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Equity and good learning outcomes. Reflections on factors influencing societal, cultural and individual levels - The Finnish perspective

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Inhaltsverzeichnis

Allgemeiner Teil

Sammelrezension

Besprechungen

Dokumentation

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Equity and good learning outcomes

Reflections on factors influencing societal, cultural and individual levels – The Finnish perspective.[1]

Abstract: *Learning has been acknowledged lately in Europe as the very core of economic development (e.g. Conçeicao/Heitor/Lundwall 2003; Cochinaux/de Woot 1995, p. 52; Schleicher 2006). A strong optimistic trust has been placed in the power of knowledge and learning. Learning and the acquisition of competence and skills are seen as the most important tools for achieving individual or organisational goals of welfare. Learning and empowerment through learning are also considered as key tools in promoting democracy in society. What do equity and equal opportunities mean in education? How can equity be combined with high-quality performance? We may ask what characteristics an education system has when it combines equity with good learning outcomes. Relations between good learning outcomes and equity are very complex and multifaceted. We have evidence that there is a very clear correlation between high educational outcomes and the welfare of society. However, serious problems in reaching all people with learning opportunities still exist. We see that exclusion is growing (OECD 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006) in connection with the global economy.*
In my article I will elaborate how good learning outcomes and equity are related and how these are connected with larger societal trends. At the end of my article I will refer to Finnish experiences related to equity and learning outcomes.

The concepts of learning outcomes and equity

Many contradictions exist between equity and good learning outcomes. Solution can be different depending on the definitions of these concepts. In addition, these concepts are very interdependent. Some aspects are also related to time and can be assessed only after long periods. Learning outcomes can be fairly narrow skills developed through training or they can be broad competences which are manifested later in life and sometimes after many years of schooling. The perspective is also different if we consider about the macro or micro level of phenomena and experiences.

In my presentation, learning is seen as a socio-constructive process which is very bound to contextual and cultural factors in the learners' environment. I have earlier used (Niemi 2003) the concept „life-wide learning" to describe that learning has two complementary components: (1) learning at different ages, as a *life course process* and (2) learning across life spaces. In educational literature the term life-long learning expresses that learning is possible throughout our lives from our childhood to our elderly years, but it is also associated with adult education and learning in working life contexts. Life-wide learning means that we are learning in different contexts and spaces of

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life, *crossing the boundaries* of traditional learning institutions. Working life and work organisations are important learning environments, but information technology, with the Internet and virtual communication and learning spaces, also creates a powerful arena for learning, both in formal and informal settings of education. Also media, such as traditional mass communication and new forms of electronic media, especially interactive digital TV, provide many learning opportunities. Life-wide learning means that there are continuous processes of learning, occurring both vertically throughout various ages and horizontally in cross-boundary spaces of life.

Equity is very often defined as equal rights and freedom from discrimination for all people. All human beings have basic rights and should be free of discrimination based on gender, age, religion or ethnic background. But having equal rights does not ensure that people have the capacity to use their common rights. In this article the concepts equal and equity have been used with the following meanings: Equal refers to the ideal and aim that all people should have the same rights without considering their sex, status or race. Equity is a policy making concept meaning the quality of being fair and reasonable in a way that gives equal treatment to everyone. Equal access to education does not mean that all people have a realistic opportunity to have the education needed for a better life in their own individual life space or in their community. Equal rights are very closely related to social cohesion and empowerment in society. Therefore it is necessary to set the concepts of learning and equity into a broader context of social practice. I will approach the issue by elaborating the problem through using the different levels of social practice. I will elaborate the theme ‚Equity and good learning outcomes' from the perspectives of *social, cultural and individual* levels. The social level includes social structures in communities as well as society in general. The cultural level consists of activities of social practice which are grounded on knowledge and also on values. The individual level means those experiences which individual learners have in learning processes and their capacity to learn.

The social level – The policy and structures that support access to learning

The social level consists of societal structures and orders through which members of society have organised and legitimate social memberships, power relations, social mobility, and division of labour and welfare. Nowadays the concept of social cohesion has been used when describing equity and security in society.

