6. THE FINNISH NATIONAL CORE CURRICULUM: Structure and Development

ABSTRACT

The national core curriculum as a means for enabling and managing educational change has an important development role in the Finnish school system. In Finland, the national core curriculum is a framework around which local curricula are designed. The national core curriculum contains the objectives and core contents of teaching for all school subjects, and also describes the mission, values, and structure of education. It describes the conception of learning and goals for developing the learning environment, school culture and working methods. This gives the core curriculum a dual role: on one hand it is an administrative steering document, on the other a tool for teachers to develop their own pedagogical praxis. In Finland, development of the core curriculum through a process of collaboration between national and local authorities is a highly developed practice. This has afforded a shift in the focus of curriculum development towards the structure of the curriculum and its pedagogical functionality.

Keywords: curriculum system, curriculum design, curriculum development

MAIN FEATURES OF THE CURRENT CURRICULUM SYSTEM IN FINLAND

In this article, we will introduce the main features of the Finnish national core curriculum for basic education: its essence, structure and implementation. We will also explore current challenges in the curriculum’s functionality, and new directions for its continuing development.

The core curriculum has an important role in the Finnish system of school development as a means for enabling and managing educational change. The changes in society and its values will not be able to establish a constant position in schools, if they do not permeate the curriculum. The curriculum is essential to every educational reform: innovations in science, technology and education will
only bear fruit if they are embedded in curriculum guidance. We argue that this is the only way that they can especially reach teachers and all the other important educational actors. The current curriculum system in Finland is based on three essential ideas:

- management by goals given in legislation and in the national core curriculum
- autonomy of municipal authorities in providing and organizing education: local curriculum as a steering document at local level
- utilization of teachers as valued experts who develop the school-based curriculum as a source for different approaches to schoolwork (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2011).

In Finland, the national core curriculum is a framework for making local curricula. It determines a common structure and basic guidelines that the local curriculum makers, school officials and teachers, use in order to build a local, context driven curriculum. The National Core Curriculum has two parts. It includes the objectives and core contents of teaching for all school subjects, also describes the mission, values, and structure of education. It also describes the conception of learning and goals for developing the learning environment, school culture and working methods (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2011). This gives the core curriculum a dual role: on one hand it is an administrative steering document, on the other a tool for teachers to develop their own pedagogical praxis. This dual role makes the development of the curriculum structure challenging.

The Finnish national core curriculum is a fairly new invention, which has only been in place for the past forty years. Before 1970 Finland had two parallel education systems, which placed children on different educational routes at an early age. This division had a strong connection to the socio-economical background of the children and resulted in inequality of learning opportunities and an achievement gap between different groups. A long politically heated debate preceded the 1968 Basic Education Act, which stated that all children should attend the same school for the first nine years of education. The foundation for Finnish basic education was born. The national implementation of this comprehensive school reform began in 1972 in the northern parts of Finland. By 1976 the reform had reached the municipalities in the southern parts of the country (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2010).

The first national curriculum was published in 1970 and it was a strongly centralized document. The curriculum was first reformed in 1985 after the 1983 Basic Education Act, and a direction to decentralization and teacher autonomy was set. Before 1985 streaming was the usual practice in schools, a vestige from the time of two parallel education systems. The curriculum reform discontinued this practice and set higher standards for all students. Municipalities were given more decision-making powers, and individual student needs became the focus point of education.