



**WHAT WORKS IN INNOVATION IN EDUCATION**

**FINLAND: EMPHASISING DEVELOPMENT INSTEAD OF COMPETITION  
AND COMPARISON**

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**NOT FOR CITATION**

## Background<sup>1</sup>

### The Structure of Basic Education in Finland: Centralised Steering - Local Implementation

Basic Education is intended for children from seven to sixteen years of age, and its completion in comprehensive school takes nine years. It is governed by the Basic Education Act of 1998. Basic education may include one-year pre-school education and one-year additional education (10<sup>th</sup> form). After completing comprehensive school, pupils have fulfilled their compulsory education. Often basic education is provided in elementary comprehensive schools (grade 1-6) and upper comprehensive schools (grade 7-9). Only a few schools offer basic education from grade 1 - 9. With a Basic Education final certificate pupils continue their studies for another three years in upper secondary general education or in vocational education.

Centralised steering in education was drastically reduced in the 1990's and instead the local administration's decision-making powers were increased. The Finnish Parliament decides on educational legislation and the general principles of education policy. The Government, Ministry of Education and National Board of Education are responsible for the implementation of this policy at the central administration level. To influence local practice the government has legislation, projects, training and exemplary tools as instruments at their disposition.

Local authorities are responsible for organising basic education for children between seven and sixteen. Each local authority is obliged to provide basic education for all children living within the municipality, or to otherwise ensure that school-aged children receive corresponding instruction. Based on the curriculum framework provided by the National Board of Education in 1994, the municipality prepares its own local curriculum and based on that the schools write their own curriculum. The 1994 curriculum framework is not very detailed and therefore leaves room for municipalities and schools to formulate their own local curriculum.

Consequently, educational institutions have become differentiated and the options they provide have multiplied. The differences between schools and municipalities may lead to inequality, because they have different budgets for education. This is an important reason that the National Board of Education has given criteria for student assessment in comprehensive schools in 1999. These criteria are compulsory. The new criteria were published in January 2004, in relation to the new core curriculum, which will be implemented between 2003 and 2006. In this way more uniformity across the country will be created.

Compared to the 1994 guidelines the new curriculum will be stricter and more prescribed. Per subject teaching hours are prescribed and the level for assigning 'mark 8'<sup>2</sup> is defined. Particularly the latter is new for the schools, because until now the schools themselves defined what knowledge and skills are required for receiving a certain mark. The new curriculum also implies that students have fewer possibilities for electives during the time they are in upper comprehensive school. The proposed implementation of the new curriculum is a hot item for discussion in Finnish schools, which also became clear during the visits to the case study schools.

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<sup>1</sup> The information on the Finnish education system is collected through talks with staff members of the National Board of Education and the following websites: [www.edu.fi](http://www.edu.fi) and [www.eurydice.org/Eurybase](http://www.eurydice.org/Eurybase)

<sup>2</sup> Marks are given between 4-10: 4 =fail; 5=basic effort; 6=poor; 7=average; 8=good; 9 and 10 are excellent

## **Evaluation as a means to secure quality**

### *Evaluation at the national level*

At the national level, monitoring and evaluation focus on the extent to which the objectives set in statutes, education policy decisions and national core curricula are achieved. Finland does not have an inspectorate. Moreover, there are not any national exams except for the matriculation examination to finalise upper secondary general education. This is the reason why the National Board of Education has conducted evaluation projects. The aim is that each comprehensive school participates in national evaluations of different subjects every third year. The evaluations of the National Board of Education are random sample based evaluations. Their objective is to give a general picture on the state of educational results. Each school that participates in the sample gets individual feedback on paper where they can see their own results and the national results curves and averages. However, they can not read the results of other schools in the sample<sup>3</sup>.

The purpose of the national evaluation system is to produce information on the quality of learning outcomes. The results of these evaluations are utilised in the development of the education system and core curricula, as well as in practical teaching work. The national evaluation system of education consists of three sections:

- Learning outcomes;
- Production of indicators that provide long-term information on educational trends;
- Evaluation projects on selected topics (situational or thematic evaluations).

The globalization of today's world makes it all the more important to compare Finnish education with developments in other countries. Therefore Finnish participation in studies such as PISA is considered highly important. In the PISA 2000 study Finland scored above average in reading (the top), mathematical and scientific literacy for 15 year-olds. Finland will continue to raise the quality of education. It is interesting to notice that in the new core curriculum, mother tongue got more lesson hours.

An important aim of the national evaluation system is also to support educational institutions and teachers in the continuous reform of education, on the one hand, and produce and convey diverse, up-to-date and reliable information on the functionality and results of the institutions and the entire education system, on the other.

The planning and implementation of national evaluations is based on transparency and co-operation with educational institutions and their maintaining bodies. Evaluation must give space to local objectives, interpretations and expectations. The underlying principle is that those being evaluated are aware of the evaluation criteria and have the opportunity to present their own views concerning the evaluation and its results. Furthermore, it is also important to ensure student involvement in the evaluation of education. The results of the evaluation and the methods and materials applied are public. Educational evaluation information is produced for use by education authorities, political decision-makers, educational institutions and their maintaining bodies.

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<sup>3</sup> In contrary to what usually is done by an inspectorate (which Finland does not have) the evaluations do not deal with individual schools and hence does not focus on accountability.

A separate Evaluation Council for Education and Training in connection with the Ministry of Education has been acting from April 2003. It is responsible for planning, coordinating, managing and developing the evaluation of education.

### ***Evaluation at the local level***

At the local level, the municipality and the educational institutions that they maintain are responsible for developing the education they provide according to local conditions. According to legislation municipalities are responsible to accomplish local evaluation of education. At a local/municipal level, evaluation may focus on the accessibility of education, the financial accountability of educational institutions and the realization of the objectives of municipal policies on education and culture, as well as on the differences between various educational institutions. At an institutional level, the evaluation targets include the achievement of objectives, the completion of pedagogic and curricular reforms and the use of resources.

