KRISTIINA KUMPULAINEN & TIMO LANKINEN

5. STRIVING FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE:
Evaluation and Assessment in Finnish Basic Education

ABSTRACT
In this chapter, we shall provide an introduction to the evaluation and assessment practices in Finnish basic education. We shall highlight the primary premises and goals set for the evaluation work and illuminate its’ realization at different levels of the system. Our introduction reveals the holistic development and enhancement function that educational evaluations and assessments play in Finnish basic education. We shall conclude our chapter by outlining the future challenges and developments of Finnish basic education with a special focus on evaluation and assessment.

THE UNIQUENESS OF FINNISH BASIC EDUCATION
Finnish basic education has attracted international interest for over a decade. International comparisons of learning outcomes have ranked Finland among the best performing countries on several occasions, placing Finnish education firmly among the top elite of the world. But what is behind the success? How can we explain these results? Closer investigations of Finnish basic education have revealed intriguing facts about the system and its functioning. For example, unlike in many other countries, in Finland students start school fairly late - at the age of seven- and spend less time at school. The students have fairly little homework and are rarely tested at a national level. In Finland, the schools create their own curriculum based on the national core curriculum. The teaching profession is highly valued and trusted. The teachers are not subjected to evaluations either. All these features highlight the uniqueness of the Finnish basic education system as compared to many other countries. Yet, before making any systematic conclusions about these educational features, it is necessary to understand the systemic whole of the Finnish basic education system and the core elements that contribute to this entity. This is likely
to open up new understandings about the core features and functioning of Finnish basic education.

In this chapter, we shall provide an introduction to one of the core elements of Finnish basic education, namely the evaluation and assessment practices. We shall highlight the primary premises and goals set for the evaluation work and illuminate its realization at different levels of the system. Our introduction demonstrates that the evaluation and assessment framework of the Finnish education system stresses the holistic developmental and enhancement function of evaluation. Evaluation is not exercised to control or sanction, but, rather, to develop education at all levels of the system, creating the best learning opportunities for every learner. The nature and function of educational evaluations distinguishes Finland from many other countries. Evaluation may be considered as one of our strengths in maintaining and developing the high standards of the Finnish education system.

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY – THE FOUNDATIONAL VALUE OF FINNISH EDUCATION

The pursuit of educational equity has long been a major goal of the Finnish education system. Creating and maintaining a system of education where all children have equal access to quality education and widely available opportunities to learn to their fullest human potential has been elusive. A strong national vision of the importance of equal basic education is seen as promoting intellectual and social capital as well as prosperity within the whole nation and its individuals. Educational evaluation and assessment work plays an important role in monitoring the realization of educational equity throughout the nation and within and across its districts and municipalities, educational providers and individuals (Atjonen, 2007; Jakku-Sihvonen, 1993; Korkeakoski, & Tynjälä, 2010; Raivola, 2000).

The objective of Finnish basic education is to guarantee sufficient equity in education throughout the country. Equity of education stands for equality of opportunities. A further premise for educational equity is respect for the diversity of individuals. Learners’ aptitudes, objectives and educational needs differ and the educational system needs to be able to flexibly respond to these needs. Equal opportunities for education do not mean the same education for everyone, but, rather, equal opportunities to develop one’s own aptitudes and personality. Given the educational stratification of diverse students, the implications for equity would suggest the allocation of resources relative to the needs of learners.

Educational equity is supported in Finland in many different ways. The basic prerequisites for students’ learning are created by providing education, support and guidance free of charge, offering free school meals, health care, school transport, learning materials and tools, as well as student welfare and other support services. Caring for students in educational and personal terms has become one of the leading educational principles in Finnish basic education alongside ensuring a high-quality curriculum and competent teachers.