Social cohesion

The concept of social cohesion has been used in different contexts, sometimes related to economic growth in society and sometimes as a common term for reducing social inequality. Wickham (2003, p. 102) points out that during the 1990s it came to mean equality between the EU member states and poorer states in Europe. It has also been

used to describe something closer to the Durkheimian ideal of ‚organic solidarity', meaning that all members of society have different roles but share a common fate and mutual responsibility. In many definitions the essential element of social cohesion is interdependence and trust. A society characterised by mistrust and fear loses its integrity and productivity.

Wickham distinguishes between the vertical and horizontal aspects of ‚social cohesion' in the following way: „By vertical I mean inequalities of income, wealth and power […] By horizontal social cohesion I mean a sense of mutual trust and responsibility between members of society. At its simplest a cohesive society in this sense is a society in which you don't worry if you forget to lock the backdoor at night" (Wickham 2003, p. 103).

Nowadays many researchers consider that social cohesion is a necessary condition for societal welfare and innovation. Wickham (2003, p. 104) emphasises, „At this macro level of the whole society, the fundamental issue at the moment is whether social cohesion and economic growth are compatible." He refers to scholars of the regulationist school who understood that in the last century social cohesion in Europe was not just compatible with economic growth but one cause of it.

Vertical cohesion is threatened if the structures of society produce unemployment and economic insecurities among citizens or if people are in danger of being excluded due to losing their jobs. The educational system can also break down vertical cohesion if it does not provide access to schooling to all learners or if there are inner barriers in the system preventing education from being continued at different stages of a life course. The educational system also affects horizontal cohesion positively or negatively. Education can promote security, trust and solidarity in society. The real challenge is to create learning environments where people learn to work together. If the educational system is very selective and steers toward segregation, horizontal cohesion will decrease.

Structures producing exclusion or inclusion

The welfare of society depends on the abilities and contributions of all its citizens. At the national level the danger always exists that education and training promote diversity even though they are intended to advance equity. We have to face those problems and do our best to make education and training the key factors advancing social cohesion. The education system must also offer infrastructures and social practices where people learn to work together.

New technologies are constantly producing innovations which accelerate the processes of changes in economic life, societal structures and production. A serious problem is that as our horizons shift, many people, young and old, lose their opportunities to put these new technologies to use or they don't have these opportunities to begin with. This threatens to democracy and social cohesion. Technological innovation, together with social, political and cultural dispersion, produce new forms of knowledge and culture. Whole segments of populations in different countries are in danger of being denied ac-

cess to the job market (Wickham 2003; Steedman 2003). The important message, shown by many indicators, is the link between education, employment and professional success. Those who are well educated are able to find jobs that provide them with more training, while the uneducated are not given opportunities to improve their skills. Much evidence shows that a prerequisite of economic growth is high-level education (OECD 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006). The correlation becomes very clear when low level education is improved and available throughout society. Countries investing in education have shown that the relationship between a good economy and education is mutual: economic success promotes better education, and better education accelerates business and innovation.

We need an educational infrastructure that provides all learners with opportunities to obtain an education at the highest level commensurate with their own growth and growth potential. The system must allow flexible routes to facilitate the continuation of education at any stage of life. A knowledge-based society needs all of its citizens to be committed to the pursuit of learning (Conceicao/Heitor/Lundwall 2003). However, learning does not happen in the context of a uniform, excessively norm-based set of standards, but rather in the successful development of an educational infrastructure that is equal and encouraging to different learners.

Learning as an essential component in organisations

Hilary Steedman (2003) mentions how low skill levels result in possible social problems for Europe. She identifies those aspects of technological and organisational change in working life that have particular implications for social cohesion by increasing the risk of social exclusion (Steedman 2003, p. 206).

Based on several case studies in different European countries, her article emphasises that workers' skill levels are crucially important for the innovation and technological capacities of organisations (Steedman 2003, p. 208). The ‚new economy' poses a substantial threat to social cohesion by excluding people with insufficient skills and competences from sharing in the wealth generation process. The evidence from these research projects underlines the danger of social exclusion in the labour market for a substantial proportion of the EU population – currently 40 per cent of the 25-59 age group – with qualifications at or below the ISCED 2 level (no education or training beyond compulsory schooling) (ibid., p. 208-209).

The main challenge is for organisations to ensure that not only formal and informal learning opportunities are offered to all employees but that incentives to participate in such learning are developed and put in place. Steedman continues, „Encouraging every workplace to develop into a workplace where learning is built into the work process and provides incentives for individuals to invest in their own development constitutes the major challenges to policymakers to combat social exclusion" (Steedman 2003, p. 213).

