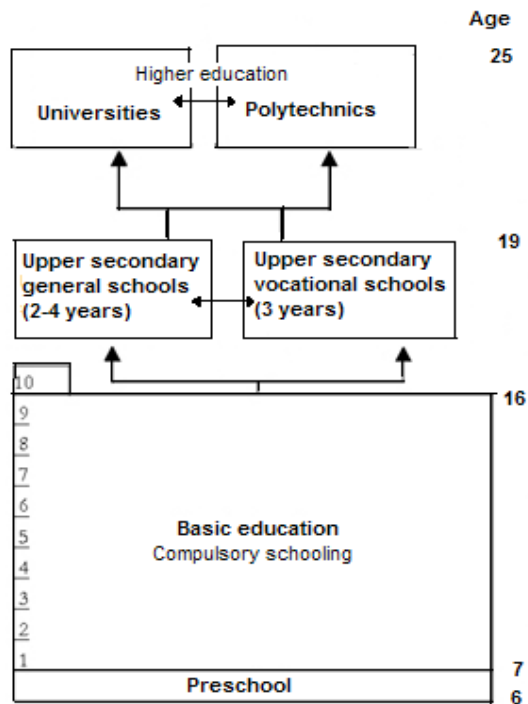
The next logical step in the comprehensive education reform was to extend the principles of comprehensive education to post-compulsory education. One of the visions presented was to integrate the old upper general secondary schools and vocational schools and colleges by creating a “youth school” (like in Sweden). The idea was received by fierce criticism of right-wing parties, employers’ confederations and secondary education teachers. The main driver of resistance was the respect for the traditional Matriculation Examination. Established in 1852, the Matriculation Examination was originally the entrance test to the imperial University of Helsinki. Its purpose was shifted towards a more general assessment of the students’ knowledge, skills and maturity, but nevertheless, only students who passed the Matriculation Examination remained to be eligible for higher education. Employers regarded the idea as a threat to the quality of vocational studies and to their workforce, because it would delay the entry of young people into the labor market. Therefore, the upper-secondary education continued in parallel and dual track system, but the structures and curricula were modernized. The main guidelines of the reform were the following (Aho, Pitkänen & Sahlberg 2006, 71):

- “1. Vocational education will be developed into a competitive educational path leading to higher education. However, workforce requirements come first.
2. Young people who have graduated from comprehensive school have equal competency for both general and vocational upper-secondary education.
3. If the comprehensive school does not provide sufficient general competency for college-level vocational education, the problem will be solved by elevating the comprehensive school’s educational level and performance.
4. Upper-secondary vocational education will be organized according to broad basic lines that after a general introduction will differentiate into specific vocations and professions, each with different skills and training levels.
5. Upper general secondary school will provide a three-year general education.
6. In all university faculties as well as institutions having the Matriculation Examination as their entrance requirement, quotas shall be reserved for graduates from college-level vocational education.
7. Education in vocational institutions and universities shall be developed so that students advancing via vocational and general paths will be able to earn their university degree at about the same age.”

The planning organization of the secondary education reform was composed of 15 main committees, each with dozens of sections. To create commitment, the Government called teachers, employers, unions and workers to participate in the restructuring of vocational secondary education. The existing 700 or so specific lines of study were reassembled into 22 main occupational branches including 220 specialties. The duration of vocational programs was lengthened to 3 years. The students chose first the main occupational branch and then deepened the level of education and area of specialization. New resources and arrangements for remedial and special education were directed, and they have been a permanent element in vocational education since then. The aims of the reform in general education were to connect upper-secondary schools to the local comprehensive school system and to create a more flexible pedagogical structure for municipalities and schools. Each subject or discipline was reorganized into a series of smaller components, and thus a course-based upper-secondary school was established. By the 1985 Upper Secondary School Act, the Government ratified the reallocation of teaching hours, and the National Board of Education accepted the new core curriculum. The vertical integration of secondary education into the reformed system succeeded better than the horizontal cooperation of general and vocational education. The planning and implementation period lasted nearly twenty years, until 1992. During this period, enrolment in secondary education doubled. Until the very recent years, however, the reform was not able to decrease the difference between the popularity of general and vocational education, as was its original goal.

In the late 1990s, a new form of higher education institutions, the polytechnic, was established. The transition to a binary system of higher education was introduced in OECD's country review in 1981 (Rinne 2007, 204). One of the major aims was to increase the quality, popularity and status of vocational studies. The administrative division of basic schools into two levels, lower grades (1-6) and upper grades (7-9), ended in 1999. In 2001, a free preschool education system was established. The planning process had been started already in the 1960s, a municipal day-care system implemented in the 1970s, and because of the economic depression of the early 1990s, the realization of the free preschool was postponed until the beginning of 2000. The new comprehensive and rationalizing education system is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Present Finnish education system.



Toward a Neo-liberal Era of Educational Reform?

Decentralization, deregulation, accountability and rationalization have been the major trends in the education policy from the 1990s onwards. In people’s everyday lives, especially in jobs and also in school life, individualization, competition and precarious temporary and part-time work contracts have increased nearly dramatically. Partly following this tendency, a non-graded system was started in upper-secondary schools.

