

Balancing Quality and Equity in Education: Finnish Education Experience and Implications

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Abstract: In the 21st century, rapid technological development and changes in the times have made international competition increasingly fierce. The Finnish education system has been highly regarded for its excellent quality of teaching, unique education concepts, and innovative education policies. Through comparative analyses of the Finnish education system, this study finds that the key to its success lies in its unique 'all-inclusive' education system, flexible and reasonable education policies, and comprehensive financial aid system. Compared with Finland, China's education is developing continuously, but there are still many problems. For example, unequal distribution of education resources, uneven quality of education, and poor implementation of education policies are still prevalent. Therefore, this study needs to draw inspiration from Finland's successful experience to further improve China's education system and policies. Taking into account the Finnish experience in reforming the education system, China can carry out education reform by upgrading the links between vocational and academic education, formulating reasonable and flexible education policies, and establishing a sound system of relevant student subsidies.

Keywords: Education System, Education Quality, Education Equity

1. Introduction

Since the Industrial Revolution, the world's science and technology have been developing rapidly, and education has gradually become an important means and way for countries to secure their international status and enhance their international competitiveness. The Western capitalist countries, led by the United States and the United Kingdom, gradually realized the important role of excellent scientific and technological talents for national development and social progress after the Industrial Revolution. Therefore, western countries began to gradually change their education structure and system, 'dual-track' education to achieve convergence is one of the most important parts of the reform of the education system in Western countries, which means that science education was once limited to the aristocracy gradually into the public education, laying the foundation for the cultivation of cutting-edge national talents.

With the development of the times, many developing countries and economically backward countries have also gradually realized the importance of education, and have been carrying out educational reforms from the top down, starting from the national level. However, education, as a subsystem of society, is subject to the constraints of the current social context while promoting socio-political, economic, and cultural progress, and the government may neglect the balanced distribution

of educational resources and opportunities to promote the improvement of the quality of education. Educational equity is the subordinate concept of 'fairness', and in the pursuit of educational equity, the state and relevant departments have coincidentally put elements such as equality, reasonableness, and balance into the evaluation criteria, in pursuit of the balanced development and coordination of educational resources and opportunities. However, in the process of actual policy implementation, due to the limitations of educational hardware and software resources, the actions of the relevant departments are likely to be relatively different from the expected results. For example, according to a World Bank survey in Nigeria, the country has promoted educational equity through a series of measures such as expanding the teaching force and helping to build schools in remote areas. However, the relevant departments in the process of policy implementation ignored the large number of teachers in demand resulting in the decline of the quality of teaching and learning [1]. The expansion of the Nigerian teaching force and the apparent enhancement of educational resources has not brought the true meaning of educational equity, and even once pulled down the quality of education in the country.

China's education reform is in the ascendant, although the start time is later than in Western countries, especially developed countries. But in recent years, China has never stopped improving the quality of education and promoting education equity. However, as the world's largest developing country, China still has many problems in education reform. The Finnish education system has been widely noticed and praised globally for its excellent education quality and fairness. Through the implementation of a series of innovative education policies and measures, the country has ensured a balanced distribution of education resources so that every student, regardless of his or her background, can receive a quality education. The success of the Finnish education reform has been demonstrated not only by the academic performance of students but also by their overall personal qualities and social adaptability. These achievements fully demonstrate Finland's outstanding leadership and practical wisdom in education. Therefore, it is of great significance to analyze and learn from the Finnish education reform experience to promote the quality, fairness, and balanced development of education in China.

2. Review: Ideas and Actions in Finnish Education

After the Second World War, Finland gradually embarked on a path of national development through education. Through the rapid development of education, Finland has evolved from a small country with limited land and few resources to a scientific and technological powerhouse that leads the world in several problematic scientific and technological fields and has achieved impressive results in international assessments such as PISA. Finland's excellent education system has achieved a balanced development of education quality and equity and has become one of the most important references for the reform of education systems around the world.

2.1. 'All-Inclusive' Education System

Education is the foundation and one of the most important parts of the cultivation of high-quality talents in a country, so an efficient and reasonable education system is crucial for the development of a country's education quality and education equity. The Finnish education system decentralizes education management, encourages all levels and sectors to develop reasonable education policies according to local conditions, and emphasizes the potential of individual student characteristics as well as high-quality education [2].

As shown in Figure 1, interconnectedness is one of the most distinctive features of the Finnish education system. In the Finnish education system, each subsystem is interconnected and there is no clear value gap between academic and technical talent. Therefore, students' choices of future directions are largely determined by their potential and habits, rather than by societal values. In

addition, the Finnish government ensures that students are not subject to unfair distribution of educational resources due to geographical differences through policy support and financial support, thus ensuring the greatest degree of equity in basic education [3].