To build new competences we have to critically evaluate system-level conditions. A supportive and flexible infrastructure is needed. We need system-level structures which

respect humanity and the real needs of people. Learners need a lot of human support and encouragement. We must ask critically what we should renew in our systems in order to support learners more interactively to become empowered by learning.

The cultural level – Respect for learning

I use the cultural level to describe how learning is valued in society. The cultural level is a combination of several components, such as the ethos of teaching and teachers' work. It also includes how teacher education is organised and how it educates professionals of a high standard. The cultural level also consists of the elements through which society supports learning opportunities by investing research in learning and assessments of learning outcomes. Good learning outcomes and social cohesion are related to cultural environments in society. It is important to consider how the educational system promotes the learning of different learners and how teacher education is seen as a societal partner.

The ethos of teaching and teacher's work

In recent years the teaching profession has been under debate. Is teaching a real profession or is it more or less a craft which is regulated by policy makers and authoritarians?

The European Commission has convened a small group of experts (Prof. Sonia Blanford, UK, Prof. Bernard Cornu, France, Prof. Hannele Niemi, Finland, and Prof. Pavel Zgaga, Slovenia) in the field of teacher education to elaborate common European principles for teacher competences and qualifications. They submitted their recommendations in December 2004, and these principles were largely discussed in June of 2005 during a Member State conference (Memorandum 2005).

The common European principles emphasise that teaching and teacher education have a great influence on the future. Therefore the teaching profession is considered as the following:

- *a graduate profession:* high quality education systems require that all teachers are graduates from higher education institutions or their equivalents. Every teacher should have the opportunity to continue post-graduate studies to the highest level in order to develop their teaching competences and to increase their opportunities for progression within the profession. Teacher education is multidisciplinary. This ensures that teachers have: 1) a knowledge of their subject matter; 2) a knowledge of pedagogy; 3) the skills and competences required to guide and support learners; and 4) an understanding of the social and cultural dimension of education. This allows them to respond to the needs of individual learners in an inclusive way. Their education, through its emphasis on practical skills and its academic and scientific basis, provides them with the competence and confidence to be reflective practitioners and discerning in managing information and knowledge.

- *a profession placed within the context of life-long learning:* teacher education is a continuum of professional development covering the full span of individuals' careers. Teachers recognise the importance of acquiring new knowledge, and have the ability to innovate and use evidence to inform their work. They are fully engaged in the process of life-long learning and are able to evolve and adapt throughout their whole career. They participate actively in professional development, and this is recognised within their own systems. They also contribute to young people and adult learners becoming more autonomous life-long learners.
- *a mobile profession:* mobility is a central component of initial and continuing teacher education programmes. Teachers are encouraged to work for longer periods in other European countries. Those who do so have their status recognised in the host country and their participation recognised and valued in their home country. There is also the opportunity for mobility between different levels of education and towards different professions within the education and training sector.
- *a profession based on partnerships:* higher education institutions work collaboratively in partnership with schools, colleges and work-based training providers. Teachers are encouraged to review evidence of effective practice and engage with current innovation and research in order to keep pace with the evolving knowledge society. Higher education institutions ensure that their teaching benefits from their knowledge of current school practice. Teacher education, in itself, is an object of study and research.

As a result, the profession of teaching is an attractive profession and the status of teachers is high. They are recognised as key agents for developing values of inclusion within the individual and society. They are highly educated, continuously developing and reflecting on their competences, and appropriately remunerated.

The ethos of teacher education

The principles also outlined that teacher education is a research-based activity. Teacher education must be included as part of the European Higher Education Area and its status should be equivalent to that of other higher education studies. This entails that it meets high-level academic standards which take into consideration both declarative (what) and procedural (how) knowledge of what is needed in the teaching profession. The necessary prerequisite is that teacher education rests on a research-based foundation with three basic conditions:

a) Teachers need a profound knowledge of the most recent advances of the research in the subjects they teach. In addition, they need to be familiar with the newest research on how something can be taught and learnt. Interdisciplinary research on subject content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge provides the grounds for developing teaching methods that can be adapted to suit different learners.
b) Teacher education in itself should also be an object of study and research. This research should provide knowledge about the effectiveness and quality of teacher education implemented by various means and in different cultural contexts.

c) The aim is that teachers can internalise a research-orientated attitude towards their work. This means that teachers take an analytical and open-minded approach to their work, that they draw conclusions based on their observations and experiences and that they develop teaching and learning environments in a systematic way.