### ***Institutional self evaluation***

In 1993, the National Board of Education launched a project to develop school self-evaluation practices. The aim of the project was to develop suitable self-evaluation models for different types of educational institutions. Models were developed for the comprehensive school, general upper secondary school and vocational and adult education and training. The models allowed for diversity of educational institutions, but also offered means to municipalities and schools to systematically evaluate the processes and outcomes of education. This project could be considered the start of the recognition of self-evaluation as a core concept in the Finnish education system. Due to the Basic Education Act of 1998 a culture of self-evaluation was created in schools and municipalities. However, quality and involvement differ among schools and municipalities.

The main idea behind school and student self-evaluation is that it is more important to focus on *development* through self-assessment than to compare your school or yourself with other schools or students. In self-evaluation not only the outcomes of evaluation is important, but also the process, because the results of evaluation could be the start of development work. For instance, recently legislation about student welfare has been implemented, which implies that also the atmosphere in schools, teacher student interaction and student health should be taken care of in the schools and be part of the evaluation municipalities and schools carry out. The growing importance of self-evaluation at the institutional level, also resulted in attention for student self-evaluation. The 1995 review of assessment project, initiated by the National Board of Education, particularly focused on the development of approaches for student self-evaluation. The two case study schools provide examples of the student self-evaluation practices that were developed and implemented as a result of their participation in this project. The school in Tikkakoski seems ahead in conceptualizing and realizing student self evaluation. The Meilahti school presents a more typical example of student self-evaluation practices. In the educational legislation from January 1999, educational institutions are obligated to evaluate their own operations and their effectiveness. National evaluation of educational outcomes is also partially carried out on the basis of the institutions' self-evaluation.

As a result of the 1995 assessment project and formalised in legislation in 1999 the National Board of Education has formulated the main principles for student assessment in Finnish comprehensive schools:

- Assessment of study skills, working skills and behaviour should be individual, truthful and versatile;
- Feedback should support the development of self-knowledge and motivation of the pupil;

- Learning-to-learn, learning to set goals for own learning, studying and working at school have been understood to be key competencies for life long learning;
- According to the legislation (Act for comprehensive education 628/1998) assessment is considered to be a tool to counsel and support studying and learning, and to develop the pupil's self-evaluation skills;
- Student assessment is divided into to phases:
  1. Evaluation during the studies is based on the goals and framework defined by the curriculum guidelines and school's syllabus. Assessment is focused on the learning and development process of an individual pupil.
  2. The second phase deals with the school leaving certificate (final school report) which should be nationally comparable and the pupils should be equally treated. The orders dealing with the school leaving certificate are connected with the joint application system<sup>4</sup>. The pupils apply for a study place in the second stage of secondary education (either upper secondary general or vocational education) through the joint application system.

The key priorities for student assessment are:

1. Student assessment should contribute to the socialisation process and the individual development of the pupil. Development has a broad connotation here, it includes cognitive development, development of learning skills and social/ emotional development
2. Student assessment should contribute to the development of a pupil's study, learning and working skills (self-regulation skills).
3. Student assessment should contribute to the development of general skills and knowledge.
4. Student assessment supports pupils in obtaining a study place after compulsory education.

### **The case studies**

The cases from Finland were selected for the OECD project, because of their participation in a national project conducted in 1990's by the National Board of Education. The aim of this project was to improve teaching methods and reform the methods of student assessment in comprehensive education. Fourteen schools from different parts of Finland took part in the project. These schools were contacted in spring 2002. Tikkakoski and Meilahti schools were two schools, in which the new way of student assessment was considered to be practiced in the whole school and not only realised by a few individual teachers.

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<sup>4</sup> The primary way to apply for admission to upper secondary education is the national student selection system (= joint application system). Students are selected on the basis of their school certificates and grades. In some vocational tracks entrance examinations and aptitude tests are also used.

## **Tikkakoski upper comprehensive school**

### ***Background information***

Tikkakoski upper comprehensive school (grade 7-9) has 278 students and 31 teachers. Class size is between 15 and 20 students. Tikkakoski upper comprehensive is a rural school in Central Finland. The students in the school come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Only a very few students are not of Finnish origin. There is little student and teacher mobility in the school. In this part of Finland there is no lack of teachers. There are not many top students, but not many low achievers either in Tikkakoski. The majority of the students that finished Tikkakoski upper comprehensive prefer to go to Jyväskylä for general upper secondary education and not to the general upper secondary school in Tikkakoski. The main reason for going to Jyväskylä is the challenge of the larger city. About forty per cent of the students that finish comprehensive school go to vocational schools and about sixty per cent go to general upper secondary education. Only a few students go to the combined vocational/general track. Students from Tikkakoski are usually accepted in a school of their choice for their further studies.

Tikkakoski upper comprehensive is a well organised school with an open atmosphere between students and teachers. It is a tidy school. Teachers (and the school principal) are easily addressed. The school principal knows each student by name. Teacher-student interaction is very easy. Students mention teachers with their first names. One of the students mentioned the spirit of togetherness that he liked in the school.

### ***Teaching strategies –***

#### *Examples from classroom observations*

#### Technical work & arts

In these practical classes the lessons usually start with 5-10 minutes of whole classroom instruction in which the teacher explains where the students are supposed to work on during the lesson and what is considered important. For instance, during our observation the art teacher explained that in the short movie the students had to make, the flow of the story and the camera positions were important, but not the acting as such. In the technical classroom the assignment (to make a wooden frame) is written on a large piece of paper in front of the class, as well as the steps that are necessary for realising the product. The teachers provide this kind of information to help the students to focus their time and effort and not to lose a lot of time on less important elements of the assignment. Depending on the assignment the students work individually or in small groups. In the technical classroom students work in their own pace in finishing a task.