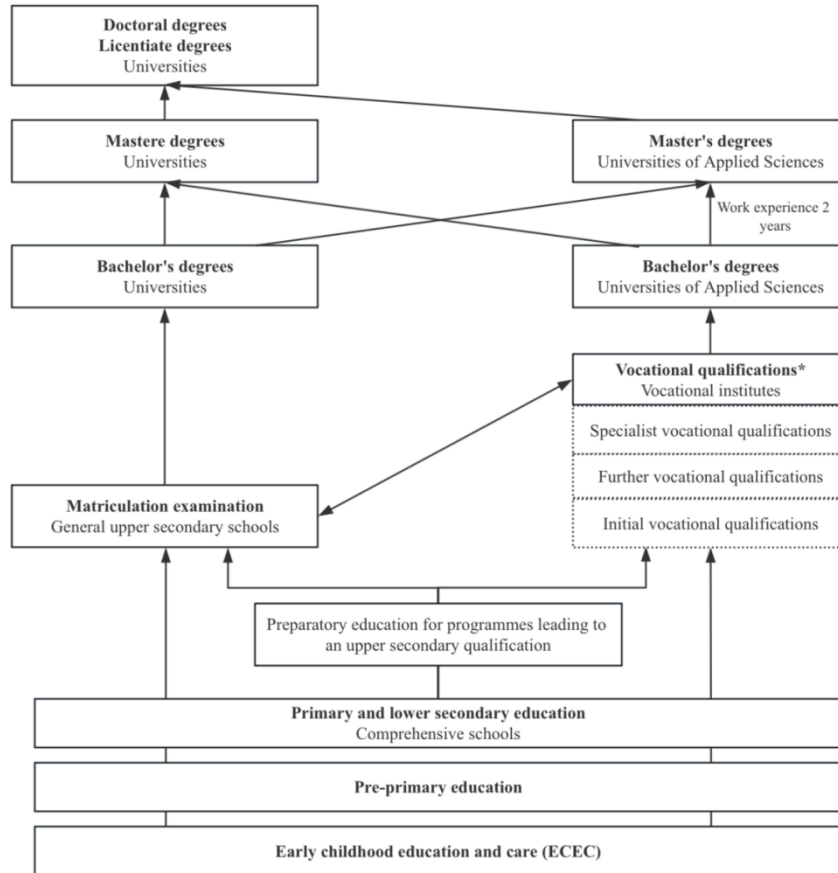


Figure 1: Finnish education system[4].

At the early childhood education stage, Finland has diversified educational institutions with diversified welfare benefits, which are tailored to the needs of young children in terms of their specialties, interests, and educational goals. In the field of education, the Government integrates early childhood education institutions according to the characteristics of the institutions and provides integrated services for children and parents. In the economic aspect, the Finnish government has formulated welfare policies for different family situations and stages of early childhood development and created a more equal growth environment for young children through the government's financial support [5]. Secondly, Finland requires that teachers in early childhood education must have a bachelor's degree or higher and have internship experience that passes a certain standard assessment, and strictly follows the government's requirement of low teacher-student ratios to ensure that every student can get equal educational resources in school [6]. Finally, the Finnish Education Guarantee Agency (FEGA) provides the 'Educare Model', which integrates education, care, and teaching, and develops curriculum programs from the perspective of national policy. The comprehensive education system and the national curriculum program have ensured the quality and fair development of Finnish early childhood education, as well as laid the foundation for the scientific and systematic nature of Finnish early childhood education.

At the basic education level, Finland has adopted uniform standards for school construction and strict control of class sizes, which means that every school, whether in urban or rural areas, follows

the same standards for buildings and facilities. This standardization ensures that students enjoy the same educational environment in different schools, thus eliminating the inequality in education brought about by geographical differences and guaranteeing that every student receives equal educational resources. In terms of curricula, Finnish basic education has adopted nationally developed core curricula for basic education. These curricula are designed to provide students with a comprehensive range of knowledge and skills, while at the same time focusing on the development of creativity and critical thinking. In addition, Finland encourages interdisciplinary teaching in schools to develop students' general qualities and adaptability.

In secondary education, higher education, and vocational education, Finland implements an education system that connects general education and vocational education, i.e., the pathway of academic talent training represented by general high schools and the pathway of technical talent training represented by vocational schools. The difference in value between academic and technical talents in Finland is not large, and students can choose the training path that suits them according to their situation [6]. Starting from secondary education, the Finnish education system is 'split', but the two tracks are interconnected. In addition, Finland guarantees a flexible examination mechanism, that is, students can set their personalized examination content. The Finnish university entrance examination is not held once a year, but students are allowed to take the examination more than once [7]. In addition, to the official examination, Finland has also set up a more perfect make-up examination and retake mechanism, through the relatively perfect examination mechanism to reduce the negative impact of paper scores on students' learning time.

