

Basic Education Development: Enlightenment from Finnish Basic Education Reforms in Recent 50 Years

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Abstract: Education reform has always been an important topic in the field of education. With the establishment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the quality and equality of education have become more attractive to educators. The curriculum reform of basic education in Finland has attracted widespread attention from scholars both domestically and internationally. Based on this, this article analyzes the characteristics of Finnish curriculum reform and the current situation of Finnish basic education, summarize the effectiveness and shortcomings of Finnish curriculum reform. The research in this paper shows that Finnish education emphasizes equity and high quality, so as to achieve a common education for the whole society. While ensuring the development of basic education, Finland emphasizes the internationalization of education and realizes the systematic and comprehensive development of education. However, Finland still faces the challenge of weakening students' basic skills. This paper argues that it is necessary to pay attention to improving the quality of teachers, ensuring educational fairness, and improving the quality of education.

Keywords: Education reform, Finland, basic education

1. Introduction

In recent years, education in Finland has received a lot of attention. The relaxed educational environment, high educational equality, and excellent educational quality have been widely recognized internationally [1]. It is worth learning and referring to how Finland has gradually achieved a high level of educational equality, while also achieving excellent results in recent PISA tests. Finland's basic education has successfully achieved excellence in balancing fairness, and its reform strategy and path are clearly different from the market oriented liberal model that dominates the current world education reform movement [2]. In fact, it provides an alternative reform strategy and path for all countries that pursue fair and excellent basic education. Therefore, research on Finland's basic education reform can help enrich the current research on education reform theories and strategies. Moreover, this is a model that has been proven successful in practice.

Finland's important basic education reform mainly began in 1970, and 1970 was also a turning point in the development of basic education in Finland. Therefore, this article mainly studies the process and trends of basic education reform in Finland over the past 50 years, starting from 1970. Combining with domestic and foreign literature analysis, it attempts to learn from the advanced

experience of education reform in Finland's basic education reform process and further improve education equality and equity.

2. Important Finnish basic education reforms in the last 50 years

2.1. Evolution

Before 1970, the Finnish education system was unfair and clearly hierarchical. In the 1950s, most children left school after six to seven years of formal basic education; only those who lived in urban or metropolitan areas could attend grammar schools and civic schools. In urban areas with grammar schools, pupils could choose to attend a grammar school after completing four, five, or six years of elementary school, but only about 27% of the lucky ones were able to attend a grammar school [3]. Some also entered civic schools or the vocational education system, but only in metropolitan cities and urban areas.

1970 was a milestone in the history of Finnish education [3]. The new comprehensive basic schools were established and provided six years of primary education and three years of lower secondary education for children aged 7-16 throughout the country, with the same curriculum and syllabus for schools in different regions. But schools are organized into classes according to students' performance [4]. In 1985, Curriculum Framework for Comprehensive School introduced deeper reforms to the comprehensive school system, completely abolishing ability grouping and introducing mixed ability grouping [3]. In addition, the competence of education was decentralized from the central to the local level. From 1994, decentralization of authority went further and "Aquarium Project" enhanced school autonomy, shaped strong school identity and promoted cooperation among schools [5]. In 2004, Finland shifted the focus of its educational reform to integrated science curricula. It could be seen that the Finnish science curriculum emphasized the gradual deepening of students' scientific literacy from shallow to deep and from broad to specialized, and focused on the gradual deepening of students' scientific literacy based on comprehensive learning [3]. The 2014 reform of the Finnish basic education curriculum emphasizes the development of transversal competence in a changing future society [5]. Therefore, a new multidisciplinary teaching model "Phenomenon Based Learning" (PBL) was proposed to encourage cooperation between teachers and develop students' integrative skills.

