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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.

Keywords: equity, evaluation, assessment, education, teaching

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 this success? How can we explain these results? Closer investigation of Finnish basic education has revealed intriguing facts about the system and its functioning. For example, unlike many other countries, in Finland students start school fairly late – at the age of seven – and spend less time at school. The students have relatively 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.

Holistic and systemic evaluation and assessment work plays a pivotal role in ensuring the realization of educational equity in Finnish basic education. Nationally defined quality criteria for evaluation, which are based on recent research and evaluation knowledge as well as on national legislation, create a common framework for education professionals and policymakers to monitor and further develop

STRIVING FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

education and its outcomes across the system (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010; Välijärvi & Kupari, 2010).

Chelimsky (1997) distinguishes three dimensions in educational evaluation that are shaped by the goals and purposes set for the evaluation work, namely (a) an accountability dimension, (b) a research evidence and data production dimension and (c) a developmental dimension. Evaluations based on accountability aim primarily at providing information to policy makers and education providers about the effectiveness and impact of education. Evaluations based on data production aim at understanding educational systems and programs. The developmental dimension aims at enhancing the educational system, curricula and teaching methods. It monitors possible changes in educational outcomes, develops indicators for the education sector, and also creates development proposals serving the needs of education providers and developers. The Finnish education system aims to promote all three of these dimensions in its holistic and systemic evaluation and assessment work.

STRIVING TOWARDS EXCELLENCE AND A JOY OF LEARNING: THE FINNISH BASIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

The role of Finnish basic education is to provide students with multiple learning paths that create opportunities to develop skills and competences for lifelong learning and active citizenship. The most essential objective of basic education is to support life-wide and lifelong learning. This means building and reinforcing learning skills and competences as well as providing the motivation for learning (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004, 2014). Competence is Finland's most important resource and it is imperative to attend to its high standard on a continuous basis. This requires setting objectives for school development that aim at supporting every learner to reach their full potential.

One of the major goals of Finnish basic education is to support the growth and development of every learner, strengthening their operating opportunities and involvement. Learners are seen as individuals whose age and capabilities form the starting points for the provision of education. Learning is defined as being complex, dynamic, linked to human development and embedded within a specific cultural context. A definition of equity should take into account these factors. Equity then could be measured in terms of quality education, care and rigor as well as individual achievement indicators (Raivola, 2000).

The Finnish education system consists of one-year-long pre-primary education and a nine-year basic education followed by voluntary vocational or upper secondary education. Higher education is provided by universities and polytechnics. Adult education is available at all levels of the education system. Participation in pre-primary education was made compulsory for all six-year-olds, from August 2015 (Kumpulainen, 2015). Yet, already in 2014, 98.5 per cent of the age group

of six-year-olds participated in pre-primary education. Compulsory education begins at the age of seven. The basic education syllabus is nine years, and nearly all children complete their compulsory schooling by attending a comprehensive school. Comprehensive schools can also provide additional basic education: a voluntary 10th grade (National Board of Education, 2010).

The national core curriculum issued by the Finnish National Board of Education determines the objectives and core contents of different subjects and sets out the principles for student assessment, special needs education, student welfare and guidance counselling. It also defines the principles of a good learning environment, working methods and the concepts of learning (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004, 2014).

In basic education and upper secondary education the education provider is usually the local education authority and the school draws up its own curriculum within the framework set forth by the national core curriculum. This local curriculum may be devised for the municipality as a whole or for an individual school.

The government defines the minimum number of classroom hours for core subjects in basic education. In Grades 1–6, the content is roughly the same for all students across the country, but a school may focus on subjects in different ways due to the flexible allocation of lesson hours. In Grades 7–9, there are more elective elements in the curriculum. The curriculum also includes a work familiarization period. Students, together with their parents or caretakers, decide which optional subjects made available by the school they should take (Finnish National Board of Education, 2004, 2014).

THE PREMISES OF EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT IN FINNISH BASIC EDUCATION

The evaluation of education in Finland is governed by the Basic Education Act (<http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/1998/en19980628.pdf>). The purpose of evaluation is to safeguard the implementation of the Act, to contribute to the development of education and to create favourable conditions for learning. There is a specific decree on the evaluation of education that sets out the following aims for evaluation:

- to provide and analyze evaluation data in support of national decision making on education and as a basis for educational development
- to provide and analyze evaluation data as a basis for local educational development and decision making
- to support learning, the work of school personnel and institutional development.

