

School curriculum – is it worth trying?

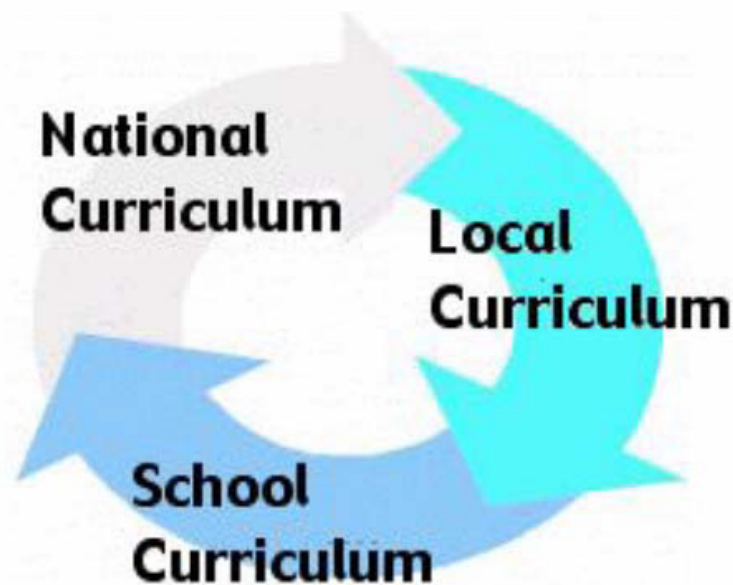
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The 1994 curriculum reform in Finland

In the Finnish educational paradigm the curriculum is an administrative and pedagogical concept. It is a plan that connects things that should happen in the school. Conceptually Finnish curriculum is both *curriculum* and *study plan* (Malinen, 1997).

The Finnish curriculum system has two levels: national and local. During the history of Finnish comprehensive basic school (since 1972) there has been a curriculum reform in each decade. This article discusses the issues related to the third curriculum reform in the years 1994-2002. At moment of writing the Finnish schools are working on the new school-based curriculum in the framework of the National Core Curriculum of year 2004.

Figure 4. Three levels of curriculum: national, local and school.



The curriculum reform of 1994 - 2002 was led by the National Board of Education. The curriculum system consists of three elements:

- * *national curriculum*
- * *local curriculum*
- * *school curriculum.*

The national curriculum was written co-operatively with local municipalities and schools. Local curriculums were mostly designed by the municipalities. Teachers had an active role in designing and writing of the school curriculum.

The reform was started with a democratic and hybrid strategy. Earlier curriculum reforms had been implemented using a top-down requirement approach. Now the schools were allowed to create their own innovations. During the course of implementation the strategy was, however, changed. In the beginning there was a common feeling of trust and freedom among the teachers. The process was evaluated by the expert team from the East Anglia University (UK) and later by the National Board of Education. The results of the evaluation changed the atmosphere in the middle of the 1990s towards more critical.

The Aquarium Project

The implementation of the new curriculum was supported by in-service training for the teachers the National Board of Education and by creating a large-scale support system called *The Aquarium Project* 1992-1998. The two officials of the National Board of Education, Dr. Aslak Lindström and Dr. Pasi Sahlberg were the two fathers of this implementation innovation. The key idea of the Aquarium concept was so called open network of like-minded education developers who would learn from each other and share their practical knowledge and good experiences.

The Aquarium Project had three phases. In the first phase about 42 schools and many local municipalities supported the National Board of Education to finalize the National Framework Curriculum. In the second phase over 400 schools networked together to support the change. There were over 400 schools and over 900 projects in 16 thematic sub-networks (Hellström, 2004a; Sintonen & al., 1999). The third phase was purely administrative.

Four missions of the 1994 reform

There were four missions in the curriculum reform after 1993. They were:

- * Mission 1: Write your own school curriculum
- * Mission 2: Change teaching methods to follow the constructivist idea
- * Mission 3: Make your school unique and personal and
- * Mission 4: Take the responsibility for development.

Let's look at how we succeed in these missions in Aurora Elementary School. But first, a short presentation of the school may be helpful.

Aurora Elementary School

We present Aurora School as a flexible, continually developing, positively oriented and safe learning environment. There are about 340 pupils (aged 7 - 13) divided into 15 groups at the school.

We emphasize the profound basis of basic knowledge, core skills and cultural education. Teaching is integrated aesthetically by using drama, visual arts, music, literature and theatre. Information and communication technologies are used every day in our school. We have a flexible curriculum that allows pupils to choose an educational program that best suits them. Optional courses make it possible to specialize in physical education, art, music and handicrafts. Voluntary Swedish is included in our curriculum.

