

# **A Stone in the Other's Hand: Finnish Basic Education Curriculum Reform**

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**Abstract.** Since the 20th century, the success of Finnish basic education has attracted the attention of many countries in the world. Starting from the background and development history of Finland's basic education curriculum reform, we explore the reasons and characteristics of its curriculum reform and summarize the inspiration of its successful reform to China's basic education reform on this basis.

**Keywords:** Finland; basic education; 2016 curriculum reform

The last round of curriculum reform, marked by the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2004 edition), helped Finland to maintain its excellent performance in international comparative studies of student learning outcomes, such as the Trends in International Teaching and Learning in Science (TIMSS) and the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), making Finnish basic education a hot topic of interest and a key research target in the international education community. However, Finland did not stop there. In 2012, it launched a new round of curriculum reform and established a curriculum centered on the seven Transversal Competences.

## **1. Overview of the background of basic education curriculum reform in Finland**

### **1.1 Policy Analysis of Curriculum Reform in Finnish Basic Education**

Starting in the fall of 2016, a new basic education curriculum was launched nationwide: the first draft was developed and published online for all citizens to comment on; education experts then revised the second draft of the national curriculum based on citizens' comments, followed by a one-year expert review period. In March 2015, the newly revised National Curriculum Framework, the National Core Curriculum Outline, was officially announced. Since 2000, Finnish young people have twice excelled in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests 15-year-olds in reading, writing and mathematics, as part of the ongoing reform of Finnish education and the improvement of students' competitiveness.

### **1.2 Reasons for the Curriculum Reform in Finnish Basic Education**

#### **1.2.1 Root causes**

The fundamental reason for Finland's educational reform for the 21st century lies in the changes in the industrial structure of society and the job market, which have led to dramatic changes in the demand for talents and labor; at the same time, Finland's rapid economic development and the rising proportion of tertiary industries require the curriculum to be in line with industrial development.

#### **1.2.2 Direct cause**

Finland has been performing very well on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assessment, but has seen a decline in performance since 2012. The Finnish government recognizes that the globalization of education, digitalization and mobile learning have become a

major trend, which will bring a series of challenges at the classroom, school and national levels, and that education reform for the 21st century is imperative.

## **2. Basic features of the Finnish basic education curriculum reform**

### **2.1 Dissolution of curriculum discipline boundaries: interdisciplinary teaching**

This reform encourages the integration of generic competencies into different disciplines and interdisciplinary teaching. Therefore, teachers need to analyze the characteristics of different disciplines, break down the content and objectives of generic competencies into different disciplines, and further develop more specific disciplinary objectives according to students' physical and mental development characteristics.

"Phenomenon-based teaching" is the core concept of the Finnish curriculum reform, that is, based on students' existing learning base, teachers of multiple disciplines learn together with students about a real phenomenon, rearrange the knowledge of similar disciplines around these topics, form a curriculum module integrating multiple disciplines, and let students cooperate and investigate in the process of The goal is to develop students' skills in analyzing and solving problems. The goal is to develop an integrated and holistic way of thinking when analyzing and solving practical problems.[1] This innovative teaching model develops Finnish students' communication and expression skills, diverse literacy skills, information technology skills, etc.

### **2.2 The role of teachers in curriculum reform: curriculum creators**

In Finland, teachers have a high degree of autonomy, prestige, and social status; they are qualified to teach with at least a master's degree; and they have standardized training in pedagogical research and have a high level of research and professionalism.

Prior to the core curriculum reform, all teachers were trained in Finland from the national level based on the innovative initiatives of this curriculum reform, curriculum goals, and the integration of curriculum technologies. After a series of professional trainings, teachers focused on enabling students to find their own learning methods and bring their expertise to bear in their interactions with teachers.

### **2.3 Interdisciplinary literacy as a core curriculum construct: seven cross-cutting competencies**

In Finland, students' core literacies are clearly defined in the national curriculum standards, and the curriculum is designed in such a way that the development of core literacies is fully integrated into the curricula of specific subjects, putting the development of students' core literacies into practice.

In the Core Curriculum, "Learning Objectives and Core Content of Education", the seven themes of the core literacy of Finnish students, i.e. thinking and learning to learn, interacting and expressing cultural competence, self-care and care for others in daily life, multiple literacy, information and communication technology competence, work skills and entrepreneurship, participation in influencing and Building a Sustainable Future, all seven themes are interdisciplinary and reflect the most central part of the education and teaching process. Secondly, each of these seven themes is specified to each discipline according to the characteristics of the discipline and the physical and mental characteristics of the students' developmental stage. The core literacy is shaped through the refinement of educational objectives and the development of quality standards that can be used for evaluation, i.e., detailing the competencies that students should have at the end of the school period.[2]

### **2.4 Innovative course evaluation system: student-oriented evaluation**

In Finnish basic education there are no standardized tests, and there are very diverse ways of assessing abilities as well as literacy. In the design and evaluation of the curriculum, the new reform

pays more attention to the subjective role of students in the evaluation and to their interests and needs. Students, as participants in teaching activities, will determine to a greater extent the selection and arrangement of teaching materials and contents, as well as the choice and use of teaching methods and approaches.

