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Finnish education system

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If you do not change direction,
you may end up where you are heading.

Lao Tzu

‘Unfortunately – a Finnish classroom is like entering an airplane. Welcome on board, please switch off all digital devices.’ The Finnish Minister of Education and Science Krista Kiuru made this comparison at the EMINENT 2013 conference (European Schoolnet) in Helsinki. In her opening speech Kiuru also underlined that we have to let pupils play learning games to learn in schools. Content of teaching, pedagogy and school practices should be reviewed and renewed in relation to the changes in the operating environment and skills.

Why should a well-functioning Finnish educational system be reviewed, reformed, and renewed? According to Pasi Sandberg the answer is that ‘...educators in Finland think, quite correctly, that schools should teach what young people need in their lives rather than try to bring national test scores back to where they were.’ The need for 21st century skills or competences has influenced the design of the core curriculum for basic education in Finland as in many other countries (*The Conversation*).

For years, Finland has been the by-word for a successful education system, perched at the top of international league tables for literacy and numeracy. Only Far Eastern countries such as Singapore and China outperform the Nordic nation in the influential Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings. Politicians and education experts from around the world – including Norway – have made pilgrimages to Helsinki in the hope of identifying and replicating the secret of its success. Which makes it all the more remarkable that Finland is about to embark on one of the most radical education reform programs ever undertaken by a nation state.

In December 2014, Finland completed the reform of the National Core Curricula for pre-primary education and for compulsory basic education. The local education authorities are now busy working with the local curricula based on the National Core Curricula. Schools will start working according to the new curricula in autumn 2016. ‘This change requires strong strategic leadership, from Finnish National Board of Education experts, local authorities, school principals, and teachers of all kinds. Furthermore, extensive amounts of shared thinking and collaboration are needed’ (Vahtiivouri-Hänninen et al: 2014:30).



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According to Vahtiivouri-Hänninen (2014), the ongoing curriculum process will play a key role in the reframing of Finland's educational sector for 21st century skills and competences. Reform of the national core and local curricula provides a common framework to discuss the changes taking place in today's world and to ensure that schools have a 21st century teaching and learning ecosystem (Vahtiivouri-Hänninen et al: 2014:30).

The world in which schools operate has undergone major changes since the beginning of the 2000s, increasing the impact of globalization and the challenges for a sustainable future. The use of ICT in both schools and everyday life are converging, coming ever closer to each other. Competencies needed in society and working life have changed, requiring skills for building a sustainable future.

The need for 21st century skills and competences has influenced the design of the core curriculum for basic education in Finland as in many other countries. The Finnish are inspired by international frameworks and trends: Such as the OECD project *DeSeCo – Definition and Selection of Competencies* (OECD, 2002) and the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning recommendation 2006/962/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of Europe (2006). In the Key Competences Recommendation, *competence* is defined as 'a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context' (European Parliament and the Council, 2006). The European recommendation recognized eight key competences for lifelong learning: communication in the mother tongue; communication in foreign languages; mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; digital competence; learning to learn; social and civic competences; entrepreneurship; and cultural awareness and expression.

The approach to key competencies in the Finnish curricula is holistic and occurs through the study of individual subjects. Some competences, such as digital literacy and collaborative skills, are presented in a much more thorough way than in the existing national core curricula.

The learning goals of the transversal competences are described as seven competence areas.

- C1. Thinking and learning to learn;
- C2. Cultural literacy, interaction, and expression;
- C3. Taking care of oneself, everyday life skills, safety;
- C4. Multi-literacy;
- C5. Digital competence;
- C6. Working life skills and entrepreneurship;
- C7. Participation, influence, and responsibility for a sustainable future.

These competences (C1–C 7) consist of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and the ability to apply them in different contexts. The aim is that learners will also have the will to use their competences for ethical purposes. The objectives for these competencies are described as part of core curriculum general goals for teaching and learning, and more detailed objectives for each grade group (grades 1–2, 3–6, and 7–9).

Fundamentally, the reform concludes that use of digital technology in Finnish education is not optional. *Digital competence* should be developed in all subjects, and technology should be used as an integrated tool for learning. The new national core curricula emphasize that future jobs will require broad competences and skills that are developed through school subjects. However, teaching and learning should be more collaborative. Developing competences and skills is influenced by the individual's values and attitudes and by their own goals and ambition.

