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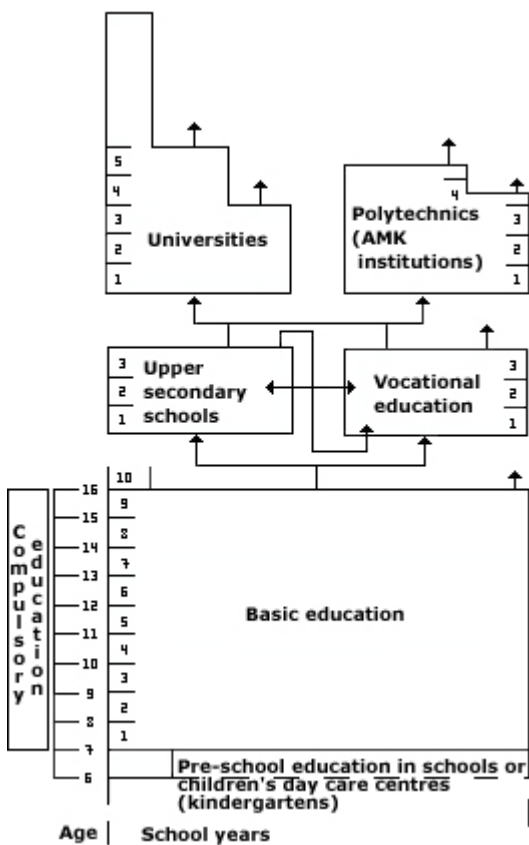
Long-Term Strategies in Finnish Educational System

In this paper some relevant points of view of Finnish future-oriented educational system are briefly handled. Like in all other western countries also in Finland we are willing to gear the schooling and education to meet the challenges of the future. We will start the discussion from the special features of Finnish educational system in the European context. Later on we will highlight several relevant future-oriented strategy papers prepared by the Ministry of Education (MoE) – we will discuss about the relevance of those strategies as acts of political will and as practical impetus for a process of change.

The Finnish educational system in Nutshell

As we see in the following graph the children start their school quite old – at age 7 – though approximately 97 % of the children take also one years pre-primary education in schools or in children’s day care centres. After nine years compulsory education approximately 98 % of the 9th graders follow the path to general upper secondary schools or to the vocational training. Unfortunately the drop-out rates in vocational educations are as high as approximately 17 %. In Finnish system we expect approximately 70 % of the cohort enter the higher education – either in Universities or in Polytechnics. In Universities a problem under discussion up-to-date are prolonged studies.

Finnish Education System Chart



A central objective of Finnish education policy is to provide all citizens with equal opportunities to receive education, irrespective of their age, domicile, financial situation, sex or native language. Thus the education is, in principle, free of charge: tuition (provided by school), health care, welfare services and school meals are provided free of charge at all levels up to the end of upper secondary education, whereas learning materials and text books are free in pre-primary and basic education.

Independence of local authorities and teachers

Education is the responsibility of Ministry of Education (MoE). The Finnish National Board of Education (NBE) develops educational aims, contents and methods for primary, secondary and adult education in the form of the national core curricula. However, one of the unique characteristics of Finnish educational system – developed especially during the 90's – is the independent role of local authorities (usually municipalities) and the teachers as actors when providing education. When recognizing the independence of the local actors, it might be interesting to note that there is no inspectorate or normative responsibilities of NBE – except the norms given in the national core curricula. Neither there is no system of examination type of evaluation in basic education. Instead there is a strong focus on both local and school-based self-evaluation and external evaluation (for example, national sample-based assessment). The quality of the teachers seems to be quite similar in different parts of Finland. To be a qualified teacher requires master's degree in university. Teacher profession has traditionally been socially valued in Finland and teacher's studies are one of the most popular university studies. That gives us the possibility to choose highly achieved students to become teachers. Though there is some special schools with higher mean of achievement tests than average the reason lie most likely not in the difference between the teachers or facilities but in pupils/students themselves. Internationally the differences between the Finnish schools were quite small measured with OECD indicators.

Future-orientation in the governmental level

Year 1993 the Finnish Parliament appointed a Committee for the Future (CF) for the purpose of evaluating and replying to the Government's decisions. Parliament decided that the Government should present a Futures Report to Parliament at least once during each electoral period. CF functioned on a temporary basis until the year 2000 – after that it has had a permanent status.

CF has released three basic reports concerning the future of Finland¹. These basic reports are mainly focusing on the general scenarios of Finland in the context of European Union – scope is to year 2015. Committee has also contributed to several projects concerning the future technology². These Technology Assessment (TA) projects have covered, for example, Independent living of elderly people, Energy 2010, Knowledge Management, Regional innovation activities in Finland, Social Capital and the Development of Information and Communication Technology and Human genome and stem cells.

¹ All the reports are available in English in the site of the Finnish Parliament. The links for these primary reports are in page <http://www.eduskunta.fi/efakta/vk/tuv/tuv3e.htm>

² Links to these reports or abstracts are in page <http://www.eduskunta.fi/efakta/vk/tuv/tuv4e.htm>

Latest publication – made by one of the leading young philosophers in Finland, Pekka Himanen, was published 4.5.2004. Unfortunately it is available only in Finnish³.

Maybe because of the interest of the CA toward technological themes also an independent public foundation under the supervision of the Finnish Parliament – the Finnish National Fund for Research and Development (SITRA) – has been active to contribute the discussion of the future of Finland⁴. Especially interesting might be a report of Sinko & Lehtinen (1999) concerning the challenges of ICT in Finnish education⁵. This report by its part influenced a series of national projects of increasing the level of ICT competencies of teachers. These projects are discussed in the next chapter.