The Ministry of Education and Culture adopts an Evaluation Plan that sets the overall objectives for external evaluation and lists upcoming evaluations undertaken by the Education Evaluation Council, learning outcome assessments carried out by The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) and evaluations contracted by the Regional State Administrative Agencies. The plan contains all Finnish

educational levels including Finnish Higher Education evaluations and international evaluations of higher education.

The Regional State Administrative Agencies evaluate the regional availability of education. Education providers have the duty to evaluate the education they provide and its effectiveness. The method of evaluation is not regulated, but the evaluations must be carried out systematically and regularly. Education providers also undergo external evaluations. Each municipality must have an inspection board appointed by the municipal council to evaluate the implementation of the operational and financial aims set by the council (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2011).

The evaluation findings are utilized by the Ministry of Education and Culture in the preparation of legislation and strategies and in financial planning. The Finnish National Board of Education applies the evaluation findings to curriculum development and other educational development work. The way in which evaluation data is used by education providers, schools or teachers is not subject to a particular act or decree. This is a matter within the discretion of the education provider, such as decisions concerning educational arrangements overall.

School Assessment

In Finnish basic education, school assessment is based on self-evaluation. Under the current legislation, education providers must assess the quality of the education they provide and participate in external evaluations. In Finland, there is no school inspectorate. This was abolished in 1991. It is up to education providers to decide what they want to review in their internal evaluations and how the findings are reported and published (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2011).

In the year 2010, the Ministry of Education and Culture devised national quality criteria for basic education with a view to facilitate internal assessment and quality enhancement. The criteria focus on:

- leadership
- personnel
- financial resources
- evaluation
- implementation of the curriculum
- teaching arrangements and instruction
- support for learning, growth and well-being
- inclusion and influence
- school-home collaboration
- safe learning environment

The national quality criteria focus on a wide array of elements in the education system and the realization of these elements. The quality criteria aim to promote high-quality education, enrich educational provision and ensure equal educational rights for every learner irrespective of their background. The criteria are also seen as

a tool for leadership, which municipalities and schools can monitor and further use to develop their local educational practices in flexible ways (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010).

TEACHER COMPETENCIES IN ASSESSING LEARNING OUTCOMES

Teacher education and in-service education courses and programs play an important role in providing teachers with skills, knowledge and understanding about educational evaluation and assessment. The initial education for teachers includes modules focusing on student assessment. In addition to introducing research-based knowledge on educational evaluation and student assessment, these modules often utilize national evaluation reports in order to explain the culture of evaluation and assessment within the Finnish education system. The courses and modules on assessment and evaluation also educate future teachers about the ways in which they can use evaluation data in their teaching. The education of future teachers on student assessment varies across teacher education programs, since there is no national curriculum for teacher education in Finland.

The Finnish National Board of Education, university continuing education centres and regional authorities arrange short-term programs and training on the assessment and evaluation criteria for education providers.

Teacher Appraisal

Neither teachers nor instruction are evaluated in Finland. The principal is, however, always the pedagogical leader of the school and, thus, responsible for both the quality of instruction and the teaching staff. Most schools have quality assurance systems that include annual development discussions and/or appraisals.

Teachers' qualification requirements are laid down in a decree (986/1998). The Ministry of Education and Culture monitors teachers' formal qualifications as well as age structure at the national and regional levels by means of triennial data collections. The data is used in forecasts and decision-making on teacher education in order to secure the availability of qualified teaching personnel. Participation in continuing professional education is also assessed and the needs for future initial and continuing teacher education programs are identified.

Student Assessment Is Part of Daily Schoolwork

In Finnish basic education, teachers carry out assessments in their respective subjects on the basis of the objectives stated in the curriculum. Assessment is an ongoing part of daily school life. Each student receives a report at least once every school year. In addition, an intermediate report may be given at least once during the school year. Achievement is assessed both continuously and through tests set by teachers. A certificate is awarded when a student has successfully completed the full nine

years of comprehensive schooling. An additional certificate is awarded for those completing the optional 10th year (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2011).

In basic education, the assessment is criteria-based. The objectives and core content of instruction are defined in the national core curriculum by subject or a group of subjects. The objectives, core content, descriptions of good performance and the criteria used in the final assessment are determined to help in the assessment. The grade scale is from 4 (weak) to 10 (excellent). The criteria for Grade 8 are defined in the National Core Curriculum for each subject (Finnish National Board of Education, 1999).