The technical work teacher as well as the art teacher walked around helping students when necessary, but also discussing the quality of work with the students. A clear example took place in the technical work class. One student had finished her product (the wooden frame). To get a grade she asked the teacher to evaluate her product. First the teacher asked the student to evaluate the quality of the product. Then the student was asked to give herself a grade, and only after that the teacher gave the grade. The teacher told afterwards that this is the usual way of working. Differences in grading between teachers and students are discussed. In this way students learn to understand what the criteria are for a good piece of work. In the interview the technical work teacher emphasises that it is not only the quality of the product that matters, but also the learning process. Therefore he emphasises that the way students work, and the ability to reflect on that is essential for the student's development. To realise this communicating with students is important.

### Lessons on academic subjects (maths, Finnish and foreign language)

In these classes teachers usually give a brief instruction of about 10-15 minutes on the topic or concept that is central in the lesson. Already during whole class instruction students posed questions to the teachers. Then the students got an exercise/assignment, where they are supposed to work on. The students worked individually, but they were allowed to discuss with their peers. In all lessons we saw that the students were really on task! Quite some students discussed with peers about the assignment, but others preferred to work alone. This was left to the students. The teachers walked around and gave help whenever asked. The students could check their work in the student key-book. In case the answer was wrong they could ask the teacher or their peers for help. The language teacher checked the homework, particularly with the purpose to explain once again difficult concepts (like use of 'the' in English). The teachers considered it more important to follow the learning process than students' final product.

The approach to learning that is outlined in the examples above is not particularly new in Tikkakoski, but has developed since the early nineties. The school also participated actively in the development of the 1994 curriculum framework and participated in the 1995 assessment project. In this framework 'decentralisation of education' was core, and related to that the schools were given responsibility for organising education. Tikkakoski took part in the 1994 curriculum framework because the school wanted to take responsibility for the way education was organised in the school.

At first sight teaching in Tikkakoski seems somewhat traditional. The classroom setting (during the theoretical subjects) is in rows with the teacher desk in the front. Lessons last 45 minutes. However, as is illustrated in the examples from classroom observations, instruction time is relatively short and most of the time the students work on assignments (they are on task!) and they actively seek the help of peers or the teacher. Teachers in Tikkakoski do not talk for 45 minutes to their students, instead most of the time students work on their coursework. This illustrates what is considered important in Tikkakoski: the responsibility of the student for their learning process. An active student is important in this realm. An important means in making students active is to encourage students to ask questions to the teacher, but also to ask their peers for help. *'Sometimes peers can better explain concepts than I can do as a teacher'* one of the teachers said in the interview. Many subjects, particularly foreign languages, use study methods that promote self-pacing.

Teachers consider it important to follow the learning process of the individual students for their specific subject. The teachers from the several subject domains (the Finnish teachers, the foreign language teachers, the maths teachers etc.) do that in their own way. The language teachers for instance told us not to test that much, but to talk a lot to the students during the lessons, as we saw during the classroom observations. The math teachers, however use small tests a lot - once a week- to see what problems students have. Teachers try to give feedback (from tests) as soon as possible, when possible the next time when they have the class. General problems are discussed with the whole class and more specific problems are discussed with individual students, during the time that students work individually on assignments.

A few students with severe problems in a subject get extra help in separate classes. Students with less severe problems can get remediation instead of taking optional courses (see conditions). The organisation of the lessons (little time spent on whole classroom instruction and most of the time spent on working on assignments/exercises) and the relatively small classroom size provides teachers with enough time to interact with individual students. Moreover, teachers know their students very well, socially, emotionally and cognitively. After all they have students for three subsequent years, and per study period (see conditions) teachers only deal with a small number of different classes. Students told us that they appreciate that their teachers are always willing to help them when they have difficulties with a subject, even before or after school hours.

The examples presented above show what the teachers in Tikkakoski consider important in their teaching. To summarise, the teachers that were interviewed emphasised that:

- Frequent feedback is important (see the examples above).
- It is important to know your students and their development well; the teachers consider the organisation of the learning environment - see conditions - very helpful in realising this.

By being enthusiastic themselves the teachers wanted to communicate to the students that learning is fun.

### *Self-assessment*

As a result of the participation in the 1994 curriculum change Tikkakoski upper comprehensive school started to renew and develop an evaluation system that has self-evaluation as a guiding principle. Since then self-evaluation in the school has been continuously developed. Because of their work on evaluation Tikkakoski also participated in the assessment project that prepared the review of the assessment system in 1999. Participation in this pilot project also had impact on thinking in Tikkakoski about the importance of learning-to-learn skills for the further development of students. Self-evaluation became even more important, not only at the school and teacher level, but also at the student level. Self-evaluation in the philosophy of the school implies that one is responsible for his/her own learning (the student), for his/her teaching (the teacher) and for providing appropriate conditions for teaching and learning at the school level. We will explain how self-evaluation is applied at these three levels in Tikkakoski upper comprehensive.

### *Student self-evaluation*

At the national level only the grading system, the minimal frequency of reports per year and the format of the report is given. As a result the way teaching and learning is organised and also the way students are assessed differ a lot between schools (only the matriculation exam at the end of upper secondary school is a national organised examination). Based on these minimal regulations schools organise their own student evaluation system.

Acquiring *skills* to learn as compared to *things* to learn is an important element of the approach to curriculum and assessment in Tikkakoski. Therefore, not only student performance should be evaluated, but also the development of learning-to learn skills<sup>5</sup>. The system of student-self-evaluation that is elaborated in Tikkakoski therefore also tries to reflect the development of students. The principal and the teachers do not want to limit the concept of evaluation to student performance only.