Digital competence is an important civic skill, both in itself and as part of multi-literacy. It is both an objective and a tool for learning. In basic education, all students should have opportunities to develop their digital skills. Information and communication technologies should be systematically used in the basic education at all grade levels, in different disciplines, in the multidisciplinary fields and in other school work.

The digital skills will be developed in four main areas: 1) Students will learn to understand the key concepts and principles of how digital tools are used and work, and are given the opportunity to develop their practical digital skills when developing their own products. 2) Students receive guidance on how to use digital tools in a responsible, ergonomic and secure manner. 3) Students will learn to use digital tools to aid in information and in exploratory and creative work. 4) Students gain experience and practice in the use of digital tools to communicate and network. In all these four areas it is important that students are active and are given the opportunity to be creative and find ways of working and learning pathways suitable for them. According to the Finnish National Board of Education, it is also important that students experience the joy of working together and discovering the world together, which affects their motivation to study. The use of digital tools gives students opportunities to visualize their thoughts and ideas in different ways. This also develops their ability to think and learn.

Students should become familiar with the applications and use of different digital tools for different purposes, and learn to see their importance in everyday life, in the communication between people and as a means of influencing. They should reflect together on why digital tools are needed in studies, at work and in society, and how these skills have become a part of the general skills needed in the workplace. Students will learn to assess the impact of ICT in terms of sustainability and being responsible consumers. Students should, during basic training, use digital tools even in international communication.

The Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) has also responded to the reports and explained some of the changes in the new core curriculum that might have led to misunderstandings: ‘In order to meet the challenges of the future, the focus (in the core curriculum) is on transversal (generic) competences and work across school subjects. Collaborative classroom practices, where pupils may work with several teachers simultaneously during periods of phenomenon-based project studies are emphasised. The pupils should participate each year in at least one such multidisciplinary learning module. These modules are designed and implemented locally. The core curriculum also states that the pupils should be involved in the planning.’

What will change in 2016 is that all basic schools for seven to sixteen-year-olds must have at least one extended period of multi-disciplinary, phenomenon-based teaching and learning in their curricula. There is an emphasis on collaborative classroom practices, where pupils may work with several teachers simultaneously during periods of phenomenon-based project studies. The length of this period is to be decided by schools themselves. Helsinki, the nation’s capital and largest local school system, has decided to require two such annual periods, which must include all subjects and all students in every school in town.

Following an initial report from *The Independent* that school subjects would be ‘scrapped’ around the country, Pasi Sahlberg explained in *The Conversation* that ‘Finnish schools will continue to teach mathematics, history, arts, music and other subjects in the future.’

A common misconception of the reform is that Finnish schools will abandon instruction in handwriting and focus exclusively on keyboard skills. From autumn 2016, first class pupils will learn to print upper and lower case letters, form words with these letters, and practise keyboard skills. Writing on a keyboard is already part of our everyday interaction. It is both an individual and a communal skill. While we write less by hand, typing and writing in a social context are increasing. Typing facilitates editing, co-writing and sharing text. The new curriculum encourages pupils to develop versatile and modern writing skills that they will need during their lives.

‘The importance of the core curriculum is limited not only to describing what should happen in the Finnish classrooms, schools, and municipalities, but also will voice the ideals, values and endeavors that the nation will undertake in the decades to come’ (Vahtiovouri-Hänninen et al: 2014:30). The new national core curriculum crystallizes the vision of education for the future and the necessary expertise that will be needed in Finnish society. As a whole, education systems often uphold historical traditions, organizational cultures, professional models and accountability arrangements which favor obedience and discourage risk-taking. So, the question on innovation in education turns into a question of the governance of reform.

Considering whole system reforms, Fullan (2011) describes many of the traditional reform instruments as *the wrong drivers*— accountability pressures, individual teacher approaches, technology without pedagogy, and fragmented strategies – because they do not lead to culture change in school systems. Therefore, systems should not be leading with these four drivers. Instead, *the right drivers* (amounting to a deliberate policy that ends up achieving better measurable results for students) include focus on the learning-teaching-assessment nexus; social capital to build the profession; the matching of pedagogy and technology, and the development of systemic synergies (OECD, 2013). These drivers work directly on changing the culture of teaching and learning. The glue that binds the effective drivers together is the underlying attitude, philosophy, and theory of action (Fullan, 2011). The right drivers embed both ownership and engagement in reforms for students and teachers.

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