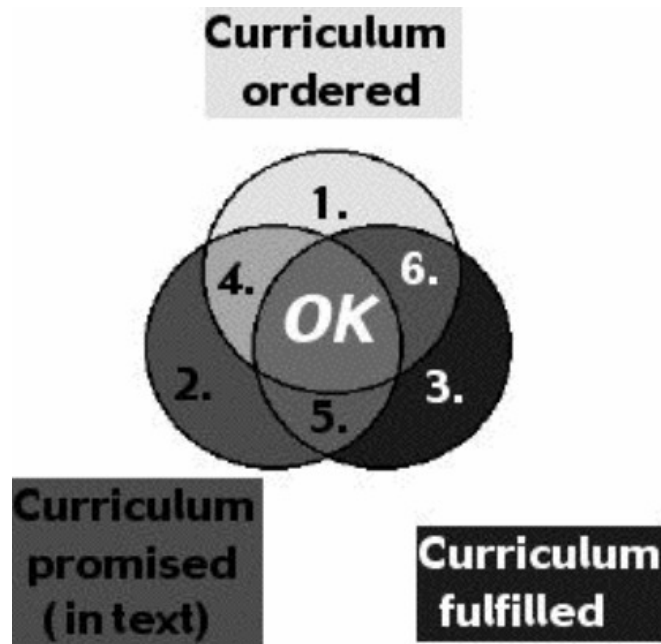
Pupils' healthy growth is our main concern. We try to promote the self-esteem of each pupil, educate them to balance, responsibility, creativity, awareness of his or her roots, tolerance and teach him open-minded by enhancing the learning environment. Pupils who leave Aurora School after sixth grade should be co-operative individuals with sound education for further studies. There are active parents' groups at our school. We take part in many national and international projects.

Evaluating the first mission

The first mission was to write a curriculum for our own school. It meant that we should describe our aims, purpose of school and its values. We had possibilities to make decisions concerning distribution of lesson hours, voluntary courses, contents of the subjects and integrative themes. We had a possibility to create certificates and evaluation reports and a little bit later also the system of self-evaluation was developed.

It was not always easy to understand the National Curriculum and what was expected of us. We made a work plan of the documents to be written and the decisions to be made. We started this work by arranging professional discussions and making questionnaires to the parents. We learnt to reflect our way of doing things. We had several discussions on values, principles and procedures with pupils and parents. We also published several articles about curriculum in our newsletter and in our web pages.

Figure 5. The model of three curricula types.



It took us two years to finish the first version of our curriculum. We revised the school curriculum eight times, once a year between 1995 and 2002 with the help of the model of three curricula (Figure 5). The model was created in the group of voluntary headmasters in Espoo. The main idea was to explore written curriculum critically by comparing it with the National Curriculum text and the reality and make the segment of correctness as wide as possible.

Finnish schools wrote their curricula surprisingly fast during the first year. The quality of school curricula varied from each other: there were some excellent ones but also curricula that were insufficient. In Aurora we were proud of our own curriculum. During the years the curriculum grew from 25 pages to almost 150 pages. Finally we had pictures and interesting educational articles in it. In 2001 we held a seminar of 20 pupils who designed a curriculum of pupils, first ever written, I suppose.

Evaluating the second mission

Second, pedagogical mission, was to change the pedagogy of basic schools from teacher-centered *herbartianism* to more child-centered constructivism and to provoke the use information and communication technologies in teaching. Both aims were challenging.

We had to understand what constructivism means. We saw it as a manifest for more child-centered, active, knowledge-constructing and co-operative methods. We started to develop our pedagogical culture with planned projects which were voluntary for teachers. In the heart of each project there were three questions to be answered:

- * How to promote ICT on school? How to help those children who have difficulties in the age of seven years and later (Start Class and Blue Bears)?
- * How to find more possibilities to learn foreign language (CLIL-project)?
- * How to integrate different subjects and use different methods (Days of ethics)?

Teachers were empowered by the curriculum projects. My duty as a headmaster was to help them and find them support and extra resources. In some projects I had a more active role) as a change agent or facilitator. We co-operated with other schools in many projects.

Because we saw our school as a learning school, all participants had a possibility to take an active role. As a community, we moved to the direction of self-determination, co-operation and teamwork. Some pedagogical ideas were born in the discussion with teachers and parents.

But did we really succeed to change our methods towards constructivism with these projects? The projects were important for me and for the teachers. We succeeded to make small steps to use more co-operative methods. But overall we must admit that *herbartianism* was too strongly connected to the cultures of our school.

Evaluating the third mission

The third mission was to make each school unique and personal. The schools had now power to make decisions that it didn't have before. Schools all over Finland started own pedagogical innovations. In Aurora we created strong support systems for those children that need special help. We formed a first Start Class in Espoo for seven years old children with special needs and later a "Blue Bears" group to support the integration of a bit older pupils. No child left behind!

