

## *Original Paper*

# School Curriculum Leadership in Elementary Education in Finland

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### ***Abstract***

*This study investigates the curriculum leadership in Finnish elementary education, focusing on successful leadership models and practices. Finland's approach, emphasizing trust in educators and significant autonomy, has led to high performance in international assessments like PISA. Key findings include the effectiveness of shared, distributed, and sustainable leadership models, which balance national standards with local flexibility and teacher autonomy. These models empower teachers to make decisions on curriculum design and student assessment, fostering a collaborative and innovative educational environment. The study concludes that trust, autonomy, and collaboration are essential for effective curriculum leadership and offers valuable insights for global educational reform.*

### ***Keywords***

*curriculum leadership, elementary education, finnish education system, educational reform, school management*

## **1. Introduction**

### *1.1 Background*

Since entering the 21st century, with the deepening of globalization and international educational exchanges, the demand for internationalized high-quality talents is increasing. Reformation as a way to enhance national competitiveness. Countries around the world have been actively engaged in nationwide curriculum reforms, each with its unique approach and focus.

Western countries, in particular, have been at the forefront of reforming centralized education management systems. These reforms emphasize the central government's regulatory role in education, aiming to standardize teaching practices and implement uniform measurement standards for both students and teachers. Curriculum standards are rigorously developed and enforced, and the

implementation of teaching courses is closely monitored to ensure compliance and quality. This top-down approach is designed to maintain consistency and high standards across the education system.

In contrast, many Eastern countries have been gradually decentralizing educational authority, empowering schools and teachers with more autonomy. However, standardized examinations continue to dominate educational practice, often overshadowing the potential benefits of increased autonomy. This reliance on standardized testing can sometimes limit the flexibility and innovation in teaching methods and curriculum design.

In this global landscape of educational reform, Finland has emerged as a unique and highly successful example. Finland has created a new model that “emphasizes trust in professionals and returns the right to education and management to professional educators” (Gao, 2019, p. 1). This approach is fundamentally different from the more rigid, top-down models seen in many other countries. Instead of strict central control, Finland places a strong emphasis on the professionalism and autonomy of educators, trusting them to make decisions that best serve their students.

Finland’s approach to elementary education is characterized by a focus on coherence and flexibility. In 2001, Finland initiated a significant reform of its national core curriculum, which was further refined and implemented in 2004. This reform was highly successful, emphasizing national standards and guidance while allowing for local adaptation and innovation. The state maintains control over the overall educational framework, but local governments, schools, and teachers are granted substantial autonomy over elective subjects and teaching methods. This balance between national standards and local flexibility is a key factor in Finland’s educational success.

Moreover, Finnish education has garnered international attention due to its remarkable performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. Between 2000 and 2009, Finland consistently achieved top rankings in these assessments, which measure students’ reading, mathematics, and science skills. These results have positioned Finland as a global leader in education, attracting widespread interest from policymakers, educators, and researchers around the world.

### *1.2 Study Questions*

Given the unique and successful model of educational leadership and curriculum management in Finland, this study seeks to explore the following questions:

- a. What are the leadership styles in elementary schools in Finland?
- b. How do they build an effective curriculum leadership development team?

## **2. Methodology and Concept Analysis**

### *2.1 Methodology*

To gain a comprehensive understanding of curriculum leadership in Finnish elementary education, this study employs a multi-faceted approach. Extensive literature reviews were conducted, focusing on academic papers, policy documents, and reports related to Finnish education reform and curriculum

management. Additionally, case studies of specific Finnish schools were analyzed to provide real-world examples and insights into the practical implementation of curriculum leadership models.

The analytical method was used to dissect and understand the structure and dynamics of curriculum leadership in Finland. By examining various leadership styles and their impact on educational outcomes, this study aims to provide a clear and detailed picture of what makes Finnish curriculum leadership effective.

## *2.2 Concept Analysis—Define Leadership Style/Roles*

Through classroom study and reading literature, several key curriculum leadership models related to Finland were identified and analyzed. These models include:

- a. Shared leadership: This model involves co-governance and greater involvement of multiple stakeholders in important decision-making processes. In the context of Finnish schools, shared leadership often includes collaboration between principals, teachers, and even students, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered in shaping educational policies and practices.
- b. Collaborative leadership: This approach refers to the establishment of partnership with external parties (such as NGOs, schools, departments) in order to achieve a win-win situation.
- c. Professional leadership: This model highlights the importance of transparent professional knowledge and expertise among leaders. Leaders are expected to be highly competent in their fields and to take responsibility for their actions and decisions. In some cases, a common governance approach is adopted, where leaders work together to achieve shared goals.
- d. Distributed leadership: It refers to a shared approach to leadership, beyond a singular leadership position. Leadership decisions supporting school curricula delegated and shared to teachers in response to the growing intensity, rapidity, fluidity and uncertainty in education reforms.
- e. Sustainable leadership:

As discussed by Brent Davies in *Developing Sustainable Leadership* (2007), sustainable leadership is not limited to a single leadership model. It involves a long-term perspective and the ability to adapt and evolve in response to changing circumstances. Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink (2003) further elaborate on this concept in their paper “Sustaining Leadership,” highlighting the importance of learning leadership, distributed leadership, and leadership inheritance in creating a sustainable educational environment.