2.2. Features

2.2.1. Equality in Education

The Finnish education system is primarily based on the fact that all people have equal opportunities to receive high quality education. Finland provides free education from preschool to higher education and secures students' right to education by implementing special programmes and providing substantial financial support [3]. The Finnish education system considers it very important that every student is treated equally and fairly. Finnish teachers ensure that no student is left behind. There are no descending classes in Finnish classes, only basic courses. Schools should strive not to compare or share grades, but to treat pupils and teachers fairly. Before the fifth grade, Finland banned testing and classification of pupils in order to maintain their confidence and self esteem, eliminate the negative effects of tests on education and reduce repetition. In addition, the Finnish education system is fully accessible. Before comprehensive school, six-year-old children have the opportunity to enrol in the preschool classes offered by primary school or kindergarten according to their parents' preferences. Children aged seven must enrol in comprehensive school in order to complete comprehensive school until the age of 16. Finnish children are offered compulsory schools free of charge through public schools run by municipalities and private institutions officially approved and authorised by the state.

Finnish schools differ slightly from each other and educational resources are distributed fairly, so Finnish parents usually choose schools in the immediate vicinity of their place of residence [6].

2.2.2. Student Development

Since the 20th century, Finland has gradually given priority to strengthening the internationalisation of its primary education system [3]. The aim is to continuously maintain the quality of basic education while strengthening the global competitiveness and impact of Finnish education. Finland's emphasis on promoting children's personal development is a well-thought-out change aimed at keeping the primary education system forward in modern times. As mentioned earlier, basic education in Finland prioritises the overall growth of each student and balances individual progress with a broader educational background. Therefore, the prioritisation of students' personal development is an important step towards improving the curriculum level in Finnish primary schools and ensuring overall expertise in modern basic education.

Since 2010, there has been a significant increase in global attention to the development of students' comprehensive skills [7]. Finland recognises the need to develop students' comprehensive skills. The goal is to increase the ability of Finnish students to communicate and collaborate with the world while contributing to sustainable learning and development of Finnish citizens. The curriculum reform launched by Finland in 2014 clearly underlines the importance of nurturing responsible Finnish citizens with a wide range of skills, including reading skills, mastery of information and communication technologies, working ability, innovative thinking and the ability to actively participate, integrate and contribute to a sustainable future [3]. The goal is to cultivate individuals who can effectively adapt to future social challenges and progress [8]. This suggests that the reform of Finland's basic curriculum gradually shifts from meeting social needs to prioritising and emphasising students' personal growth with a focus on developing their general practical skills. Finland has begun to emphasize the importance of the curriculum in the personal positioning, development and growth of students, and the humanistic value of education has been further developed.

2.2.3. Interdisciplinarity

One of the characteristics of Finland's basic education curriculum reform is the establishment and deepening of interdisciplinary courses. Especially in the new round of curriculum reform launched in 2014, Finland clearly proposed the requirement of building multidisciplinary learning modules, aiming to cultivate students' essential transversal competences [7]. In fact, the new round of curriculum reform in Finland has achieved a breakthrough in the construction of its interdisciplinary curriculum. Prior to this, interdisciplinary courses in Finland relied more on interdisciplinary themes to guide teachers in conducting interdisciplinary teaching. The requirements for integrated teaching are more at the level of advocacy. After 2014, interdisciplinary courses in Finland entered a new stage of development -- Phenomenon Based Learning. The Finnish government emphasizes the need to integrate different disciplines, promote collaborative learning models, stimulate students' learning interest and motivation, and ultimately cultivate capable and confident children and young people [9].

The construction process of interdisciplinary courses in Finland indicates that the basic education curriculum in Finland will further weaken the boundaries between disciplines in chemistry. The Finnish government focuses on addressing issues such as knowledge fragmentation and lack of comprehensive abilities among students caused by traditional subject based courses. As mentioned earlier, the construction process of interdisciplinary courses in Finland involves transitioning from interdisciplinary themes to partial interdisciplinary ones, and gradually transitioning to the coexistence of sub disciplinary and multidisciplinary thematic modules. This approach can help

teachers and students gradually adapt to the transition from learning knowledge from a single disciplinary perspective to thinking and solving real-world problems from a multidisciplinary perspective [9]. In summary, from the perspective of the development law of Finnish basic education curriculum reform, the future Finnish basic education curriculum will further blur the boundaries between disciplines and create comprehensive courses that can cultivate students' practical abilities.

