Finland: Participatory Reform and Its Limits

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze the experience of Finland - a country that has long been considered a world leader in education, but in the last decade has faced serious challenges. Relying on the study by Salonen-Hakomäki and her colleagues on the participatory leadership of the 2014 basic education reform [1], as well as data on the decline in PISA results [2] and the growing crisis of teacher well-being, I show that the Finnish experience is both inspiring and cautionary. The participatory approach to reforming - involving all stakeholders in decision-making - has become a role model. However, the 2014 reform, despite all its good intentions, encountered contradictions that remain unresolved: between the declared flexibility and the real workload of teachers, between the development of "transversal competencies" and the preservation of subject-centrism [6], and between the pursuit of innovation and the traditional assessment system. I also show that the Finnish model, despite all its attractiveness, fundamentally differs from the communicative-cognitive framework of personality (CCFP) model that I propose: it does not place the diagnostics and development of specific mental mechanisms at the center, nor does it offer a systemic approach to individualization through a child's unique abilities [8], [9].

Keywords: Finland, participatory reforming, 2014 basic education reform, PISA, transversal competencies, phenomenon-based learning, teacher burnout, communicative-cognitive framework of personality.

Introduction: Why Finland

I will start with an admission: I treat the Finnish education system with deep respect. For many years, Finland has been the benchmark we refer to when discussing what a school can be if it is based on trust in teachers, respect for the child, and the rejection of excessive control [7]. And today, despite all the problems the Finnish school has faced, I continue to believe that the Finnish experience contains lessons that we are obliged to study.

But I am also convinced that the Finnish model is not a panacea. It has not solved all the problems of education. Moreover, some decisions made within the framework of the 2014 basic education reform (Finnish Core Curriculum Reform 2014, FCCR2014) have generated new contradictions that remain unresolved [1], [2]. And these contradictions, it seems to me, are not accidental "mistakes," but a consequence of the fundamental limitations of the model itself.

In this article, I want to show that the Finnish experience is both inspiring and cautionary. It shows that even under the most favorable conditions - with a high level of trust in teachers, the absence of excessive control, and a developed culture of professionalism - reforms can encounter unexpected consequences.

Here it is appropriate to recall the Karelian-Finnish epic "Kalevala." It tells of the magical mill Sampo, which ground flour, salt, and money - a source of endless abundance. But Sampo was broken in a battle with the evil witch Louhi, and its fragments scattered across the world. The Finnish education system has long been perceived as such a Sampo - a source of "educational abundance" that everyone looked up to. But the 2014 reform, despite all its progressiveness, became the very blow that shattered Sampo into pieces: some fragments are achievements to be proud of, while others are contradictions that still bleed.

Historical Context and Reasons for Reforms

The Finnish education system has long been considered one of the best in the world. High results in international PISA assessments, a high level of trust in teachers, and the absence of standardized tests (with the exception of one

at age 18-19) - all this created the image of a country that had found the "right" formula for education [7]. However, by the early 2010s, Finland began to realize that even the most successful system needs updating. Globalization, digitalization, and changes in the labor market - all of this required a response [6]. The Finnish authorities understood that a school oriented towards the transmission of knowledge does not prepare children for the challenges of the 21st century.

Researchers analyzing the Finnish reform note: "National administrators in education constantly face the question of how to ensure that the basic education system successfully responds to complex local, national, international, and global challenges, and how best to initiate and implement systemic changes in education under such complexity and create value for society" [1]. It was precisely this question that became the driving force behind the 2014 reform. Finland decided not to wait until the problems became irreversible, but to try to stay ahead of the changes. This was an ambitious and, in my view, correct decision. However, the method of its implementation and the consequences turned out to be far from unambiguous [1], [2].

Content of the Reforms: What Changed in 2014

The 2014 basic education reform was the most extensive in the history of Finland [6]. Its key elements were aimed at making education more flexible, interdisciplinary, and focused on developing 21st-century skills. The first and, in my view, the most important innovation was the introduction of transversal competencies - seven cross-cutting skills that were supposed to permeate the teaching of all subjects. These include thinking and learning to learn; cultural competence, interaction, and self-expression; taking care of oneself and managing daily life; multiliteracy; ICT competence; working life competence and entrepreneurship; and participation, involvement, and building a sustainable future.

The second key innovation was the introduction of multidisciplinary learning modules (MLM). In the international press, this was often interpreted as "Finland is abandoning subjects and moving to phenomenon-based learning." In reality, as researchers note, subjects were not abolished [6]. However, periods were introduced into the curriculum when students worked on interdisciplinary projects on topics that could not be covered within a single subject: climate change, youth and the economy, art and history.

But perhaps the most important aspect of the reform was not so much its content as the way it was conducted. Finnish reform leaders consciously chose a participatory approach - involving all stakeholders in the decision-making process [1]. As Salonen-Hakomäki and her colleagues write, "the results show that participatory leadership in a national curriculum reform requires leaders to include stakeholders, build and maintain strong and open collaborative processes, take the risk of losing some control, reject strict dichotomies between strategy development and its implementation, and view leading change as a responsible act of giving stakeholders a fair chance to participate in decisions that affect their lives" [1]. Key aspects of participatory leadership in Finland included: "building participation rather than quasi-participation; building coherence in complexity - together; and embedding changes into the educational system with responsible leadership." This was a conscious rejection of the traditional "top-down" approach, which, as studies show, often causes dissatisfaction, lack of motivation and understanding, and resistance to the system.