All in all, there is no single, one-size-fits-all curriculum leadership model in Finland. The definitions of different curriculum leadership models are interconnected and often overlap. The effectiveness of these models lies in their ability to adapt to the unique needs and contexts of individual schools and communities.

## **3. School Curriculum Leadership in Elementary Schools in Finland**

### *3.1 Distributed Leadership and Sustainable Leadership*

According to Huang Dingchao (2017), decentralization of curriculum leadership model in Finland is as follows:

Local Government--School--Principal

Principal--Teacher-- Student and Parent

“The Finnish educational steering system is based on the Basic Education Act. General educational goals and time allocations for various subjects are defined by the government” (Sullanmaa et al., 2019, p. 4), the central and local governments jointly manage the national curriculum system. In order to ensure the quality of teaching, the Finnish government has formulated rules for the basic education curriculum and some requirements on major policies. All schools are required to implement the prescribed curriculum, but this does not mean that the curriculum of elementary education schools is completely in accordance with the government’s arrangements. Finland adopts flexible responsibility system.

The government trusts the school, does not interfere in the specific management and teaching of the school, has almost no assessment index for the school, and does not carry out the grade assessment of the school. Each school has a certain degree of autonomy in the arrangement of its own school. It only needs to follow the general direction of the government and ensure the number of class hours. The school can decide the courses to be set up, the specific class hour arrangement, and the selection of teaching materials suitable for the school.

The Finnish top-down-bottom-up approach to school development (Pietarinen, Pyhäälto, & Soini, 2017) sees the local education providers as important stakeholders who are involved and engaged in the school development process (Tian & Risku, 2019; Vitikka et al., 2016).

Finland’s success in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests provides empirical evidence of the effectiveness of its curriculum leadership model. Over the past two decades, Finland has consistently ranked among the top performers in reading, mathematics, and science. For example, in the 2009 PISA test, Finnish students achieved an average score of [X] in reading, significantly higher than the OECD average of [Y]. This superior performance is attributed to the country’s emphasis on teacher autonomy, collaborative leadership, and continuous professional development. Detailed analysis of PISA data reveals that Finnish students not only score high in standardized tests but also demonstrate strong critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which are essential for the 21st-century workforce.

### *3.2 Principals’ Leadership and Shared Leadership*

Finnish schools are highly autonomous, and principals are very important to schools. According to the law, headmasters must be teachers in Finland. The government devolves the management power to the principals, who manage the school curriculum, determine the content of the school-based curriculum, and interact with stakeholders inside and outside the school.

By reading an exclusive interview in Shanghai Education Global Education News (2019) with Ari Pokka, former president of the International Federation of principals: the “secret” of Finnish principals in managing schools. He shared the idea like: The principal may not be the best teacher, and the best teacher should stay in the classroom, but the principal may be an innovative teacher who can turn some possibilities into reality in the school.

Ari Pokka in his book *Top Class-Finnish School Leadership and Management* mentioned that one of the important cornerstones is shared leadership.

Shared leadership in Finnish schools consists of two parts: one is a principal and several vice presidents; the other is teachers and students, as school users, how they participate in school leadership, because principals need to listen to their opinions and suggestions. Shared leadership is the combination of the principal, teachers and students. There are two forms of participation in the teacher and student way: large group discussions (five or six teachers and an active student) or group discussions (two or three teachers).

To illustrate the implementation of shared leadership, this study examines the practices at a typical Finnish elementary school in Helsinki. The principal at this school actively involves teachers in curriculum design, fostering a collaborative environment where professional development is prioritized. Through regular meetings and workshops, teachers are encouraged to share best practices and continuously improve their teaching methods. This case study highlights the effectiveness of shared leadership in enhancing educational quality and student outcomes.

The Finnish Association of principals conducts regular training for principals and holds regular meetings of principals to share leadership. Communication, discussion and sharing among principals are very important. Also, In Helsinki, the capital of Finland, “the government has provided a two-year training program (jova) for all new principals, which mainly includes school administration, career planning and consultation, leadership training for principals, and management organization theory.” (GAO MENG, 2019, p. 24)

### *3.3 Teachers' Profession and the Management of Curriculum*

The traditional principal personal responsibility system, that is, the principal's personal leadership, on the one hand, is very easy to cause the principal to be difficult to deal with complex work, on the other hand, it may also lead to the principal's monopolization of power, which makes school reform lack of internal motivation and can't make progress. Therefore, it is very important to add other leadership and teachers' participation.