During particular terms, student assessment is mostly formative in nature. Summative assessments should be used at the end of the school year. The main purpose of the end-of-school summative evaluations is to assess how well the student has attained the aims set out in the curriculum. During basic education, there are no national examinations or compulsory tests. Since 1998, national school performance has been measured by means of sample-based national tests. It is obligatory for all schools in the sample to participate in these tests (National Board of Education, 1999).

Although the main purpose of student assessments is to investigate how well the students have attained the aims set out in the curricula, the feedback must also promote further learning and maintain and enhance motivation for learning. Assessments also provide information about the success of the education in helping students to learn.

Student assessments are often accompanied by authentic and formative assessment methods, such as via students' self-evaluations and learning portfolios (Patton, 1996; Williams, 2010). Students' personal involvement in monitoring their learning practices, processes and achievements has been found valuable in supporting the development of their meta-cognitive awareness and lifelong learning skills. Parental involvement is also welcomed in the monitoring of students' progress and learning. Joint meetings between students, their parents and teachers facilitate collective reflections, during which all parties can document developments and possible challenges in students' learning from their own particular viewpoints.

External National Assessments of Learning Outcomes

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is responsible for national assessments of learning outcomes. The purpose is to provide information for the development of education and the core curriculum. National external evaluations are performed according to pre-defined criteria (see e.g. Finnish National Board of Education, 1999). The information sources, compilation procedures and the methods of analysis are described and justified. The aim is that the information collected is reliable and valid. All assessment projects are carried out and reported as transparently as possible. The salient findings are reported and published in a way that does not do injustice to the individual education provider, the school,

the personnel or the students. Ranking lists of schools based on national learning outcome assessment results are practically non-existent in Finland (Simola et al., 2009).

External national assessments are sample-based. The purpose of these assessments is to obtain information for the purpose of educational and curricular development. The overall sample size is 5–10% of the age group, between 3000 to 6000 students. Assessments are usually conducted during Grades 3, 5, 7, and 9, but most commonly in Grade 9, which represents the end of compulsory education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2011).

The Education Evaluation Plan determines what subjects are evaluated in a given year. Mathematics and the mother tongue (Finnish and Swedish) are assessed systematically. Students' performance in other subjects is assessed at irregular intervals.

External national assessment projects are led by project managers who take responsibility for the entire evaluation process and how it is reported. The method of planning and implementation is quality-assured and fairly similar in all subject-specific assessments. Typically, an assessment process has several phases:

1. Development of instruments
2. Preparation of the sample
3. Pre-test and item analysis
4. Data collection and input
5. Data analysis
6. Feedback to schools
7. National report

The assessment process usually takes 1.5 years. The purpose of evaluation is to provide information about the state of affairs in schools which can be utilized in decision-making on the development of education at different levels, namely at the level of the school, the municipality, the region and the whole country (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2011).

Evaluations relating to basic education have an important function in ensuring educational equity by determining whether or not students achieve roughly the same basic competencies regardless of their place of residence, gender and home background. All national assessment reports are submitted to the Parliamentary Education and Culture Committee and to the Ministry of Education and Culture. Seminars are organized for education experts and teachers. Each school in the sample receives its own results and some reference data concerning the whole sample. The education provider (almost always the local authority) receives the same information. School-based reports are delivered to the school as soon as possible, typically within 6–8 weeks of the collection of data. The importance of communicating and disseminating evaluation outcomes among education professionals on a continuous and systematic basis is regarded as pivotal in order to ensure that shortcomings in

outcomes are recognized and acted upon (Korkeakoski & Tynjälä, 2010; Välijärvi & Kupari, 2010).

CHALLENGES OF FINNISH BASIC EDUCATION

Education plays a key role in building competitiveness and well-being in society. Only through education is it possible to create new high-level competences, which form the foundation for society to continue to develop and prosper. Basic education plays an important role in this development work. Basic education must enable learning and development for entire age groups and encourage them towards lifelong learning in various learning environments. Evaluation and assessment work plays an important role in monitoring the processes and outcomes that support and also challenge the realization of these educational goals (Atjonen, 2007).

In light of current research and national assessment results, Finland also needs to continuously develop its basic education to better respond to the needs of the society and its individuals (Finnish National Board of Education, 2011). Recent assessment and follow-up studies have revealed growing differences in learning outcomes, student welfare services, children's and young people's psychosocial welfare and health care services. There are differences between genders, regions and population groups. Based on the research, it is evident that not all Finnish local authorities have sufficient resources or political will to provide high-quality education, which puts students in an unequal position.