3. Status of Basic Education in Finland

3.1. Positive Development: Atmosphere of Trust

Trust is a characteristic of the Finnish educational culture [9]. In Finland, the government trusts schools, principals trust teachers, and parents trust the education system. The culture of trust in education was born in 1985 with the reform of the basic education curriculum and gradually spread throughout the 1990s, becoming a general consensus in Finnish society. As Erkki Aho, the former head of the Finnish National Board of Education, points out, the comprehensive school reform of the 1980s led to trust in schools and teachers, and in the early 1990s Finland officially entered the era of a trust-based culture [4]. The formation of this trust-based culture is due to the strengthening and deepening of Finland's transparent and open administrative culture, the academic orientation of professional teacher education, and the decentralization of education. The transparent and open administrative culture of Finnish society has increased public trust in government.

Since 2013, Finland has been at the top of the Global Corruption Perceptions Index, making it one of the cleanest countries in the world [9]. Meanwhile, the reform of teacher education in the 1970s led to the establishment of a research-based model for training expert teachers. Cultivating educational thinkers and educational researchers has become the main goal of teacher education, and promoting teaching from a random activity to a rational activity has become an important mission of teacher education [9]. Research-oriented teacher education has contributed to the creation of a high-quality teaching force in Finland and has increased public confidence in schools and teachers. In addition, the decentralization of education since the 1980s has to some extent reflected the government's confidence in the professionalism of schools and teachers [10]. Public confidence in the education system has been further strengthened by the increasing role and voice of schools and teachers in the reform of the basic education curriculum.

3.2. Challenges and Obstacles: Decline in Students' Basic Skills

Since 2006, however, the basic skills of Finnish pupils participating in the PISA have decreased [3]. Finnish students perform significantly better than the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science, making them one of the best in the world. However, Finland's PISA rating has declined over the years compared to previous achievements. In 2000, Finland's excellent performance in PISA received international recognition for the quality of basic education. Between 2000 and 2006, Finnish students performed well in the fields of science, reading and mathematics, and this trend continued [11]. At the same time, the Finnish curriculum reform in 2004 strongly emphasised the development of the natural sciences curriculum and scientific literacy. Therefore, the achievements of Finnish students in the field of science have improved rapidly. Since 2006, PISA performance in Finland has slowed down slowly. Despite the continuous decline in Finland's PISA scores, Finland ranks first among all subjects in the OECD countries, which underlines the excellent level of Finland's basic education.

The weakening of the performance of the Department of Basic Education might be due to a global decrease in the level of basic education, inconsistency between the Department of Basic Education and the Finnish curriculum, and outdated basic education subjects. The analysis of average performance models in OECD countries shows that basic skills levels have generally decreased, and

Finland is no exception. In addition, research on the development of the basic education curriculum in Finland showed that Finland is gradually moving towards prioritizing integrated education and developing students' comprehensive abilities [3]. This was also be a key part of the revision of the Finnish curriculum for basic education in 2014. In recent years, the inconsistency between Finnish educational content and PISA and the focus on other factors related to comprehensive school exams have led to a decline in Pisa in Finland. The recent curriculum reform in Finland has not provided specific strategies for improving students' basic skills and achieving a harmonious balance between basic and comprehensive competences. This has led to a decline in the academic performance of Finnish students in PISA in 2022 [11].