Innovation strategies include a learning component

As knowledge production has diffused throughout society, remarkable changes have been seen in the way learning opportunities are created and accessed. No longer does any one institution or group have a monopoly on knowledge. Even while knowledge creation continues to be available in educational institutions such as schools and universities, it is located increasingly in work places as well as in everyday life and is accessible through media and technology-based environments. Open access to knowledge creates new requirements for learners and learning research.

Many countries have anxiously worked to accelerate innovation. New products and practices are important to the economy and social life. Exploration of the process of innovation development reveals the following preconditions of innovations:

- The process must be an active interaction between producers and users.
- The process is non-linear and consists of the complexity and contingency of the innovative effort of people.
- Learning to learn skills are necessary for those who initiate innovation and those who apply new practices.
- Collaborative learning competences are necessary in the organisations which produce innovations.
- Crossing borders and new ways of thinking promote innovations.
- Cross-disciplinary research provides a fruitful basis for innovations.
- New leadership and ownership of processes are needed for innovative culture.

The foundations for innovations are built on basic education. If people do not have learning to learn skills and they lack collaborative skills, they will have difficulty in working life. These skills are also needed when using new products and services of new technology and knowledge production. Equity means that all people should have the capacity to learn throughout their lives. They also need skills to learn together with other people and create knowledge collaboratively.

The culture of assessment and competition

How to strive for good learning outcomes is on the educational agenda of many countries. Assessment of outcomes has been seen as an important tool to improve education. Some controversy exists over the best way to use assessment as a tool to achieve high learning outcomes. Some countries have chosen standardised testing, which stresses

competition between schools and focuses on measurable performances. Other countries have applied more formative aspects of evaluation.

A recent analysis of many countries indicated that increased standardisation of teaching and learning, for example, may be counterproductive to the expectations of enhanced economic competitiveness. The conclusion is that instead of competition between education systems, schools and students, what is needed is networking, deeper co-operation and open sharing of ideas at all levels if the role of education in economic competitiveness is to be strengthened. The key features of education reform policies that are compatible with competitiveness are those that encourage flexibility in education systems, creativity in schools, and risk-taking without fear on the part of individuals (Sahlberg 2006).

Investment in research on teaching and learning – Research programs of learning in Europe

To meet new challenges in learning, we need high quality research on how to build empowering learning spaces. To meet these challenges, some European countries have launched national research programmes on learning and teaching.

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme (*TLRP*) is the largest education research programme ever funded in the UK, with a total budget equivalent to 39 million Euros. It was established in 1998 and will continue to 2012. TLRP is funded by the relevant government agencies for Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England (http://www.tlrp.org). The TLRP supports research activities designed to lead to significant improvements in outcomes for learners at all ages and stages in all sectors and contexts of education and training, including informal learning settings. Learning outcomes are broadly conceived and include the development of positive learner identities, the acquisition of qualifications, the acquisition of skill, understanding and bodies of knowledge, and the development of attitudes and values relevant to a learning society.

Finland has launched the research program (http://www.aka.fi) ‚*Life as Learning*' (2002-2006) with an investment of 5.1 million euros. It has five research themes: Redefining the Concept of Learning, The Social and Cultural Context of Learning, Knowledge Creation, Work Environments, and New Teachership. It aims to anticipate future learning needs from the point of view of society, culture and the individual. It encourages the development of a new research culture and new research partnerships around the problems of learning. It also aims to find a way of managing life-long and life-wide learning to avoid new kinds of exclusion. It intends to create a solid quality interdisciplinary research base for developing teaching and learning in different educational and working-life contexts. The program is now at its final stage, but a new initiative, the *CICERO Learning* network, has been established to promote multidisciplinary research on learning (http://www.helsinki.fi/cicero). It is a joint effort of Finnish universities and is co-ordinated by the University of Helsinki.

Initiatives have also emerged in other countries (e.g. the Netherlands, France, Norway) to launch national programs or focused research activities on learning and teach-

ing. We urgently need these national programs to meet new demands in society and working life. Learning and knowledge creation are individually and socio-culturally constructed processes, and local actors need the knowledge of how people learn and how life-wide learning skills with learning environments are combined in diverse sectors in society. At the European level, co-operation between national learning research programmes will also become very important in the future (Smith 2003).