This mission succeeded in Finland, perhaps even too well. The National Board of Education came nervous due to the differences between the cultures of the schools. In Aurora we indeed felt that we found our identity during the curriculum reform: We chose a slogan: *Aurora - non scholae sed vitae discimus!*

Evaluating the fourth mission

The fourth mission was to take the responsibility for the development. Schools needed a system of continuous evaluation. We started annual evaluation seminars during which we edited our written curriculum and had interesting professional discussion about the hidden curriculum. We used actively the model of three curricula (Figure 5). We asked parents' and pupils' opinions using questionnaires. We asked the new teachers and visitors to tell us, what interesting in good or bad they saw in our school.

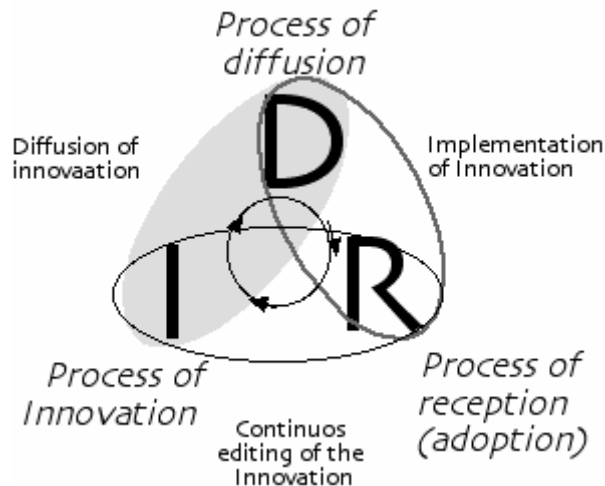
Did we succeed in this mission? As there are no standardized tests in Finland, it is difficult to prove what was achieved. But if we evaluate the schools qualitatively and listen to the professional feedback provided by the teachers, we can say that many schools took significant steps to be a learning school. Aurora Elementary School is one of them. We created an environment that supports self-determination: Autonomy, support and clear expectations (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Summa Summarum

The final summary of the curriculum reform of 1994-2002 is not written in Finland yet. It seems that some of the aims of the reform were reached well, but that the main pedagogical aim of renewing the pedagogy from *herbartianism* to constructivism did not success as well in most of the schools. Still the results from learning are excellent in Finland.

Much of the success of change is connected to the manner of the reform. The nature of the curriculum reform of 1994-2002 in Finland can be described with the model of change (Figure 6). The process of innovation was co-operative but confusing. The process of implementation was communicative and democratic. There was a possibility of continuous editing of the innovation in the school level. The teachers felt the reform professionally orientated. Teachers enjoyed professional discussions, empowerment and the task to translate the work of teachers into the language of parents. For practically oriented teachers the reform was a pure suffering and brought nothing new to their work. So they say.

Figure 6. The model of change.



Many local municipalities had no strategy at all for implementation. They just sent the instructions to their schools regarding new curriculum. On the other hand, there were many cities that gave excellent support to their schools and teachers. One very remarkable and also sad thing was that the curriculum work was done in the same time as the teachers were laid-off for several weeks because of the economical crisis in Finland during the years 1991 - 1996.

Did we really success? Yes, I would say so. Many pedagogical innovations we made are still active in our school. As a school we grew towards self-determination and to be a learning school. We took small steps towards constructivism. The school based curriculum was fantastic mean for a new headmaster like me to lead his school pedagogically. School curriculum is worth trying.

20 hints for school development

What did we learn about developing and working on our own school curriculum?

1. Make National Curriculum clear and understandable! Say clearly what kind of change you want to make in the school curriculum. Give reasons for the change. Make sure that pupils benefit from the change. Motivate all involved. Answer the questions. Don't change the expectations during the run. The confusion of strategies and policies is too hard to solve in the school level.
2. Don't just give orders - give room for discussions. It is not wise to leave the choice of the contents to the school- especially in elementary schools.
3. Create possibilities to co-operation.
4. Teachers make a difference. All teachers are not professionals, some of them are practitioners. Treat them differently but all with respect.
5. Let the schools make choices. Leave room for own solutions of the schools.
6. Give school some questions to answer, not just work to do. Give concrete examples, how to start progress.
7. Schools make a difference. Give schools more support and help. Treat them differently but all with respect. There must be a balance with pressure and support (the spirit is not enough).
8. Reform needs (paid) work time.
9. Organize co-operation between schools and administration.
10. Make headmasters stronger pedagogical leaders.
11. Use pilot projects.
12. Listen to the pupils as well.
13. Access the resources needed. Money and time are crucial.
14. Give schools chains of targets and a reasonable time line.
15. Advice the schools how to organize the curriculum work.

16. Create possibilities to reward hard work.
17. Take good care of teachers and their welfare.
18. Give the school time to develop.
19. Monitor the curriculum work. Be interested in it.
20. Teach the schools to see the problems and to solve them quickly.

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