Since the school year 2001/2002 a system for student self-evaluation based on course reports is being used. At the end of each period (the school has divided the school-year in five periods of seven weeks each) the students get a course report, of which self assessment is an important part. Students determine per subject the grade they expect, assess their study habits, their behaviour and participation during lessons and

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<sup>5</sup> The term formative assessment is not used so much in Tikkakoski although in practice it is considered an essential evaluation method to inform teachers and students. Formative assessment may consist of hard data, but more often and more importantly of 'tacit knowledge' i.e. knowledge that both the teacher and student obtain through discussion, reflection and experience. Self-evaluation has an important role in the formative assessment system used.



whether homework has been done. The students use a common marking system for filling in the form, which makes the form easy to interpret by the students, the teacher and the parents. After having filled in their own mark the students received their mark from the teacher. If there is a difference of two points a discussion between student and teacher takes place. For the majority of the students their own grade and their teacher's grade matches pretty well. The course report also includes the previous assessments and therefore enables the student to follow his/her development. According to the principal most students seem to be able to estimate quite well how they developed. Probably also the frequent feedback during lessons is helpful here. If a student, according to the course report, is failing in a subject he/ she is responsible to start a discussion with the teacher to get additional help.

#### Self evaluation form for students in Tikkakoski

Subject	Course grade	Study habits	Learning development	Student's grade
Mother tongue				
Maths				
Etc.				

Since 2002/ 2003 parents, students and (home) teacher together evaluate extensively the development of the student at least once a year. One (very active and concerned) parent says in the interview that her daughter has learned to become responsible for her learning through this evaluation system. For her it is a reason to talk with her child about the report. She very much appreciates that parents get informed about the progress of their children five times per year, which is much more than only a brief talk to the home teacher twice a year, which is usually the case. The parent was surprised how realistically her child could grade herself. Also the students that were interviewed said that they appreciated the frequency of the course reports, because they could then easily follow their own development.

#### ***Teacher self-evaluation***

Since 1997/1998 teachers are obliged to give the students the opportunity to evaluate his/ her lessons at least once a year. In practice this is happening much more frequently. Such an evaluation is usually not very formalised, but it emphasises the reality that in Tikkakoski upper comprehensive communication about teaching and learning among all involved really matters.

The importance of self-evaluation in the Finnish educational system also becomes clear in the student textbooks that are published by private educational publishers<sup>6</sup>. These textbooks contain assessment sheets, which the students have to fill in. The teachers appreciate these forms and use them for evaluating (and improving) their own teaching. It shows that teachers and students are being focused on evaluation, in order to improve teaching and learning. Teacher self-evaluation is seen to support teachers in his/her professional development.

#### ***School self-evaluation***

Every third year there is a comprehensive survey about the school among students, parents and teachers. During the school year the student counsellor surveys selected issues. Moreover the school tries to participate in as much national evaluations as possible in order to compare it self with other schools.

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<sup>6</sup> Usually textbook publishers are taken into all working groups in the National Board of Education where the changes for curriculum guidelines are made. So the publishers know how to develop the textbooks so that they follow the national instructions

The school principal discusses the importance of the evaluation system regularly with the students in the home class (at least once a year) and with the teacher teams. Common topics are the organisation of learning (school year, period, week, day) and evaluation (formative, self-evaluation, course report, final report, comparing our school to other schools as regards access to further studies, national tests etc). Other topics vary more.

### ***Creating conditions***

#### *School culture*

The principal started nine years ago. According to the principal it is important to build a school culture that is a learning environment for all that are part of it (students and teachers). Within this culture there is a lot of attention for the individual learner. The school culture is made explicit to students, parents and teachers, so that everyone knows their freedom and responsibilities. In the school not only cognitive knowledge and skills are important, but also growing up and learning-to-learn skills.

The principal emphasises that the organisation of the curriculum and the assessment system is important in realising the school culture.

The principal has a clear vision on how the school should develop and how this can be realised. He has some clear principles about the way the school has to be led, which can be summarised as follows:

- Communication between all involved in the school (teachers and students) is crucial.
- Decisions are made together.
- Change is being realised in small steps.
- Solutions for problems need to be simple and logical.
- Barriers are sometimes resources.

A lot of formal (e.g. in the teacher teams) and informal communication among teachers and between teachers and students happens in the school.

Teachers and other personnel are part of a team. There are four subject matter teams, one team is responsible for student care and one for support services. All teams meet once a week. Each team appoints a team responsible who discusses the plans with the principal. Those who are team responsible change every other year, so that every teacher gets a turn. The teams are an important component in the school organisation.

Co-operation between teachers (particularly those of different subjects) is encouraged, but not forced. Sometimes there are projects where several subjects are involved. Teachers between subjects communicate about their teaching, but again they are not forced to do things.

#### *Regulation of the learning environment at school level*

Instead of courses that run throughout the school year in Tikkakoski the curriculum is organised in courses that are given in a certain period (the school-year is divided into five periods of seven weeks each). In this way a teacher has only four or five different classes a week and a student has only three to four different teachers a week for the academic subjects. Practical subjects (technical work, arts, textile work)

are being taught during the whole school year. This is done to intensify the contact between students and teachers and therefore it also helps teachers and students to get to know each other.

To limit the workload for students a balance between theoretical and practical/optional subjects is realised in the timetable. Each day all students have three or at the most four theoretical and one practical/optional subjects. Also not all subjects are covered in each period (due to the course system that is implemented), so there is variation. From the interview with the students it became clear that students liked this approach, because they could concentrate better. Students also appreciated that they had many choices for optional courses.

Besides taking optional courses students could also choose for extra remedial teaching in compulsory courses (20-30% of the students use this possibility). Based on the frequent course reports (see student self-evaluation above) the student can decide whether (and for which subjects) extra remediation is necessary. The home teacher is of course also available in helping the student to decide.

The curriculum change that is about to be implemented (between 2003 and 2006) is received with criticism in Tikkakoski upper comprehensive. The principal of Tikkakoski thinks that, compared to the current situation, there will be less flexibility when the new curriculum is implemented. Particularly there will be less room for the practical subjects (such as technical work, home economics and textile work) and remediation. Compared to the 1994 guidelines the new curriculum will be stricter and more prescribed. Per subject teaching hours are prescribed and the level for assigning 'mark 8'<sup>7</sup> is defined.