The individual level – Empowering different learners – The capacity to learn

The empowerment of learners

Learning is an important pathway towards empowerment. It is also a holistic process which touches learners' emotions and has a social component, as well. We may ask why people want to learn and why they do not want to learn. It is not self-evident that people have skills and efficient strategies in how to learn. Learning is an individual process, but increasingly also a process based on sharing and participation with different partners in a learning society.

Empowerment can be defined as an enablement of human beings. Sears and Marshall (1990) differentiate between two kinds of empowerment: empowerment-by-authorisation and empowerment-as-enablement. In empowerment-by-authorisation, people work within a limited framework, imparting specific knowledge, skill, and certification to the „empowered", with the underlying assumption that the „power" in empowerment derives from and ultimately rests with those who do the empowering. Empowerment-as-enablement is an ongoing process, not to be bestowed on one person by another, but through a deeply personal process of meaning-making within particular historical, cultural, and economic contexts. Empowerment-as-enablement means that the power is created and realised by individuals themselves, not given or handed down by someone else.

Hannah-Moffat (2000) describes the history of the empowerment concept. She points out that empowerment is nowadays a common term. The term was originally associated with social movements in the 1960s and 1970s that sought radical political changes in social relations. More recently, the concept of empowering individuals (whether they be the poor, workers, patients, immigrants, students, citizens or prisoners) has become a common tenet of several diverse political strategies and policy initiatives. The widespread use of the term empowerment in everyday language has gradually depoliticised or deradicalised the language of empowerment.

After becoming a common concept, „empowerment" still carries the emphasis that a person or a group has a better ability or power to manage its personal capacities. As Worell and Remer (1992) define it, empowerment means finding one's own personal power, developing increased self-esteem and valuing oneself. But in addition to this power to manage personal capacities, the empowerment concept has a message: that a person also manages her/his circumstances and has the ability to participate in and to influence a social community.

Israel and his co-writers Checkoway, Schultz and Zimmerman have defined (1994) empowerment as „*the ability of people to gain understanding and control over personal, social, economic, and political forces in order to take action to improve their life situations*" (Israel et al. 1994, p. 16). Empowerment aims at democratic purposes, opening better life situations, supporting people to find their voices and make their needs visible in social communities.

In promoting learning towards empowerment, learners need skills for managing their own learning and collaborating with other learners. In life-wide learning, people need skills for *self-regulated learning* and *collaboration*.

Self-regulation

In learning psychology there is a long tradition which provides clear evidence that significant differences exist between learners. Even in the 1960s and 1970s, many research studies explored how individuals have different aptitudes and how they use different learning styles or strategies. In the 1980s the concept of self-regulated learning emerged as a promising tool for human learning behaviour. It means that individuals must have the skills to steer their own learning processes.

In light of self-regulation research, we have evidence that at least some self-regulatory processes may be learnt and transferred to new situations. Wolters (1998, p. 224) summarises, based on a large earlier research body (e.g. Pintrich et al. 1991; Pintrich 1995; Schunk/Zimmerman 1994; Winne 1996), that self-regulated learners are generally characterised as active learners who efficiently manage their own learning experiences in many different ways. Self-regulated learners have a large arsenal of cognitive and metacognitive strategies that they readily deploy, when necessary, to accomplish academic tasks. Also, self-regulated learners have adaptive learning goals and are persistent in their efforts to reach these goals (Schunk/Zimmerman 1994). Finally, self-regulated learners are proficient at monitoring and, if necessary, modifying their strategy use in response to shifting task demands. Self-regulated learners are motivated, independent and metacognitively active participants in their own learning. Since the 1980s (e.g. Biggs 1988; Stewart/Landine 1995; Winne 1996), the research on metacognition has underlined the importance of metacognition in self-regulatative learning. Usually it is assumed to consist of two broad components:

(1) knowledge about people's cognitive states and processes, and
(2) the ability to control or modify these states.

Students control their learning through metacognition and also through using cognitive and resource management strategies. Resource management strategies concern students' strategies to control resources (i.e. time, effort, outside support) that influence the quality and quantity of their involvement in the task.