2.2. Flexible and Reasonable Education Policies

The Finnish education policy emphasizes flexibility and sustainability, takes into account students' abilities and social resources, and establishes a system of education policy that is weak in competition, well implemented, and with a high degree of trust and collaboration between all parts of the education system, through the values and will of the people [8].

Flexibility and stability in Finnish schooling are combined to promote high quality in Finnish education through a localized approach while guaranteeing a fair distribution of educational resources. Finland's nine-year compulsory education system, children from the age of seven into basic education, homogenized teacher qualifications, and systematic and transparent education concepts and teaching practices to achieve the unity of the Finnish basic education system, and to promote educational equity [9]. In Finland, the relatively high status of teachers has made classroom education a popular specialty in university education. In Finland, one must have a master's degree to apply for a teacher education program and eventually become a teacher. In international comparisons, Finnish teacher education programs are characterized by their depth and breadth. In the course of the Finnish curriculum reform, the traditional mandatory training programs for teachers have gradually disappeared, and have been replaced by teacher-sponsored upgrading of competencies. Teachers and schools recognize the problems involved in teaching and learning as their problems to be solved, rather than transferring them to others. Teachers select solutions to classroom problems and ultimately solve them in the classroom through immediate classroom diagnosis.

Evaluation of teaching is an important indicator of teachers' ability to teach and students' learning, but the only external evaluation that occurs in the Finnish education system is the higher education entrance examination or Gaokao. The flexibility of the examination and the focus on internal evaluation give Finnish schools more autonomy in the curriculum process, allowing them to develop the right amount of time and education according to their realities. By avoiding a test-heavy atmosphere, Finland's teaching is more focused on improving students' knowledge and abilities than on evaluating the quality of education based on paper scores.

Finland's policy of flexibility and stability has not only ensured a balanced development of quality

and equity in education but has also increased the level of trust in Finnish education. Parents and society trust that Finnish schools and teachers have the competence and resources to ensure children's education, which is one of the main reasons for the freedom of the Finnish education system.

2.3. Comprehensive Financial Aid System

In addition to a sound system of the education system, Finland has a well-developed system of financial assistance to help students from weaker families to complete their studies. Central government expenditure on student financial assistance also includes costs incurred for student housing subsidies, student loan reimbursements for students completing higher education degrees, central government guarantees for student loans, school transport subsidies, and meal subsidies for higher education students [10]. Even in the early 1990s, when the Finnish economy was hit hard by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Finnish government still chose to sell some state-owned enterprises in exchange for sufficient funds to ensure adequate and stable government funding for public education [11].

In addition, Finland for students to apply for student loans and other programs also set up a certain compensation policy to reduce the pressure on students to repay (As shown in Table 1). Finland's emphasis on education is well reflected in the stability of financial inclination in education. In the context of the global economic impact caused by the 2019 epidemic, Finland's student loan compensation has not declined and has even been steadily increasing year after year, showing that Finland has not alleviated the impact of the epidemic on the national economy by compressing the proportion of education finance.

Table 1: Student loan reimbursement in Finland, 2016-2023 [12].

Time	Benefit	Recipients	Benefit paid out in EUR	EUR/recipient
2023	Student loan compensation	19,681	93,631,269	4,757.44
2022		18,666	87,810,806	4,704.32
2021		18,196	83,992,988	4,616.01
2020		15,275	67,332,328	4,408.01
2019		11,419	43,805,496	3,836.19
2018		8,642	28,289,627	3,273.50
2017		1,180	3,039,318	2,575.69
2016		41	58,775	1,433.54

In addition, according to data from the Finnish Ministry of Education, 4,600 persons received interest subsidies on student loans in the academic year 2022-2023. The number of recipients of interest subsidies paid by Kela has increased by about eight times compared to the previous academic year. The expenditure on interest subsidies has increased more than 20 times compared to the previous academic year. The total expenditure on interest subsidies amounted to EUR 1.2 million, whereas the interest subsidies paid in the previous academic year amounted to approximately EUR 55,000 [13]. In the academic year 2022-2023, a total of about 290,100 students received financial aid. At the end of the academic year, there were 524,900 student loans with an average of €11,329 in student loans. At the end of 2022, the principal amount of state-guaranteed student loans was EUR 5.7 billion [13]. Finland's comprehensive and well-developed student loan system has helped children from

disadvantaged segments of Finnish society to be able to gain equal access to educational resources, thus contributing significantly to the development of educational equity.