#### *Regulation of the classroom environment*

Social cohesion is seen as an important condition for learning in Tikkakoski. Therefore students are part of a fixed group of not more than 20 students. These groups are together for about 20 of the total 30 weekly lessons. The groups stay together for three years and during these years they have the same teacher for each specific subject. This approach strengthens the relationship between students and teachers, and also between the students. Both teachers and students appreciate this approach,.

Because of the fact that groups stay together for three subsequent years, a lot of attention is paid to form stable groups when students enter the school in grade 7. Teachers, parents and students from grade 6 are consulted. Based on these consultations socio-grams are built. The social worker and the student counsellor make a proposal for the grade 7 groups, which is discussed with the principal and the class and subject teachers. The purpose is to get groups that are expected to be beneficial to the learning process of the individual student. The groups that are created are not based on performance level.

#### *How do we know it is working?*

It is not so easy to show 'hard evidence', which demonstrates that the approach to teaching, learning and assessment is working, because, as the principal says, no one is asking for it. On the other hand there is ample tacit knowledge (see footnote 5), and also the hard data (e.g. surveys, results in national tests, success in access to further studies) that are gathered are analysed and made public. The importance of self-evaluation and the way the school is operating has already been in place for quite some time. The approach to leadership the school principal applies seems very supportive in realising and sustaining the developments in the school. Everyone appreciates the open atmosphere that he has created. From the interviews with the students and the available evaluation data of the school it is clear that students like to

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<sup>7</sup> Marks are given between 4-10: 4 =fail; 5=basic effort; 6=poor; 7=average; 8=good; 9 and 10 are excellent; in the present curriculum schools themselves decide where 'mark 8' stands for.

go to school and that they are motivated. According to the principal this is important, particularly for students of this age, who are often not very motivated to go to school.

There is also hard evidence of good performance. In spring 2003 all students in the final grade obtained access to further studies. 86% received a place in their first choice option. At the same time nationally 86% received access to further studies. Nationally 40% went to general upper secondary education and 60% to vocational studies. In Tikkakoski upper comprehensive school 60% went to general upper secondary education ( about 50% to the city of Jyväskylä where it is more difficult to go) and 40% to vocational studies. National tests show constantly that the school's results are above the average and that there are practically no very poor performers. Comparison of assessment scales with neighbouring upper comprehensive schools has shown in several surveys that the scale used in Tikkakoski upper comprehensive school is solidly of medium level; one does not get his/her grades too easily or too demandingly.

### ***Reflection***

Emphasising development instead of competition and comparison, is one of the striking elements in the Finnish educational system. Tikkakoski upper comprehensive school is clearly applying this in its approach to teaching, learning and assessment. To contribute to the development of a student, a system of student self-evaluation is being developed that not only focuses on evaluating academic performance, but also on developing study habits and learning-to-learn skills. As the case study shows, the self -evaluation system helps students to feel responsible for their own learning. Students in Tikkakoski upper comprehensive are very much aware of their development. It is not that easy to describe the relation between classroom teaching and student development, because student development clearly goes beyond classroom practice.

There are some conditions created in the teaching process at classroom level in Tikkakoski that seem essential in promoting student development. These will be mentioned here:

- Teaching that gives room to individual students, teachers actively help individual students; this is particularly possible through the relative small classes.
- Although not very structured an atmosphere was created where students were encouraged to discuss with their peers (and not to keep silent).
- The teachers were able to create in class an atmosphere to work.
- There are clear demands for students but these are not overemphasised.

The learning environment that is created at classroom level could be realised, because of the conditions that were realised at school level:

- Self-evaluation is considered important by *all* actors (students, teachers and parents) in the school.
- Supportive leadership (a principal that tries to realise things through discussion with all partners).
- Creating a safe environment, where students and teachers know each other well and interact easily and where groups are relatively small.

- Teachers are open for comments of their students on their teaching, the teachers are willing to improve themselves.
- Creating a balanced environment, so that theory and practice alternate. It limits student workload and also underlines that not only academic performance is important.

## **Meilahti Upper Comprehensive school**

### ***Background information***

Meilahti Upper Comprehensive School (grade 7-10) has 383 students and 48 teachers. The school is located in the centre of Helsinki and specialises in visual arts. The students in the school are from many different primary schools. About 10% are not of Finnish origin. Most of these students come from Russia and Somalia. There is little student and teacher mobility.

There are several special classes in Meilahti: visual arts (since 1988), music (since 1999), mathematics and science (since 1999), sports (since 1999) and a Swedish immersion class (since 2000). In this class 50% of the lessons are given using Swedish as language of instruction. Foreign students can be placed in a preparatory class (since 1998 - there are only 8 students currently in this class, the others are in mainstream classes, but they have some language support). There is one class with mentally handicapped children (since 2000). There are two grade 10 classes (since 1999).

After grade nine students from Meilahti go to senior high (60%) the rest of them to vocational. Only a few of them (school year 2002/2003 17) stay in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. These are the most difficult students to handle, because they are not motivated to study and they have very poor study habits.