The centralized norm and resource management have been replaced by data-driven results-based management and information steering. A significant amount of power and responsibility has been distributed to the local levels. In curriculum planning, a new core curriculum has been introduced, and municipalities and schools have more autonomy to decide on their curricula. Principals and rectors have been given more responsibility for both financial management and educational leadership in schools. According to the 1999 Education Act, the organizers of education have an obligation to assess their education and its effectiveness by both internal and external evaluations.

All education from preschool to university is still free in Finland (there are university fees but they are nominal). In addition, a free school-meal and under certain conditions a free transportation is

given in pre-primary, primary and secondary schools. Education is funded as part of the statutory government transfer system (or state subsidies) for local authorities and by local taxes. However, from the 1990s onwards transfers and subsidies were no longer ear-marked for education or other sectors, but they are general funds to municipalities and other local authorities. The transfers and subsidies are calculated on the basis of unit costs, and their level has decreased from 70 percent to 50 percent, which has led to closing of village schools and merging schools based on scale benefit. In fact, in the context of tightening economy, shrinking age groups and the deregulation concerning grouping of school students, over 1300 basic schools have been closed since 1990 in rural areas and poorer parts of some cities (Beach 2005, 259). Rationalization of the municipality system is under planning, and it seems that either regions are becoming the basic unit of school administration, or alternatively, the units are formed by many municipalities.

As a result of deregulation, school choice is common especially in big cities. In the capital city Helsinki, half of the age group transferring to the 7th grade in the basic school had applied for a student place in other catchment area school, and in other big cities the average is approximately one third of the students (Seppänen 2003). Choices were more commonly made by the upper- and upper-middle class students. A clear pattern of selection can thus be distinguished, and the observation is similar to those made earlier in the UK (Ball 2003).

Learning at work and competence-based qualifications have been adopted in vocational adult education. Now they are also coming to young people's vocational education. Strengthening of the position of employers' and employees' associations is becoming a common trend in education policy (Antikainen 2005a).

In Government reports, globalization is seen as a challenge especially to higher education. The main theme running throughout the proposals is the need to increase mutual cooperation between universities and between universities and polytechnics. A proposal given in February 2007 recommends the merging of the Helsinki University of Technology, the Helsinki School of Economics and the University of Art and Design in Helsinki into a university of innovations. It is proposed that the resulting university be accorded foundation status and commence its activities in 2009.

From the earlier 1980s, the OECD's role as a supranational counselor of the government has been clear e.g. in restructuring higher education network or establishing a national organization of

evaluation. The European Union, whose member Finland has been from 1995, does not play just a counseling role, but it has a legitimacy to make laws and use massive funds to realize its will. A most striking example is the Bologna process and its influence to the structure of higher education degree system. (Rinne 2007.)

In the middle of all these more or less neo-liberal reforms, a new planning system based on the Development Plan for Education and Research for the coming five years was established in the 1990s. Aho, Pitkänen and Sahlberg (2006) are arguing that the basic values and visions of the Finnish education policy have not changed from the 1960s, and sustainability is one of the cultural characteristics of the Finnish society in general. This can also be seen in the wide-spread 'ethos' of the primary school teachers interviewed and observed for the Profknow-project (Houtsonen, Lindblad & Sugrue 2007). The teachers were concerned about providing all children with a safe and relaxed learning environment, and seeing that no children would get left behind (Kosonen & Houtsonen 2007). The entire picture is thus complicated and controversial.

Concluding Remarks

The development of the Finnish society from the 1960s to the 1980s was dominated by a transition from agrarian to industrial society and to a Nordic welfare state. In education, it was a period of growth and broadening under the state comprehensive education system. Alasuutari (1996) calls the early years of this era the phase of moral economy. The organizations of parties and corporate associations were still rather weak after the World War II. It was the task of civil servants to maintain a "right" moral code and orientation. Teachers were involved in creating national consensus and controlling bureaucracy (Säntti 2007). The growth of the industrial working class and the neighboring Soviet Union had some socialist influence on this consensus culture.

The later part of this era was called the phase of planning economy, and it lasted until the mid-1980s. Faith in planning and science, as well as the steering power of the State and corporations were the characteristics of this era. Teacher education was located to universities and the science of education was expanded. The

planning and administrative machineries of education were strengthening on national, regional and local levels. In fact, this phase lasted in education until the 1990s, and in some respects it is still continuing. The status and position of teachers were controversial in the middle of the strong administrative machineries. Nevertheless, the era can be described as an era of teachers' professional expertise (Säntti 2007).

The criticism against bureaucracy and State control in education started in the late 1980s and led first to decentralization and support to teacher's professional status. The phase of competition economy was realized in the 1990s. Alongside and ahead the discourse of equality appeared the neo-liberal discourse of competition and efficiency. As a discourse it is dominating the education policy, but concrete changes in primary and secondary education towards a diversified and stratified school system are few in number. In higher education and adult education, the tendency towards marketization and privatization is much more clear and stronger. The overview is more complicated because of two other processes. Firstly, the aging population and migration are leading to closing of schools especially in rural areas but also in cities. Secondly, learning at work and competence-based qualifications are coming more popular and strengthening the power of corporate associations and the so called tripartite system (State, employers' associations and employees' unions). Migration and the change of vocational education are, of course, related to globalization, but not directly to neo-liberalism. The basic structures of the Nordic model of comprehensive education system are still there, but in a modified form and threatened by restructuring processes.

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