4. Enlightenment

4.1. Improvement of the Quality of the Teaching Force

Finnish primary and secondary school teachers are required to have a master's degree or higher, and they must go through solid subject knowledge learning, a lot of pedagogical training and scientific research ability cultivation before service, which is a high-quality teacher education training mode that is an important guarantee for high-quality education in Finland [12]. Compared with the admission and training mechanism of Finnish teacher education students, China is not strict and advanced enough in the selection of teacher education majors, and there are problems in the training process, such as some colleges and universities do not train teachers with strong professionalism [12]. At present, China should improve the selection and training mode of teacher education students as soon as possible: first, increase the interview link in the selection of teacher education students, select the students who are more suitable to be teachers for training, and take the students' educational motivation and teaching potential as one of the examination links in the selection of teacher education students. Second, in the process of training, strengthen the professional training of teachers, emphasize the study of pedagogy, and carry out a large number of teaching practice, so as to ensure that the courses offered can effectively improve the abilities and qualities of teacher trainees. In addition, the post-service training for teachers who have already entered the profession should be strengthened, and teachers should be urged to continuously enrich their knowledge and improve their teaching ability in their work. By improving the quality of teachers' teaching, society's trust in teachers and schools can also be increased.

4.2. Equality and Equity

In order to achieve a fair and just basic education system similar to Finland, the initial stage is to ensure an equal educational foundation [13]. Therefore, it is necessary for appropriate management agencies to develop and implement regulations to ensure fair distribution of resources among schools. This includes providing sufficient school facilities, training teachers, and funding for school development. In addition, efforts should be made to support disadvantaged areas and schools, while encouraging schools with excellent performance to assist those in poorer situations. The ultimate goal is to improve the overall quality of primary education. At the same time, a strong financial aid framework must be developed for students. Cooperation between the government, society, and schools is necessary to ensure that children with special needs, children with learning difficulties, and children from disadvantaged families can access high-quality primary education.

Furthermore, it is crucial to incorporate the principle of educational equality into the entire teacher training process. This will effectively reduce any discriminatory or biased attitudes towards students by certain teachers. It will also help teachers cultivate a mindset of teaching methods that adapt to the abilities of each student, strengthen the practice of personalized teaching, and ultimately ensure true equality in the educational process [13]. Schools should ensure the provision of sufficient professional

education personnel to support students with special needs or facing academic difficulties, in order to improve their academic performance. At the same time, relevant materials must be integrated into courses on other topics to promote a common understanding of egalitarianism for all [14]. The concept of educational equality effectively narrows the gap between schools and students, thereby maintaining the overall standards of primary education.

5. Conclusion

The Finnish curriculum reforms over the past 50 years have been an incredible quest for educational excellence, equal education and inclusive education. With international recognition and admiration, Finland has made a commitment to provide all students high-quality education. Finland's basic education system is modeled on an integrated approach of comprehensive reform. It represents a version with equality, inclusiveness and quality as well as efficiency. These reforms depend on the Finnish National Board of Education. One necessity for this process is that it has created a social environment which views teachers with respect, values education and trusts schools and its teachers. Teacher education and training is also an important strength of the Finnish system. Finnish teachers are expected to obtain a master's degree. They must undergo intensive learning of subject knowledge, rigorous training in pedagogy and cultivation of scientific research ability. This high standard of teacher education training has helped to guarantee quality in Finland's educational system. Besides, the importance which Finland attaches to equality and equity in education is represented by its efforts to level out differences between schools in terms of resources, support for children with special needs or learning disabilities; reducing discrimination and prejudice during the educational process. Equality in education eliminated differences between schools and students, providing the basis for high quality basic education throughout Finland.

Nonetheless, in recent years Finland has experienced problems of its own, including a fall off in basic skills among students as evidenced by the PISA scores. In general, the quality of basic education has declined internationally. Overcoming these challenges is essential if Finland's education system to continue its success. Summing up, the Finnish basic education curriculum reform has been a transformative process which has given rise to an educational system that is equal, inclusive and of good quality. There are obstacles to be overcome, but Finland's achievements in education deserve reflections of teachers and planners of every country. Through reviewing Finland's experiences and strategies, other countries can learn to build a more fair quality of education that is effective for all students.

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