The demographic landscape in Finnish basic education schools is clearly becoming more complex. Increasing cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity among learners makes it timely to re-examine educational equity and its realization in Finnish education. The need to obtain evidence that indicates the degree of equality attained in Finnish schools makes educational evaluation and assessment work extremely valuable for monitoring the situation and adequately responding to the emerging challenges in order to create better learning opportunities that match the needs of diverse learners (Hursh, 2005; Meyer, 2001).

Responding to the Multiple Needs of Diverse Learners

One of the key questions for the development of basic education is how to safeguard encouraging and motivating education for all students. The development of basic education is premised on giving due consideration to students' age and abilities, their individual growth and development, and their different needs. Any possible difficulties should be identified at the earliest possible stage and all students should be supported in a socially empowering way (Linamo & Kannas, 1995; Linnakylä, 1993). Student welfare services, social services and mental health services should form an effective whole. School health care needs assistance from an effective adolescent psychiatric service system that provides support for children and young people requiring treatment.

Schools are also expected to motivate and support students more clearly, so as to provide them with opportunities to make the most of their potential as individuals. These objectives can be supported by creating increasingly flexible learning pathways that recognize different learning styles, needs and talents. The right of students to systematic, early and preventive support for learning and schooling was reinforced by a 2010 amendment to the Basic Education Act. Education providers need national guidance in carrying out reforms in order to establish procedures in a consistent manner throughout the country.

Student assessment is one of the most essential issues when developing basic education. Student assessment may be perceived too narrowly as being about examining the outputs of learning and awarding grades. However, the primary role of student assessment is to guide the learning process of learners and to support motivation for learning. Students construct their perceptions of themselves as learners through the feedback received as part of assessment. Experiences of success and finding the joy in learning are important for every student. At the same time, students must also be guaranteed equal treatment in terms of assessment; students showing an equivalent level of competence must be awarded the same grade regardless of location, school and class.

Assessment should support the development of students' learning skills and competences. This requires the development of both the methods of and criteria for student assessment. It is necessary to ensure that assessment criteria and specified objectives are consistently linked to each other. The objectives, in turn, must be formulated in such a way that makes it possible to assess them. Schools need new assessment practices that support the learning process and make use of information and communications technology. These must be consistently supported through national guidance.

STEPS FORWARD IN ENSURING EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE FOR EVERY LEARNER

Developing the best comprehensive school system in the world so that it becomes even better calls for a nationally shared vision of the goal of basic education, its objectives, as well as the implementation and continuous evaluation of development work. It requires securing resources for maintaining and developing the availability and quality of basic education. Success entails determined and persistent leadership and good co-operation at all levels. The development of education should be consistently seen as a development task for the entire education system and as a continuous process. It is not solely determined by degrees. Instead, it should form a natural part of everyday operations within the administration, local educational services and schools.

In order to ensure the integrity of learning, it is essential to determine the key development targets for the education system, which are then pursued through each aspect of the education system. This should be visible throughout the

system: in policy decisions (legislation, distribution of lesson-hours), steering documents (National Core Curriculum), funding, teacher education and training, and the provision of education and school operations, in the selection of learning environments, the use of various teaching and learning methods, and the forms of guidance as well as in support and evaluation measures. Ensuring the performance of learning outcomes requires stability from the national steering system when pursuing the targets. Legislation, funding and other national steering bodies need to support and steer education providers to carry out statutory and education policy objectives (Lahtinen & Lankinen, 2010).

The development of basic education needs to continue to recognize the needs and aptitudes of diverse learners. The most essential objective of development is to promote learning and maximize learning outcomes for every student. The curriculum together with educational evaluation and assessment work are key instruments for developing and reforming basic education in Finland. They are the cornerstones of the whole system, through which objectives are refined into steps that guide schoolwork.

Teachers and principals also play an important role in the development and evaluation of basic education; professional competence relating to teaching and management should be constantly supported and consolidated. Building a collaborative culture and developing collaborative competence require attention and effort. Basic education must be developed through partnership and shared leadership. The need for change and the objectives of reform should be understood throughout the system. The prerequisite for achieving the objectives is commitment from all participants in the education system: national and local administration, schools and teachers. Consistent development of the entire education system, supported by development and enhancement-led evaluation and assessment work, is likely to create education, competences and wellbeing that form the most important resource for Finnish society.

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K. KUMPULAINEN & T. LANKINEN

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