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Educational Policies for Raising Student Learning: The Finnish Approach

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Abstract :

Finland appears to have met the challenge of offering equitable and high quality education at reasonable cost to its students. What features of the Finnish education system contributed to this success?

Features of the Finnish Education System

Unlike most countries, Finland did not opt for implementing the three components featured in most reforms, including the standardization of education, increased focus on the development of literacy and numeracy skills, and consequential accountability systems in which schools are rewarded (e.g., resource allocation) or punished based on their results obtained during evaluations. Instead, Finland banked on the following components:

- (1) Same quality, basic schooling for all students, regardless of their socio-economic level, abilities or personal characteristics – This component features compulsory schooling for all students during the first nine years, a publicly-financed system and a philosophy based on the principle of equity. In its role of education, the school provides a setting where students are taken care of (e.g., warm meals, free health care).
- (2) Well-trained teachers – Teachers enjoy the respect and trust of the public and parents. Their profession is considered as requiring high-level qualifications (Master's Degree). Only a small proportion (10%) of applicants are accepted in teacher training programmes. Therefore, teachers are highly motivated and ready to commit to the development of projects in their schools.
- (3) Intelligent accountability – Until the end of compulsory schooling, schools and teachers are responsible for student evaluation. As a result, decentralization has led to the sharing of responsibility; schools must make sure that each student achieves success, while decision-makers must make sure that schools are provided with the resources needed to reach this goal. This shift allows greater freedom for student evaluation methods and curriculum planning.
- (4) Culture of trust – The shift of a centralized system to a decentralized system must be based on trust. The capacity of teachers, principals, parents and the community to decide on what is best for the education of students is acknowledged. Teachers and principals accept and appreciate this responsibility.
- (5) Sustainable leadership – The importance of education as a public service was never challenged in Finland, regardless of the political beliefs of its leaders. Hence, Finland did not engage in applying externally-designed successive waves of reforms; instead, it allowed schools and teachers to develop teaching based on their real needs.

Great Results at Reasonable Cost

Recent international comparisons have revealed that in Finland the participation rate at all levels of education increased, especially in higher education.

There was very little variation in student performances across schools. This result revealed that the Finnish education system is one of the most equitable. In fact, the correlation between family socio-economic status and student performances was quite low.

As revealed by major international surveys (TIMSS, PISA), Finnish students outperformed students from other OECD countries in mathematics, reading, sciences and problem-solving skills.

It should be pointed out that Finland achieved these positive results in spite of limited investment in its education system.

Conclusion

Finland proved particularly effective in implementing seven components fostering successful change in education, as defined by Hargreaves & Fink: (1) focus on the holistic development of students (e.g., knowledge, skills, values, creativity); (2) long-term vision of education policy development; (3) local leadership; (4) equal opportunities for quality education for all students; (5) promotion of diversity within schools and classrooms; (6) qualified, talented and creative human resources; and (7) balance between innovation and good practices.

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