We need more knowledge about bootstrapped and maladapted forms of self-regulative learning. It seems that some learners adopt destructive forms of self-

regulative learning (Winne 1996). For instance, some learners use a self-handicapping strategy, such as choosing not to study as an excuse for academic failure. Knowledge of how to overcome this problem would be absolutely important when targeting competence building in Europe. Moreover, we need more knowledge of how metacognitive strategies and skills can be instructed and mediated to different age groups in working organisations and educational institutions. Research results show that learners were able to gain a sense of personal autonomy over learning through training strategies. But we also have information that learners may not receive instruction which is explicit enough about metacognitive knowledge and skills in schools and in working life settings (Winne 1996; Boekaerts 1997; Niemi 2002).

Co-operative learning

In the construction of knowledge, social attitudes and skills have emerged as very important. How we learn and comprehend knowledge depends on our beliefs, attitudes, values and our self-concept as a learner. According to the socio-historical tradition, the human mind is distinctive from the minds of all other species in its capability for developing language, tools and a system of education. Knowledge is seen as the catalyst of social cohesiveness: it engages individuals and groups in daily interaction and praxis and, in so doing, helps them adapt to and transform the environment around them. Learning is increasingly being seen as embedded within a social context and framework. Knowledge is not an individual possession but is socially shared and emerges from participation in socio-cultural activities.

Learning also requires social skills. This means that learners will need skills that make them capable of effective social interaction. The ability to learn is related to deeply ingrained socio-cultural patterns and the ability to interact with other people. Active learning theories (e.g. Slavin 2003) stress the social elements of learning, e.g. the importance of co-operative action, collaborative problem-solving and sharing as tools for attaining deeper processes of learning – and in many cases also for achieving better results. This means participation in discussions, dialogues and mutually shared reflections, working in responsible co-operation with other learners. Learner participation is fostered by a supportive atmosphere and equal partnership among learners based on mutual respect. European scenarios of learning emphasise teamwork and networking as important tools for bringing people closer together.

Moving towards knowledge-based societies in Europe means that educational institutions, companies and working places should provide optimal conditions for empowerment through learning. This means that education should strengthen learners' self-regulation and collaborative skills. These skills are a part of learning outcomes, and they open pathways to equity.

The Finnish case – An educational policy purposed towards equity

PISA shows that Finland has succeeded in its policy to enhance the equity and quality of learning. It has been a long process, and long-term development objectives were set almost 40 years ago. At that time the main goal was to develop basic education to meet the criteria of the comprehensive education system. Finland is now on top and, at the same time, only a very few students fall within the lowest PISA categories. Likewise, differences between schools are small.

Finnish researchers have analysed factors that have an influence on these good results. Some reasons are deeply rooted in Finnish culture, which has always valued learning and education as a basic resource. As early as in the *Kalevela*, the national epic, mental abilities are valued more than physical power and strength.

According to education researchers (Välijärvi 2004, Simola 2005; Laukkanen 2006; Niemi/Jakku-Sihvonen 2006), the educational policy has purposefully aimed at equity in education, which is the main reason for good learning outcomes. Laukkanen (2006) emphasises that Finland has built up an education system with characteristics made up of uniformity – free education, free school meals and special needs education. The principle of inclusion has been an important guideline. In 1968, it was decided that the parallel school system should be replaced by a national nine-year basic education that would represent the ideology of comprehensive education. As the Government delivered its bill to Parliament in 1967, one of the arguments for the common nine-year education for all was that it was too early to judge individual capacities at the age of eleven or twelve. Finnish basic education has been logically developed towards the comprehensive model, which guarantees everybody equal opportunities in education irrespective of sex, social status, ethnic group, etc., as outlined in the constitution. The focus has been on equity.

Laukkanen (2006) summarises that the most important decisions have been 1) the discontinuation of streaming, 2) the strong allocation of affordable educational resources to lower secondary education and 3) the decentralisation of decision-making powers. 4) Primary school teacher education was also raised to the MA level. 5) Support for weak students was taken care of. 6) Different stakeholders were invited to express their opinions.

Since the 1980s, all students in basic education began to have the same goals in mathematics and foreign languages. In so doing, the Finnish Government was realistic. The reality is that such goals are reached by individuals with different levels of success. However, with extra support for the weakest students, we can considerably raise the performance of the whole age group.

