

TRANSFORMING A LEARNING SOCIETY

The Case of Finland

2nd expanded edition

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EXPLORATIONEN

Introduction: The Construction of a Learning Society

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I propose [...] to view the idea of a learning society as a contested concept in which the different meanings given to it not only reflect different interests but imply different visions of the future and different policies for getting there.

Michael F. D. Young, *The Curriculum of the Future*.
(London: Falmer, 1998), 141

Education, Welfare State and Globalization

According to international comparisons of education, the outcomes of the Finnish education system are very good. In the OECD Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA), Finnish 15-year-old-students perform excellently, compared to their peers from 32 countries, in reading literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy (OECD 2001 and 2002). They show the highest performance in reading literacy. In mathematical literacy they were ranked among the best quarter, and in scientific literacy they scored, after Korean and Japanese students, at the same level as students from United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. According to the OECD Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the level of functional literacy of Finnish 16–59-year-old-adults is among the highest in 20 countries for prose literacy, document literacy and quantitative literacy (OECD & Statistic Canada 2000).

These international comparisons, especially PISA, are often dealt with in the media as if they were the 'Olympic games' of education. A more valid way to view the results of these comparisons would be to study the determinants of outputs and further the effects of different national education policies (Psacharopoulos 1995, 280). Thus, PISA and IALS results can provide an opportunity to obtain key information about different ways of solving problems in education and to evaluate the effects of these solutions. What underlies this Finnish success in international comparisons of education?

It is possible to search for explanations from various analytical levels and perspectives. I argue that a valid and well-grounded perspective would be a social and cultural analysis of the place and meaning of education in contemporary Finnish society. Some support for this argument can be found in the preliminary results of the Finnish PISA research group (Välijärvi et al. 2002). In the constellation of various interrelated factors, students' own attitudes and activities, especially engagement in reading and interest in reading appear to form the most significant factors by regression analyses for explaining variation in reading literacy (*ibid.*, 15). The next strongest factors were communication between parents and children and family background. For mathematical literacy, self-concept in mathematics was strongly associated with performance (*ibid.*, 22). This was the case for all participating countries. Interestingly, Finnish students tended to be more confident of their mathematical abilities than of their reading skills. Self-concept in reading explained more of the variation in reading literacy performance for Finnish students than it did, on average, across all participating countries (*ibid.*, 20). Active users of computers were also active readers. Heavy computer users scored lower in their the reading literacy than their moderate counterparts, whereas those who did not use computers at all scored as the poorest readers of all (*ibid.*, 20). The performances of Finnish girls were higher than that of boys and in reading literacy the gender gap was widest for Finland among all the OECD countries. In general, the aims of high quality and high equality seemed, however, to have been reached very well in Finland. The differences between Finnish schools proved among the

smallest in the OECD countries, and the gap between high and low performers was relatively narrow. (*Ibid.*, 24–39.)

Finland is a Nordic country who has with her Nordic neighbours many parallels and some differences. In the present globalizing world, it is not justified to speak of a Nordic model anymore, but without doubt there are Nordic patterns in our educational cultures and in educational systems. Torsten Husén (1974, 1986) created the vision of a learning society already in 1970s. He discusses it four criteria: i) people have an opportunity for lifelong learning, ii) formal education extends to the whole age group, iii) informal learning is in a central position and self-studies encouraged and iv) other institutions support education which in turn depends on them. It is obvious that these criteria have not yet been fully realized, but they form a framework for the study of educational change in recent decades (Antikainen, Houtsos, Huotelin & Kauppila 1996). The articles in this book can be read as studies on the extent and form of the realization of a Finnish learning society within Nordic parameters.

In the discussion on the PISA results, the significance of the principle of equity and the place of a comprehensive school system has been stressed. A Nordic group of PISA researchers present this as follows:

The Nordic strategy for building up high quality and equality in education has been based on constructing a publicly funded comprehensive school system without selecting, tracking or streaming students during their basic education until the age of 16. Part of the strategy is to spread the school network so that pupils have a school near their homes whenever possible or if this is not feasible, e.g. in rural areas, to provide free transportation to more widely dispersed schools. Inclusion of special education and instructional efforts to minimise low achievement are also typical to Nordic educational systems. (Lie, Linnakylä & Roe 2003, 8.)

After the establishment of the Finnish comprehensive school system in the 1970s and 1980s, the administration of comprehensive schools and the entire education system was very centralized. It was the way to implement the comprehensive reform despite the opposition of right-wing parties and the association of secondary school teachers. In

the late 1980s, a significant change occurred, an incremental planning paradigm gained ground and decentralization was implemented. Schools became more responsible for their own management and were supposed to make their own curricula according to the guidelines given by the national board of education. Teachers could choose the pedagogy they apply. Thus, there was a great emphasis on the professionalism of teachers. In the 1990s there has been a trend towards school-based profiles, stronger parental choice, 'customer' orientation and, in particular a systematic school evaluation system (*ibid.*, 9). The consequences of these more or less neo-liberal changes are under debate. They have been more modest than in many other countries, yet Simola, Rinne and Kivirauma (2002) argue they represent a historical shift in education governance in Finland and in other Nordic welfare states.

In official education policy documents, lifelong education was referred to for the first time in 1960 (Ministry of Education 1969). In the 1970s and 1980s there was a lively debate on the views of UNESCO, OECD and EC which was incorporated into the concepts of lifelong education, recurrent education and continuing education (Alanen & Sihvonen 1981). In practice, formal education and its vertical integration from comprehensive school to post-comprehensive general and vocational education and further to higher education and adult education were stressed. In line with this goal polytechnics were established alongside universities in the 1990s, a more comprehensive pre-school system is under construction and adult education has rapidly expanded and been reorganized. Since the 1990s, informal education/learning and horizontal integration between education and work has also been emphasized (Ministry of Education 1997a; 2002).

The Finnish welfare state has a long history, but the decisive phase was the swift structural transformation that Finnish society underwent between 1960 and 1975. An agrarian society became an industrial, capitalist welfare state. This welfare system was funded by economic growth. The transformation occurred later but much faster than in other Nordic countries. For instance, in Sweden it took approximately one hundred years. The welfare state represents a social pact between

labour and capital. Minimum level of social welfare, including education, health, social security, employment and housing were guaranteed. These services were defined as a right of citizenship. Education was seen a kind of ideological edge of the welfare state. Thus, since the 1960s the ideal of a comprehensive education system has been the major rationale underlying Finnish education policy. The 1980s brought a period of calming structural change and economic boom in Finland. It was followed in the early 1990s by a deep economic recession, in relative terms deeper than in the 1930's. The successful information society, especially the success of electronics and Nokia's mobile telephone industry, makes the continued financing of the welfare state possible, although with some cuts and reorganizations. In the context of globalization, the welfare state has transformed in the direction of a 'competitive state' (Streeck 1998, 180–186; Kettunen 2004, 290–291). This concept implies that the state still plays a vital role and, simultaneously, globalization has resulted in a profound change in the methods the state employs. In education policy, the establishment of polytechnics were already grounded by a national information society strategy of the government.

Castells (1996) argues that informationalism is a new mode of production and development that is replacing industrialism as a major mode. From the point of view of social organization, informational societies are network societies:

Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture (*ibid.*, 469).

This is also the case in education. Schools, colleges and universities are establishing partnerships with each other and with actors like companies, employers and unions, citizens' associations and so on, both locally and globally. Education is more dependent on the development of working life and civil society and in turn education has an impact on the organization of work and civil society by providing 'legitimising accounts of knowledge and skills required from citizens