Positive Experience and Achievements

The Finnish reform has yielded important positive results that, in my view, deserve attention. The first and perhaps the main achievement is the culture of trust in teachers. In Finland, there are no inspections, no control system, and no endless reports. Teachers are trusted. As the study notes, "the profession of a Finnish teacher is chosen by very talented people," and "teaching is a creative, prestigious, and highly independent job" [7]. The participatory approach to the reform has strengthened this culture of trust. Teachers were not passive recipients of ready-made solutions. They were involved in the process - and this, as studies show, increased their readiness for change [1].

The second important achievement is the rejection of excessive testing. In Finland, there is only one national standardized test, which is conducted for students in upper secondary school (18-19 years old). In all other respects, the assessment of a student's progress is the work of the teachers who taught them [7]. This creates a fundamentally different atmosphere in the school. Students do not prepare for tests and do not experience constant stress from exams. Teachers are not forced to "cram" children for successful passing. This, in my view, is one of the most important conditions for the development of thinking. The third achievement is the systematic integration of 21st-century skills

into the educational process. Finland does not just declare the importance of critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity. It tries to embed these skills into the structure of education, making them a part of every lesson [6].

Negative Consequences and Challenges

However, the Finnish reform has encountered serious problems that, in my view, are no less instructive than its achievements. The most noticeable and painful consequence of the reforms is the decline in Finland's results in international PISA assessments [2]. If in the early 2000s Finland was at the top of the rankings, by 2012 its positions had significantly deteriorated: from 2nd to 5th in reading, from 6th to 12th in mathematics, and from 3rd to 5th in science. This trend, as researchers note, has continued in subsequent years. Teachers note that the changes in the Finnish educational model introduced since 2014 have affected PISA results, which focus on more traditional subjects and methods [2]. "In Finland, we are really developing the education system towards student-oriented learning instead of teacher-oriented learning, and I think there has become more chaos in the classroom," one teacher said in an interview. A study of the media discourse around PISA showed that "the obvious drop in the PISA ranking and the inability of the previously so successful political elite to manage the public discourse fueled critical discussion about education."

Perhaps even more alarming than the drop in PISA is the crisis of well-being of Finnish teachers. Studies show that half of basic education teachers in Finland have considered changing professions [2]. Teachers describe systemic problems: classes with a large number of students needing special support; teachers who are forced to simultaneously perform the functions of educators, nurses, psychologists, cleaners, event organizers, mediators, social workers, and therapists. Researchers note that the "first job" of a teacher - teaching - suffers from a lack of resources, while the demands of the "second job" - planning, communicating with parents, cooperating with consultants - continue to grow. Teachers are also disappointed by the demands imposed from above. The study also shows that the assessment reform, which in Finland was relatively modest, has created four significant tensions in teachers' perceptions of assessment. This suggests that even minor changes in the assessment system can cause serious resistance.

The third problem, which I consider especially important, is the gap between the declared goals of the reforms and real practice [1], [6]. Researchers who studied the implementation of the reform note that "teachers and students were prepared in terms of knowledge, however, they were not prepared to implement the ideas of the reform into their daily practice" [1]. This observation echoes what I have already described in the first article of this module: the gap between science and practice is a systemic problem, and Finland is no exception. In addition, although the international press wrote about the "abandonment of subjects," in reality, subjects were preserved, and multidisciplinary modules remained subordinate to subject-based learning. As researchers note, the assessment of transversal competencies was embedded in the assessment of individual subjects [6]. This means that subject-centrism, in essence, remained intact, despite the rhetoric about "interdisciplinarity."

And finally, Finnish reforms, like reforms in other countries, have led to growing inequality [3], [4], [5]. Researchers note that the "relaxed education" reforms in Finland have led to an exodus of the middle class from public schools to private ones, which has increased inequality in education [3]. Although this phenomenon was especially noticeable in Japan, similar trends are also observed in Finland. Evolutionary-psychological research [4], [5] shows that this process is part of a broader mismatch between human biological nature and the organization of the modern school. A school that does not correspond to evolutionary learning mechanisms inevitably reproduces inequality - those who can afford an alternative (private schools, additional education, individual lessons) gain an advantage.

Contradictions with the CCFP Model

Now I want to move on to what, in my view, is the most important for this module: the fundamental differences between the Finnish model and the communicative-cognitive framework of personality (CCFP) model that I propose [8], [9]. At first glance, Finnish "transversal competencies" and my "mental mechanisms" may seem similar. Both are skills that should be developed in school. However, there is a fundamental difference between them [6], [8], [9]. Transversal competencies are general, cross-cutting skills that "permeate" all subjects. They do not have a clear structure, are not diagnosed as separate units, and do not have assessment criteria. They exist as if "in the background" of subject-based learning [6]. The mental mechanisms that I propose are specific, operationally defined tools of thinking: establishing cause-and-effect relationships, critical thinking, Socratic dialogue, spatial imagination, forecasting, and others [9]. Each of them can be diagnosed, evaluated in dynamics, and purposefully developed [8].