Since the mid 1990s, the Finnish National Board of Education has conducted national assessments of learning outcomes, mostly in the 9th grade of basic education. Regular assessments have been carried out in mathematics, the students' mother tongue (either Finnish or Swedish) and literature, and occasionally in other subjects as well. National assessments produce information about the quality and results of education and training in relation to objectives stated in the national core curricula. Assessments

are sample based and thus do not cover the whole age group. This is because the results are used for the development of education. Recently, evaluations have also been started at the end of the second grade, for example. The purpose of this is to enhance the use of evaluation for formative purposes. All schools in a sample of an assessment receive an individual feedback report. These reports are delivered to schools as soon as possible after the assessment data has been collected, as fresh results are more interesting for schools than results that are months old. Recently, feedback has been received as quickly as two months after the data was collected (Laukkanen 2006).

Finland has also balanced between a centralised and decentralised administration. The comprehensive school was very centralised in the beginning, but in 1985 municipalities had more freedom and responsibility. The status of the then new national curricular guidelines was to create a framework for curriculum design in the municipalities (Kouluhallitus 1985; Laukkanen 2006). Ten years later, in 1994, The National Board of Education only gave very broad aims and content guidelines for teaching different subjects. The municipalities and, ultimately, the schools set up their own curricula on the basis of the national core curriculum.

In Finland, the responsibility for providing education to prospective teachers at primary and secondary schools was transferred to universities. Since 1974, teacher education for all teachers in basic education has been arranged at universities. Before 1974, primary school teachers were educated at teacher-training colleges. In 1979, the basic qualification for secondary and elementary school teachers was defined as a Master's degree in the form of programmes requiring 4 to 5 years to complete. The purpose of this modification was to unify the core aspects of elementary and secondary school education and to develop an academically high standard of education for prospective teachers. Teacher education for the secondary school level was also reformed by expanding the scope of pedagogical studies (Niemi/Jakku-Sihvonen 2006).

Competition for teacher education is stiff because only around 15% of applicants are accepted (Kansanen 2003, p. 86-87). Thus, it is fair to say that teaching work is popular. Lately, we have seen that a career as a teacher in Finland is the most popular choice amongst those leaving upper secondary education. Teacher education for comprehensive school teachers and senior secondary school teachers, as well as for those teachers who teach general subjects in adult education and vocational education, is provided at eight Finnish universities around the country.

The Finnish strategy has taken a long time to mature and is composed of several interrelated issues. This was noticed by an OECD review team looking at equity in the Finnish education system. The team writes: „This is a complex of practices that has emerged over time, but it must be maintained since any weakness in one component will undermine other practices" (OECD 2006, p. 48).

At this moment, the Finnish educational policy expresses (Ministry of Education 2006):

> „Students' opportunities to progress from one level of education to the next is safeguarded by legislation. Both general and vocational upper secondary certificates

provide eligibility for further studies in universities and polytechnics. A student completing one level is always eligible for the next level studies. Adult education is provided at all levels of education. Adults can study for a general education certificate or for a vocational qualification, or modules included in them, take other courses developing citizenship and work skills, or pursue recreational studies.
The welfare of Finnish society is built on education, culture and knowledge. All children are guaranteed opportunities for study and self-development according to their abilities, irrespective of their place of residence, language or financial status. All pupils are entitled to competent and high-quality education and guidance and to a safe learning environment and well-being. The flexible education system and basic educational security make for equity and consistency in results."

Towards the future

The advancement of learning is a key social, political and economic objective in this globalised world. Learning is an important force not only in empowering individuals and groups but in enriching society as a whole. As knowledge production has become diffused throughout society, there have been remarkable changes in the way learning opportunities are created and accessed. No longer does any one institution or group have a monopoly on knowledge. While knowledge continues to be available in educational institutions such as schools and universities, it is located increasingly in work places as well as in everyday life, accessible through media and technology-based environments. Open access to knowledge creates new requirements for learners and learning research.

To achieve both good learning and equity, we have to evaluate critically all three levels of education: the societal, cultural and individual. We need a purposeful educational policy and system-level structures which aim at equity and provide a supportive and flexible infrastructure to all learners. We need system-level structures which respect humanity and the real needs of people. Learners need a lot of human support, encouragement and guidance to achieve better self-regulation and collaborative learning skills. We must ask what we should renew in our systems to support in a more active way all learners to become empowered by learning on societal, cultural and individual levels.

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