### ***Teaching strategies***

The teaching strategies applied in Meilahti upper comprehensive school differ between the teachers. Some teachers use self- and peer evaluation in their lessons, others don't. Some teachers apply small group work, but other teachers use whole classroom instruction. The way teachers are teaching depends on what they feel comfortable with. The teaching strategy is part of their routines. The teachers are not very much challenged to experiment with new approaches. Below there are some examples of teaching strategies used by different teachers:

- The Finnish-language teacher (who is also the vice principal) does a lot of self- and peer evaluation during lessons. For instance when the students write stories the teacher asks the students to read each others' stories and to evaluate their peers' work. Besides, the teacher also gives comments to the students. The pupils have guidelines on how to evaluate the stories from their peers. During oral presentations (which each student has to do at least once during the school year) all students have to fill in a feedback form about the presentation. The student that gives the presentation gets this feedback from his peers and gets time to read the feedback during the lesson. This Finnish language teacher also tries to communicate with each pupil at least once during the lesson, during whole class discussion, during self study time or at the end of the lesson. During our classroom observation the teacher asked questions about a text, to elicit communication. Students reacted spontaneously. However, not all students seemed involved in the activity.
- The math teacher uses a learning diary, where students note whether they did their homework. In this way she tries to make students feel responsible for their learning process. During our classroom observation the learning diary was checked by the teacher. One student had filled in

that he had not made his homework, but that did not result in any follow up. During her math lessons the teacher uses mainly whole class instruction. According to the math teacher, maths does not lend itself much for group work. In the chemistry and physics lessons she much more works with small groups.

- The art teachers use a portfolio, but only for those classes that specialised in visual art, not for the art lessons in the regular classes, because of lack of time. In the portfolio the students write about their work and about the process in creating a certain piece of art. One of the two teachers asks the students to give their mark, before she gives a mark. Both art teachers discuss students' work with the students a lot. They also encourage students to discuss each other's work. Sometimes work is discussed in the whole class. According to the teachers this is an important part of their lessons and it is important for the development of the personality of the students. Students like the art lessons a lot, according to the teachers. The criteria for a good piece of art are based on guidelines which are defined in the school syllabus and national curriculum guidelines. The teachers explain to the students what criteria and skills are central when they discuss a certain piece of art.
- The music and drama teacher co-operate a lot. These teachers (as did the art teachers) use a lot of feedback strategies in their work. The music teacher expressed it as follows: *'Students should learn how to give feedback to each other, because you need to be very careful about that. You need to create an atmosphere where students judge each other. Students also need to give reasons, grounds for their feedback. It should be critical but positive'*. There are no grades for these subjects.
- The drama teacher, who is also a Finnish language teacher, also pays a lot of attention to the written comments she gives on the students' writing. It is her experience that the students ask for such comments.
- The Foreign Language teacher says about herself that she gives too much instruction, because the subject requires that. *'In Foreign Language we have this burden on grammar, I can't let that go. This forces me to give them instruction. I could not be very creative. I try to give them options in the assignments they make for homework, they can choose then for themselves.'*
- The Physical Education teacher gives the student clear goals, they know what is expected from them. He considers team-work as an important goal of Physical Education. In his lessons it is important to work as a group, it is important that the students get well along, and that they work together as a group. *'When there are problems I stop the game and talk about it'*.
- The use of tests differs per teacher and subject. But the teachers all say that tests are important. As the teachers expressed in the interview: pupils want to show what they know, tests are important because they help pupils to focus on what they have to do. The teachers say *'They always compare themselves with the others. Tests motivate them. Then they make an effort'*. Each teacher makes his/her own test. According to the teachers the tests that are part of the textbook are not always useful. The teachers emphasise that it is important to give the students feedback (they do that in the form of a written mark), and to discuss the mistakes.

The students we interviewed expressed some criticism towards the school. According to the students the teachers should pay more attention to the motivation of students. They say that the attitudes of students will improve when the teacher is excited about his subject. Now some teachers are, but others not. According to the students not many teachers inform the students at the start of a course what they will do and what is expected from them. Most teachers in the school just start teaching. The students would

appreciate when more teachers would inform them about what is expected in a course. One of the students said that there is too much attention for learning through listening and viewing instead of learning by doing. The students also expect from teachers to be somewhat stricter towards students with behavioural problems. Now it is sometimes very noisy in classrooms. Teachers should do something about this. Children with behavioural problems are not always punished for their misbehaviour, while children without behavioural problems are punished when they have a bad day.

### *Assessment*

The term formative assessment is not known (and so also not used) at this school. The term continuing evaluation is a term that better reflects what the school is doing. Continuing evaluation is particularly referring to student self-evaluation, which focuses on the development process of the individual student. The development process of students is not only viewed from the perspective of academic skills, but particularly students' behaviour and attitude towards learning is considered important. The school participated in the review of assessment in 1995. This project followed the 1994 curriculum project.

#### *Student self-evaluation*

The evaluation of students' study habits started already in 1995. The current system for self-evaluation has been in place since 1999. The national curriculum required schools to focus also on the development process of the individual students, that was an important reason for Meilahti to elaborate the current system. The approach to self-evaluation was developed by one of the teachers of Meilahti, and implemented after discussion in the teacher meeting. The self-evaluation system is not so much related with ongoing assessment during lessons.

Four times per year, at the end of each course period the students are evaluated. Students get marks for knowledge, study habits and being active from each teacher of a course. Also the hours of absenteeism and being late are noted. Usually teachers discuss the marks they give with individual students. The school has a formal description what each mark means in the three domains. These descriptions are discussed at the teacher meeting, so there is a shared understanding among the teachers of what the marks mean.

During a course the students and teachers fill in a small questionnaire about their study habits. In grade 7 the questionnaire is about their study habits and well-being in school and class, in grade 8 about their study habits and their behaviour and in grade 9 about their study habits and their attitude towards learning. An example of the questionnaire for grade 7 is presented below.

***Self-evaluation of student habits after the first period in grade 7***

During this autumn my most important goal is:  
\_\_\_\_\_

I achieved my goal: well \_\_\_ pretty well \_\_\_ badly \_\_\_  
These issues influenced \_\_\_\_\_

I	
Work actively during lessons	
Make my home-work	
Remember to take books and all I need with me	
Follow good habits	
Be in time in lessons	
Attend regularly lessons	

G= good M= moderate T= trying and practice needed

Teacher comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
Marks: \_\_\_\_\_  
Something else: \_\_\_\_\_  
Teacher signature \_\_\_\_\_

Parents' comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
Parent's signature \_\_\_\_\_

In the beginning the evaluation was text-based, but this was too much work for teachers. Now 'marks' are given through a letter system: G (good), M (moderate), T (trying and practice needed). According to the teachers these student self evaluations are filled in by the students in a realistic way. The evaluations are communicated with the parents, who can comment on it. The self-evaluations are a basis for discussion about the development of the student, between home teacher, student and, when necessary, the parents.