The Finnish model lacks a systematic approach to diagnosing these mechanisms. There is no understanding that the development of thinking is not a "background," but the central task of education. There is no clear distinction between the "framework" (CCFP) and the "tools" (mental mechanisms).

The second fundamental difference concerns the assessment system. In Finland, as I have already noted, there are no standardized tests [7]. This is good. But this does not mean that Finland has a systemic diagnosis of thinking development. Assessment remains mainly subject-based - knowledge in mathematics, language, and history is assessed [6]. Progress in the development of thinking is not evaluated. In my model, on the contrary, the diagnosis of the development of mental mechanisms is central [8]. I propose evaluating not a static level of knowledge, but dynamics - progress in the development of each of the eleven mechanisms. For example, not "whether the student can establish cause-and-effect relationships," but "how their ability to establish these relationships has changed over the last six months."

The third difference concerns individualization. The Finnish model, despite all its merits, remains universal [6]. All children must master the same transversal competencies. Differences between children are taken into account, but they are not a central principle. In my model, on the contrary, individualization through unique abilities is a key principle [8], [9]. I proceed from the fact that every child is unique: some have abilities in music, others in dance, others in mathematics. And it is precisely through the prism of these unique abilities that each child should develop the remaining mental mechanisms. A child with musical abilities develops cause-and-effect thinking through the analysis of musical structures, emotional intelligence through the expression of feelings in music, and spatial imagination through the representation of musical notation [9]. The Finnish model does not have such an approach. Transversal competencies are developed "equally for everyone," without taking into account the unique abilities of each child.

And finally, the most important difference. The Finnish model, like most other educational models, does not realize the epistemological significance of developing thinking [8]. As I substantiated in the article "Epistemological Recursion in Cognitive Science," modern neuroscience is stuck in the "trap of correlations": we record the results of brain activity, but we do not understand the mechanism of its self-organization. The way out of this dead end lies not in the plane of creating even more powerful scanners, but in the plane of the evolution of the knowing subject itself. The Finnish model does not set itself this task [6]. It does not understand that the development of mental mechanisms in children today is the preparation of the very cognitive apparatus that tomorrow will be able to deconstruct the logic of its own brain. It remains within the framework of pedagogy, without reaching the level of epistemology.

Conclusions and Lessons

So, what can we take away from the Finnish experience? The first lesson: participatory reforming is the right path [1]. Involving teachers, parents, and students in the decision-making process builds trust and increases readiness for change. Finland has shown that rejecting the traditional "top-down" approach is possible and effective. The second lesson: trust in teachers is the foundation on which everything else is built [7]. Without trust, there is no professional autonomy; without autonomy, there is no creativity; without creativity, there is no development of thinking. The third lesson: even the most well-intentioned reforms can have unintended consequences [1], [2]. The drop in PISA results, the crisis of teacher well-being, and the growth of inequality - all this shows that reforms must be carried out carefully, taking into account all possible risks.

The fourth, and most important lesson for me: without a systemic approach to the development of thinking, without a clear understanding of which specific mental mechanisms we must develop, without diagnostics and assessment of the dynamics of their development - any reforms remain at the level of declarations [8]. Finland introduced "transversal competencies," but did not give teachers the tools for their diagnosis and development. Finland introduced "multidisciplinary modules," but left subject-centrism untouched. Finland abandoned standardized tests, but did not create an alternative system for assessing the development of thinking [6].

That is why, despite all my respect for the Finnish education system, I believe that the CCFP model that I propose is a step forward [8], [9]. It provides answers to the questions that the Finnish reform left unanswered. Which specific thinking mechanisms should we develop? Eleven mental mechanisms, each of which is operationally defined [9]. How will we diagnose their development? Through dynamic diagnostics, evaluating progress rather than a static level [8]. How will we take into account the uniqueness of each child? Through individualization, where unique

abilities become the "entry point" for the development of all other mechanisms. Why do we need all this? Not only for a "successful life," but so that humanity can solve the "hard problems" of the 21st century, including the mystery of consciousness [8].

Here I would like to recall the musical symbol of Finland - "Finlandia" by Jean Sibelius. This anthem, written in 1899 as a protest against Russian censorship, became a symbol of national awakening and hope. The Finnish educational reform also began as a hymn of hope - it promised to free the school from the shackles of the industrial model. But, like any anthem, it could not solve all the problems. Today, Sibelius's "Finlandia" sounds more like nostalgia for lost greatness than a call to the future. Finland has shown us that the path to a new school is possible. But it has also shown that this path requires not just new "competencies" and "modules," but a change in the very paradigm - from the conveyor-belt school to the school of thinking, from the transmission of knowledge to the development of mental mechanisms, from static assessment to dynamic diagnostics, from unification to individualization [8], [9]. It is precisely to this path that my entire module is dedicated.

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