Finland's education evaluation system is characterized in several ways. First, the government provides support from top to bottom. Second, the information network-based assessment platform is fully utilized, not only promoting networked assessment, but also providing assessment training. Third, emphasis is placed on the combination of self-assessment and external assessment. Fourth, there is a focus on educational quality control, with processes and achievements assessed and compared against predetermined goals. Fifth, the decentralized system of decision-making has increased the authority and responsibility of local education providers, and educational assessment standards reflect local differences.

### **3. Finland's Basic Curriculum Reform to China**

#### **3.1 Refining curriculum standards and diluting curriculum boundaries**

Finnish primary and secondary education has always been based on the trinity of teaching objectives, teaching content and general competencies, so that teachers can have a trace of each literacy development. Looking at the curriculum reform in China, the curriculum in basic education has been transformed from "strong classification" to "weak classification", and the boundaries of knowledge areas are gradually blurred. In addition, in terms of the presentation of the curriculum, the integration of subjects, the integration of daily life experiences into the curriculum, and the establishment of legitimate pathways in the curriculum system have become the unique presentation of the new Chinese education model.[3] In this context, we actually see a new trend of change: more teachers are beginning to pay attention to the process of student growth and the influence of environmental factors on personal growth.

#### **3.2 Promoting theme-based teaching and the role of teachers**

"Phenomenon-based teaching" requires that the state give schools and teachers full autonomy in their choices and management. Teachers take the "steering wheel" of teaching, set different subject themes, and guide students to carry out different tasks according to their own characteristics, so that students are interested in exploring knowledge and expanding the depth and breadth of knowledge on their own.[4] Our core literacy development can learn from Finland's phenomenon-based teaching approach, designing learning themes that are close to life and help students better understand the learning content based on their existing knowledge. In addition, schools can cooperate with local enterprises and communities, so that students can go out of campus for practical operations to achieve the purpose of phenomenon teaching.

Finland's teacher training philosophy provides food for thought for the curriculum and teaching of teacher education in China. First, China should pay attention to the cultivation of teachers' research capacity. The curriculum of teacher education students in colleges and universities should emphasize the cultivation of their research abilities so that they can become not only consumers of research but also researchers of education. Second, emphasis should be placed on cultivating teacher education students' ability to combine knowledge, teaching practice, and research to avoid the disconnect between theory and practice.

#### **3.3 Integrate curriculum and teaching elements to promote the implementation of core literacy**

"The Finnish model"[5] is considered to be the model that integrates core literacy most closely with the subject curriculum.[6] At present, how to determine the core literacy and its performance characteristics of each school section in China, and to do a good job of vertical articulation of core literacy of different school sections from the perspective of students' development are important

links for the final implementation of core literacy. [7]Taking into account the actual situation in China and the characteristics of students' physical and mental development, we explore the vertical articulation and horizontal coherence of core literacy that is suitable for the development of each school section in China, so as to cultivate students' necessary character and key abilities for the future.

### 3.4 Play the function of assessment to promote learning and encourage students' participation

According to Chinese experts, the development of basic education in China and Finland is moving in the same direction, with emphasis on "quality" and "balance", but the two countries have different national conditions and different paths to achieve their goals. The key point of China's basic education reform is the evaluation system. On October 14, 2020, the State Council of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued the General Plan for Deepening Education Evaluation Reform in a New Era, which proposed a series of evaluation reform measures, highlighting the urgency, systemic and overall significance of deepening education evaluation reform at all levels, marking a new phase of China's education evaluation reform.

At the same time we need to realize that assessment should be responsive to the demands of the times and keep up with the times. Promote the use of information technology in schools so that students can use digital personal terminals to communicate and learn from teachers and peers, and achieve better mutual assessment and support.

## 4. Conclusion

Finnish education is internationally renowned and even considered a model for the world. It is important to have a deep understanding of the theory behind the success of Finnish science education patterns, but also to look at the problems brought about by the transfer and transformation of Finnish science curriculum reform with a dialectical perspective. Educational reform should be based on self-reflection and introspection, but also on reference to countries such as Finland. It is especially important to note that our national situation is different from Finland's, and we must face the reality of our country and carry out educational reforms guided by scientific theories.

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