In Finland, the curriculum has traditionally concentrated on developing teaching and learning, and teachers are recognised and highlighted as the most influential factor in a reform process having an effect on student learning (Sahlberg, 2015) Because teachers are the group closest to students and experts in the front line of education, therefore, they are most likely to make decisions that are beneficial to students. Distributed leadership will help teachers to grasp the process and ensure that local actors establish cooperation and discussion relationships in time to support and participate in the implementation process. Schools believe in teachers. “In terms of teaching, each teacher has greater autonomy in teaching, and can freely choose teaching materials and teaching methods, and arrange the schedule.” (Liu, 2014, p. 41) Finnish teachers have full authority over syllabus, student assessment, campus improvement and community participation. (Huang, 2017) Curriculum leadership is manifested in the autonomy and

authority of school and teachers in curriculum development and implementation, and the independence and cooperation of teaching evaluation.

Finland's approach to teacher professional development is a cornerstone of its educational success. The country follows the "less is more" principle in education governance, which means achieving good results with less intervention. Under this empowerment principle, teachers are endowed with full professional autonomy, and the outstanding performance in practice is that teachers have a high degree of control over teaching work, characterized by teachers' self-efficacy as the core driving force (Zhang & Qiu, 2024).

The Finnish education system provides a comprehensive support system for teacher professional development. This includes a strong emphasis on pre-service teacher education, where aspiring teachers must obtain a master's degree to qualify for teaching positions. The teacher education program is research-based, focusing on developing teachers' research capabilities, reflective practice, and problem-solving skills (Niemi, 2018).

In addition to pre-service education, Finland places significant emphasis on continuous professional development for in-service teachers. Each school is required to develop individual professional development plans for teachers. These plans are tailored to the specific needs and contexts of each teacher, ensuring that they receive the support necessary to enhance their teaching practices. The system also encourages teachers to engage in collaborative learning communities and action research projects, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation (Niemi, 2018).

Furthermore, the Finnish education system promotes the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in teaching and learning. Teacher education centers, such as the LUMA Science Education Center at the University of Helsinki, provide ongoing training and resources to help teachers integrate ICT into their classrooms. This not only enhances teaching efficiency but also prepares students for the digital age (Niemi, 2018).

Therefore, Finland strictly guarantees the quality of teachers, attaches great importance to the professional training of teachers, and has carried out a series of reforms in improving the professional quality of teachers. Teachers must obtain the required degree, and almost all teachers in elementary schools are master's degrees.

### *3.4 Effective Curriculum Leadership Development Team*

The effectiveness is dependent on how well curriculum leadership is distributed to teacher leadership, and thus how well both distributed and teacher leadership competencies are developed. According to Andrew Hargreaves (2007), elementary school curriculum leadership and management team in Finland, the distributed collaborative leadership is reflected in all levels. The redistribution of leadership within municipalities, between municipal authorities and schools, between schools and schools, and within schools, is the distribution and adjustment of power on the basis of cooperation.

In Finland, principals and teachers are the main body of school management and curriculum leadership implementation. Take the primary schools in Vantaa, Finland as an example. Curriculum leadership

development team adopts the combination of principal responsibility system and team leadership. Teachers adopt the post rotation system under the principle of voluntariness to form a leadership team. All team members participate in the decision-making system. Members make decisions through individual communication and group discussion. The principal has the final decision-making power, but the leadership team and the principal make more contributions to the development of the school for scientific and reasonable decision-making, the overall efficiency of leadership development team is high. (Zhang, 2012)

#### 4. Conclusion

Because Finland's curriculum leadership is mainly distributed leadership under the leadership of the principal responsibility system which including Professional leadership, and also contains some other leadership models like shared and collaborative leadership. Learning from other leadership models, it is also a Sustainable Leadership in development. In addition, reasons for length, this paper on the establishment of effective curriculum leadership team is not deep enough.

#### 5. Recommendation

Through the discussion of curriculum leadership in Finland primary school, this has some inspiration for curriculum leadership in China.

First of all, because teachers are the key role of education, it is particularly important to improve the requirements of teachers and strengthen the training of teachers and teacher resources. Therefore, greater attention should be paid to teachers in the context of curriculum reform. It can introduce a series of teacher standards and teacher evaluation system, so as to improve the quality of teaching staff, and improve teachers' quality, so that they can have the comprehensive quality of national curriculum reform. The schools in China should improve the selection requirements of principals and strengthen inter school cooperation. Regular meetings should be arranged among local and upper and lower levels, so that principals can communicate with each other and share leadership experience.

Sustainable curriculum leadership should be developed, and it should not be confined to any kind of curriculum leadership mode. It should be combined with the local actual situation. We can learn from each mode to find the most appropriate curriculum leadership development.

Students, parents, society, school and teachers should trust each other. In order to win the trust of parents and society, teachers need to improve their professional ability, while schools need to improve the quality of education as a whole. When the social parents trust the school completely, it will encourage the whole staff of the school to make progress.

However, there is not any internal examination in elementary schools in Finland, and elementary school usually only takes half a day course, so the study and homework pressure for students is not very large. It is difficult to learn from the current mode of China. It is also difficult to learn, but it also has some reference to the current policy of reducing students' burden in China.

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