Particularly the home teacher has to do a lot more work in the administration of the forms, and in communicating with the parents about the results. According to the teachers the forms provide the students with a lot of information. They think that it is important for the students. It helps the students to know how they are developing. One of the teachers said that the forms are a way to give feedback to the more quiet students. Usually the noisy students get feedback on their behaviour, but the others hardly ever. In the beginning, the students did not take it very seriously, but now everyone is used to filling out the forms. It is not so clear however how the information from the forms influences teaching practices.

The several teachers that were interviewed reacted different towards the forms. One of the Finnish teachers uses the form as a basis for discussion with the students about their progress. Most of the students are interested in their grades. She considers it useful. The Foreign language teacher on the other hand doesn't find the evaluation system very informative. The Physical Education teacher says that the questions do not very well reflect what physical education is about. Also the students differ in their opinions about the evaluation system. Some of them think that the evaluation forms are useful, but the scale should be more detailed. Other students think that they are useless. The feedback of the teacher is useful, but not so much that they have to fill it in.

According to the parents the evaluation forms are informative, particularly when your child does not tell much about school. It is easier to follow your child, not only their grades, but also how they are



studying. The impression of the parents is that students, particularly girls, tend to be critical towards themselves.

### *Evaluation of teachers*

Evaluation of the way teachers teach is also considered important in Meilahti. The principal discusses with each teacher about their teaching and observes lessons (once a year). As a result the principal sees across classes' themes and issues that have to be dealt with. For instance, how to handle bad behaving students. These themes are then discussed in the teachers' meeting.

### *Evaluation at school level*

Evaluation practices used at schools in Helsinki are based on the Evaluation Strategy for General Education for 2000–2003. Key surveys related to evaluation include learning to learn studies, evaluations of learning outcomes, the school health care survey and serviceability surveys. Helsinki schools are involved in the city, national and international evaluation studies. Each school's own curriculum determines the principles and practices for both evaluation of its own operations and pupil/student assessment. Plans for development and evaluation work and achievement of these plans are presented in the action plans and annual reports of individual schools.

One of the evaluation instruments of the Helsinki Board of Education are school audits. In a school audit a principal and some teachers from another school evaluate the school. The principal from Meilahti considers this as very good and educational, because not only your school and yourself as principal is evaluated, but you also evaluate other schools and principals. According to the principal '*you learn a lot from it*'. In October 2002 Meilahti was audited. The principal is also evaluated every four years by the Head of the general Education division of the Helsinki Board of Education. Part of the school audit is focused on the principal. The Helsinki Board of Education assigns tutors (other principals) to support the principal.

### *Creating conditions*

#### *School culture*

According to the teachers the school has an open atmosphere. One of the teachers expressed it as follows: 'We feel good to be here. There is a good positive atmosphere. The pupils are interested in learning, they succeed, they develop and that makes you happy'. The distance between teachers and pupils is good, as one of them said in the interview 'it's not too close and not too distant'. Also the students mention an easy relationship with their teachers. They appreciate that each student gets equal attention, which they did not always experience in elementary school, because in elementary only the more talented got a lot of attention. The parents we interviewed said that the school has a good reputation. They appreciate that the school is not only selecting the most ambitious children, but that they take a variety of children<sup>8</sup>. There is a very good and easy contact between the parents and the home teacher of the children. When there are any problems with children, either at home or in school, the parents or the home teacher easily contact each other (often through e-mail).

The principal acts for three years as a principal. She sees her main role in preserving the good reputation of the school by creating a good atmosphere for teachers and students.

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<sup>8</sup> Finnish schools do not have a selection system for comprehensive education. Usually students are going to the most nearby school. In schools - like Meilahti - which are specialised in certain subjects students can be selected, but only for the specialised classes. [

Teachers meet every week with the whole group of teachers. During a recent teacher meeting it was agreed that the main goal of the school is 'learning'. Social goals are secondary. Among other things, at the teacher meetings students are discussed with behavioural or learning problems. Teachers teaching the same subjects share informally among each other what they do in the lessons in the teacher room, where teachers teaching the same subject share a table. Only a few teachers teaching different subjects (for instance the music and the drama teacher) are co-operating. Teachers can take professional development courses if they wish to take them, as long as the resources allow. There are no special incentives to participate in professional development activities. Currently, due to budget cuts from the Helsinki Board of Education, it is more difficult to find financial resources for professional development.

### *Regulating the school and classroom environment*

Classes have a size of not more than 20 students, often less. It is expected that next year the class size will be bigger, because of the budget cuts of the Helsinki Board of Education. Each class has a home teacher that the class keeps till the ninth grade. Groups stay together, however teachers may change (except for the home teacher). All teachers appreciate the fact that a home teacher stays with a class during the whole school period, because in this way the home teacher gets to know the student very well. '*You see their development, in behaviour and in learning*', according to one of the teachers. Also the contact with the parents is much easier, because you know them for a long period of time.

Since 1999 the curriculum has consisted of four terms. Every term has a different schedule. In each period several courses are given. All subjects, the academic and the practical/ vocational subjects, are considered equally important. The new curriculum that will be implemented 2003 - 2006 is causing a lot of concern among the teachers, also in Meilahti, because it reduces the hours available for optional subjects in the upper comprehensive school curriculum. Currently the students have 4 hours per week for subjects related to visual arts. In the new system they will have only 3 hours per week. The new curriculum is seen as very demanding, leaving too little room for the process of learning. Particularly subjects like music, arts and practical subjects (like textile work) provide students with possibilities to demonstrate their capabilities (and not only their academic skills), for instance in a play, an art exhibition or a fashion show. The requirements for giving 'mark 8' (see also background information) is considered as very demanding by the teachers, because it is perceived as a higher level than what is currently expected from schools. According to the teachers, the present curriculum that has been implemented since 1994, schools have much more opportunities to determine how the curriculum and the grading system are organised.