Future-orientation in the Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education (MoE) have also been active in future orientation. Though the strategies prepared by MoE are not determinative or binding in the governmental level they tend to be normative in practice. These strategies are short term strategies (up to one electoral period) and long term strategies (up to 2015). Some of the papers are available also in English⁶ though the others will be mentioned here too.

The long-term strategy paper addresses six strategic key areas in the MoE sector: 1) Securing educational and cultural equality, 2) Promoting intellectual growth and learning, 3) Increasing opportunities for participation, 4) Supporting the educational, cultural and economic competitiveness of Finnish society, 5) Diversifying Finland's international influence, and 6) Improving performance in the MoE sector. Supposedly same kind of goals are seen in the strategies of most OECD countries – the name. Thus, these key areas are not very unique, but it is important to note that on the top of the list there is emphasis for equality. This order is not an accident - equal opportunities are very important in Finnish society – as we discussed earlier. Among others following policy and strategy papers prepared by MoE support these key areas:

- Education and Research 1999-2004. Development Plan. (in English⁷).
- Education, Training and Research in the Information Society. A National strategy for 2000-2004 (in English⁸).
- Education, Training and Research in the Information Society. A National strategy for 2004-2006 (in Finnish).
- Ministry of Education regional strategy 2003 – 2013, Regional development of higher education. (In Finnish).
- Regional strategy for education and research up to 2013. (in English⁹)

³ This report was discussed also – which happens quite rare in Finland – also in tabloids because of some interesting proposals made by the author. The text is available (in Finnish) in http://www.eduskunta.fi/fakta/julkaisut/ekj4_2004.pdf.

⁴ SITRA has funded some interesting projects which have relevance to education and schooling also. Exhaustive list of publications is available in <http://www.sitra.fi/eng/index.asp?DirID=297>

⁵ The report is available in <http://www.sitra.fi/Julkaisut/sitra227.pdf>

⁶ Some of the reports and strategy papers are available in English in <http://www.minedu.fi/minedu/publications/online.html>. Especially the main strategy paper “*Ministry of Education Strategy 2015*” is in English on the site.

⁷ in <http://www.minedu.fi/julkaisut/KESU2004/eng/engKESU.html>

⁸ in <http://www.minedu.fi/julkaisut/information/englishU/welcome.html> and its plan for implementation is in <http://www.minedu.fi/julkaisut/pdf/tietostrategia/toimeenpanosuunnitelmaENG.pdf>

- International strategy for higher education institutions 2010 (in English¹⁰)
- Cultural Information Society 2010 – Strategy and Program. (In Finnish).

One of the main emphasis in Finnish society is to develop information society with covering infrastructure, purposeful reinforcement of competencies in information society and emphasizing role of education and research. This line has been realized under MoE as several large programs concerning different areas of future information society. One of the written goals for the information society program is that by 2007 all citizens have basic competencies and possibilities to use digital or electric services. One of the programs – “*Skills of information society for all*” – focuses on that area. Another goal is that appropriate use of ICT in learning and teaching will be a part of everyday life in every school. Programs named as “*OPE.FP*” – focuses on that area. The main effort in the latter area was an educational process to educate approximate 60.000 teachers to use computers – 25.000 in a basic level, 23.000 to use ICT in their teaching and 10.000 for (high) expertise of ICT. The evaluation of the program is still ongoing – thus, we do not yet know what the results of the program are.

Future-orientation in the National Board of Education

The Finnish National Board of Education (NBE) has also a role in planning the future of education and schooling in Finland. Though NBE has its main role in **preparing the core curricula**¹¹ for schools (which will effect the future in short term), there has been several areas where NBE has been active when focusing on long term future of schooling. One of the main stable instrument is **a statistical model of calculating the future needs for study places in vocational training**¹². In Finnish system the MoE decides the amount of students in every vocational training institutes – the forecasting model takes into account different factors affecting the need of labours on certain year and helps MoE to decide these study places. Also **the qualitative needs** have been scanned in a project called OSENN¹³. Another – more or less stable – instrument for future orientation has been a project called OPEPRO on which the **qualifications of the future teachers** were scanned. The focus of all the projects were on 2010. The assessment unit of NBE – which is on charge of the assessment of school achievement in schools up to higher secondary education – has also its own future oriented program negotiated with MoE. This program initially runs till 2015.

⁹ in <http://www.minedu.fi/julkaisut/koulutus/2004/opm11/opm11.pdf>

¹⁰ in <http://www.minedu.fi/julkaisut/pdf/strategy.pdf>

¹¹ The school law and the National Core Curriculum (NCC) give guidelines to comprehensive and upper secondary education. They include orders about the school year, the obligatory and voluntary subjects and the timetable. They also formulate the aims of education and teaching, guidelines for pupils/student assessment, the form of certificates, division of teaching into cross-curricular topics and the contents of different subjects, guidelines for extra-curricular activities and for pupil/student guidance and well fare. On the basis of the national curriculum, local authorities draw up the local curriculum or support schools to draw up their own school based curricula. The school board makes decisions about school curriculum and the City Education Committee confirms all curricula. According to NCC the local authorities are assumed to take into account the decisions (local visions, plans, scenarios ETC.) concerning the education. Thus, the local curricula are connected to future thinking in some extend.

¹² More information for the project called MITENNA is in <http://www.opi.fi/english/page.asp?path=447;490;6750>

¹³ Projects OSENN and OPEPRO are reported only in Finnish.