3. Suggestion

There is a huge difference in value between academic and educational talents in China's education system, and due to the unbalanced development of urban and rural areas, there are large differences in the level of educational resources between schools. Especially in the context of higher education as an important way to cross social classes, Chinese students are often blind in their choice of development paths. China can pay attention to the establishment and improvement of the education system, promote the connection between the various sub-systems of the education system, and narrow the value gap. Improve the education system and realize the interconnectedness and symbiosis between the sub-systems within the education system.

First, strengthen the connectivity between education systems. China's current promotion to higher education takes the form of an admissions test to conduct a standardized single evaluation of students. Although this approach ensures the relative fairness of education to a certain extent, it fails to meet the needs of students' choices for education and school professions for talent selection [2]. First of all, China can improve the subject selection system of the college entrance examination. At this stage, after the reform of the new college entrance examination, China has begun to gradually liberalize the students' subject selection system, and students can make personalized choices of subjects for the college entrance examination according to their situation, but the starting point of most students for the selection of subjects for the college entrance examination is still the higher scores of the college entrance examination instead of the more suitable direction for their development. Secondly, the college entrance examination needs to be enriched with a mechanism for making up and retaking the examination. Compared to the Finnish system of multiple entrance examinations, the Chinese college entrance examination, as one of the most important ways to select students for higher education, offers only one opportunity to participate in the examination each year. When the training of students' minds and the improvement of their abilities conflict with the scores of the college entrance exam, they tend to sacrifice the former for the latter.

Second, China needs to focus on the balanced development of teacher quality and the equal distribution of educational resources. At present, the teaching ability of teachers at all levels and in all types of educational institutions in China is uneven. Teachers' teaching ability is one of the most important parts of educational resources, and lagging in teacher quality not only seriously affects the quality of education, but also poses a great obstacle to the development of educational equity in China. Firstly, the entry threshold of teachers can be raised, and teachers should have a certain degree of accumulation of knowledge and teaching ability in their field before entering the training related to education knowledge. At the same time, the training and professional development of in-service teachers could be strengthened. Schools and relevant departments can provide ongoing professional support and resources to help frontline teachers continuously update their educational philosophy and teaching methods, to improve the quality and equity of education.

Third, establish a sound education policy at the national level. China is and will be in the primary stage of socialism for a long time, so the huge economic differences between regions are one of the important problems that China needs to face in the development of education equity. Through financial favoritism and policy support, the government can help children of socially disadvantaged groups to be able to break social class limitations, guarantee the equal distribution of educational resources, and thus promote the fair development of education in the country.

4. Conclusion

In the wave of rapid development of modern education, the development of China's education system faces many difficulties, especially in the coordinated development of education equity and education quality. With the rapid development of education in the world, the cultivation of front-end scientific and technological talents has become one of the important focuses of countries around the world. This study analyses the typical characteristics of the reformed Finnish education system in promoting the development of education quality and equity and proposes corresponding support strategies for the focus and solutions of China's education reform at this stage from various perspectives.

In exploring the excellence of Finnish education, this paper analyses the three perspectives of the education system, education policy, and student support system. In the education system, Finland's 'all-encompassing' education system allows Finnish students to have the right to re-select at every stage of education, and due to the Finnish society's equal treatment of technical and academic talents, Finnish students do not think that becoming a technical talent is a choice that has to be made; in the education policy, Finland's diverse examination system and the importance of practical education. In the education policy, Finland to diversify the examination system and pay attention to the actual teaching effect of the education environment, the maximum degree of education to avoid formality, and enhance the society for Finnish education of the degree of trust; in the financial aid system, Finland has a sound and perfect system of financial aid, through the financial inclination, financial assistance and other ways to reduce the objective factors for students to receive the differences between the education and to further promote educational fairness.

China's education is in a critical period of prosperity. In recent years, China has gradually realized the importance of education quality and fair and balanced development of education for the cultivation of top-notch talents and has therefore begun to gradually develop education. However, due to the limitations of China's basic national conditions, there are still many problems to be solved in China's education development. As the world's largest developing country, China can better promote the development of education in China with the help of the reform of the Finnish education system. The report combines the results of the Finnish education system reform with China's national conditions to conduct an in-depth study of education in China and concludes that China should reform its education system, improve its education policies, and promote financial assistance to promote fair and balanced development of education in China. This study focuses on the analysis of the Finnish education system and system, but the analysis of the current situation of China's education system is a bit insufficient, and it should be followed by an in-depth study of the specific implementation of China's education and the difficulties, combined with the experience of foreign education reform.

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