### *How do we know it is working?*

The school has a good reputation, already for a long period of time. What is appreciated about the school is that the school takes care of the students. The teachers are interested in the development of children. Particularly the home teacher has an essential role in this respect, because whenever there are problems (academic or behavioural) he or she is the primary contact person for the student and his/her parents. It is very much appreciated by parents and students that also children with difficulties are welcome, which becomes very visible through the class of handicapped children as well as the presence of a 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Not all Finnish schools provide such possibilities. Particularly in the music and art classes a lot of attention is paid to development of the personality of the students. However, it is difficult to provide 'hard evidence' that the school and learning environment that is created in Meilahti, as well as the approach to self-evaluation is working. After all, the school is already operating in this way for quite some time.

### *Reflection*

Meilahti Upper Comprehensive reflects the importance that is attached to student development, that is so characteristic for the Finnish education system. It is an inner city school that has 'learning' as its main

goal. However, 'learning' in Meilahti is not limited to academic skills only, it also encompasses the development of other capabilities of the students, for instance in visual art. The self-evaluation system that is implemented in the school aims at contributing to providing means for students to take responsibility for their development. As such, the self-evaluation is more informative for the students and their parents than for the teaching practices of the teachers.

Some conditions that were created in Meilahti clearly contribute to realising a school where student development is considered important:

- Home teachers are important for the interaction between students, school and parents. Because home teachers follow a student for three years they become to know them very well.
- Students are challenged to develop themselves, particularly in the in the music and art lessons.
- The school is open to students with varying capabilities. Children, also with leaning difficulties are welcome; teachers and parents agree: the school cares for its students.
- Teaching is in relative small classes, so students can get a lot of attention.
- According to the teachers the school has had wise principals throughout the years, who focused on the creation of a good team spirit among the teachers.

## Conclusion

*Development* is one a of the core concepts of the Finnish education system. It refers to development of schools and to development of individuals (teachers and students) within the school. The focus on development implies that it is more important to *improve* than to *compare*. Development also entails that not only learning outcomes, but also the process that leads to learning is considered essential. Self-evaluation is perceived as an important instrument for contributing to development. Self-evaluation practices are applied not only for assessing the progress of individual students, but also for assessing progress of teachers and schools.

Development of students does not only refer to cognitive development, but also to the development of learning -to-learn skills (self- regulation) and to the social/emotional development of students. One of the key priorities of the student assessment system is to contribute to the individual development of students. Student self-evaluation is seen as a valuable assessment tool in this regard.

Schools develop their own approaches to student self-evaluation. In the two case study schools, forms were developed which were easy to fill out for students, easy to administer for teachers and easy to understand by parents. The most important function of the form was that it helped students, teachers and parents to reflect and discuss progress of the development of the individual student over time.

The two case study schools are typical schools for Finland. They differ in size and location, but similar schools could be found in many other parts of Finland. Student self-evaluation can be considered as an important formative assessment practice in Finnish schools. Next to the information gathered through student self-evaluations, teachers also base school report marks on summative tests made by teachers themselves. Finland does not have a system of standardized testing. The final school leaving certificate (at the end of compulsory education) and the formal exams at the end of the second stage of secondary general education have a summative nature. The final school leaving certificate is important for entering the second stage of secondary education, while the final exam at the end of the second stage of secondary education is important for entering higher education.

To some extent the focus on *development* not only has influenced student assessment practices, it also influenced the way teaching and learning is being organised. The two case study schools showed how teachers are searching for ways to attune teaching practices to students' needs and development. Formative assessment practices, such as feedback (from teachers and peers), diagnostic tests and interaction between peers were the strategies that teachers used. The Tikkakoski case study school clearly was very active in this area. From their point of view students need to be actively involved in their learning process in order to become responsible for it. Formative assessment, next to creating a safe learning environment, was important in Tikkakoski. Also the teachers at Tikkakoski were very committed to this approach. The Meilahti case study school was aiming at similar goals, but appeared less far in integrating formative strategies in teaching and learning.

In the new curriculum guidelines, criteria have been defined for student assessment and self-evaluation of schools. This new way of doing things has now lasted nearly four years. Teachers and principals have been in in-service training to acquire adequate competencies for realizing the new approaches to student assessment and self-evaluation. Throughout the country, self-evaluation practices are implemented, but it is not clear to what extent self-evaluation practices are integrated with formative strategies in teaching and learning.

## **Data collection**

### ***Tikkakosi Upper Comprehensive***

***Visit: April 22 - 23, 2003***

- Discussion with principal, throughout the visit;
- Interviews with classroom teachers in two groups (2+3);
- Interview with parent;
- Talk with students in a class + interview with five students from the student board;
- Interview with two representatives from the municipality;
- Background information prepared by the principal and handed out during the visit;
- Classroom observations in a technical work class (optional course), an arts class, maths, Finnish and English; part of the chemistry lab (optional course).

### ***Meilahti Upper Comprehensive***

***Visit: April 24-25, 2003***

- Discussion with principal and vice principal, and the math teacher (because she is in charge of the evaluation system)
- With teachers (fl, Finnish, special needs, sports), two art teachers, teachers of Finnish and math - in groups; and music drama/finnish. Textile work and art (same teacher)
- Parents (3) – from the school board

- Students 6 : 2 from grade 7, 4 from grade 9
- Some background information (some was in English but some in Finnish)
- Classroom observations math, Finnish, computer science, art (parts of the lessons were observed)
- Art exhibition, textile class, musical rehearsal

*National Board of Education*

*Visit: April 25, 2003*

- Counsellor of Education
- Staff