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THE FINNISH NATIONAL CORE CURRICULUM: STRUCTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

The national core curriculum as a means for enabling and managing educational change has an important development role in the Finnish school system. In Finland, the national core curriculum is a framework around which local curricula are designed. The national core curriculum contains the objectives and core contents of teaching for all school subjects, and also describes the mission, values, and structure of education. It describes the conception of learning and goals for developing the learning environment, school culture and working methods. This gives the core curriculum a dual role: on one hand it is an administrative steering document, on the other a tool for teachers to develop their own pedagogical praxis. In Finland, development of the core curriculum through a process of collaboration between national and local authorities is a highly developed practice. This has afforded a shift in the focus of curriculum development towards the structure of the curriculum and its pedagogical functionality.

Keywords: curriculum system, curriculum design, curriculum development

MAIN FEATURES OF THE CURRENT CURRICULUM SYSTEM IN FINLAND

In this article, we will introduce the main features of the Finnish national core curriculum for basic education: its essence, structure and implementation. We will also explore current challenges in the curriculum's functionality, and new directions for its continuing development.

The core curriculum has an important role in the Finnish system of school development as a means for enabling and managing educational change. The changes in society and its values will not be able to establish a constant position in schools, if they do not permeate the curriculum. The curriculum is essential to every educational reform: innovations in science, technology and education will only bear fruit if they are embedded in curriculum guidance. We argue that this is the only way that they can especially reach teachers and all the other important educational actors.

The current curriculum system in Finland is based on three essential ideas:

- management by goals given in legislation and in the national core curriculum
- autonomy of municipal authorities in providing and organizing education: local curriculum as a steering document at local level
- utilization of teachers as valued experts who develop the school-based curriculum as a source for different approaches to schoolwork (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2011).

In Finland, the national core curriculum is a framework for making local curricula. It determines a common structure and basic guidelines that the local curriculum makers, school officials and teachers, use in order to build a local, context driven curriculum. The National Core Curriculum has two parts. It includes the objectives and core contents of teaching for all school subjects, also describes the mission, values, and structure of education. It also describes the conception of learning and goals for developing the learning environment, school culture and working methods (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2011). This gives the core curriculum a dual role: on one hand it is an administrative steering document, on the other a tool for teachers to develop their own pedagogical praxis. This dual role makes the development of the curriculum structure challenging.

The Finnish national core curriculum is a fairly new invention, which has only been in place for the past forty years. Before 1970 Finland had two parallel education systems, which placed children on different educational routes at an early age. This division had a strong connection to the socio-economical background of the children and resulted in inequality of learning opportunities and an achievement gap between different groups. A long politically heated debate preceded the 1968 Basic Education Act, which stated that all children should attend the same school for the first nine years of education. The foundation for Finnish basic education was born. The national implementation of this comprehensive school reform began in 1972 in the northern parts of Finland. By 1976 the reform had reached the municipalities in the southern parts of the country (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2010).

The first national curriculum was published in 1970 and it was a strongly centralized document. The curriculum was first reformed in 1985 after the 1983 Basic Education Act, and a direction to decentralization and teacher autonomy was set. Before 1985 streaming was the usual practice in schools, a vestige from the time of two parallel education systems. The curriculum reform discontinued this practice and set higher standards for all students. Municipalities were given more decision-making powers, and individual student needs became the focus point of education.

The decentralization process continued during the 1990s. The curriculum reform of 1994 gave the municipalities' local authorities a large degree of autonomy. The rights of local authorities were set in the steering system. Previously all textbooks had been inspected, and schools were regularly visited by school inspectors, but these practices were abolished. Being the primary educational provider, municipalities were given the right to freely determine how they wished to use state provided financial grants. Local authorities received autonomy to organize schools, education process and funding. School based decision-making became a central part of formulating curriculum.

In 1998 a total reform of educational legislation followed. The emphasis was set on goals, pupil rights and duties (OPH 2010). Evaluation was emphasized: thematic reviews and national testing was put in place. This testing was based on sampling and its purpose was to obtain an idea of national learning outcomes. However, there has never been a comprehensive national testing system for all students. The 2004 curriculum reform was consequently more centralized. The national core curriculum is a normative document, which emphasizes national decision-making and narrows down differences in local implementation. Also, for the first time, national criteria for student assessment were introduced (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2004).

Currently, the debate on the future of the national core curriculum is focused on its educational aims and pedagogical elements. The challenge of the contemporary curriculum is that it needs to correspond to the evolving conceptions of knowledge and learning. Thus the curriculum must be restructured so that it supports the learning process of 21st century learners. This can be achieved with a better implementation of interdisciplinary pedagogy and higher skills in the curriculum.

The steering system of basic education

The core curriculum of basic education in Finland cannot be discussed without discussing the steering system behind it. The curriculum is an educational tool shaped by the decision making of many different administrative levels. Firstly, the curriculum functions as a part of the steering system of education. Secondly, it has a pedagogical function, serving as a guiding document for educators, especially for the teachers themselves.

The steering system of basic education has multiple hierarchical levels. The foundation of the Finnish educational steering system is the Basic Education Act and decrees. The Council of State determines the general goals of education and the time allocations for various subjects. The National Board of Education develops the national curriculum, which outlines the local curricula. (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2006). In Finland education providers form their own local curriculum. This might be a joint curriculum for all schools in the municipality area or schools might form their own curricula, which are then approved by the school officials of the municipality. Municipalities and schools are granted great autonomy in organizing education and implementing the core curriculum. (Halinen and Järvinen, 2008). This is to ensure freedom to make individual choices based on the local

needs of different schools, with the core curriculum serving as a common national basis. Local decision-making is also seen as a means of increasing local officials' and teachers' commitment to the implementation of the curriculum. Their active involvement in the process and therefore their ownership of the curriculum is reinforced by the autonomy and freedom they are afforded.

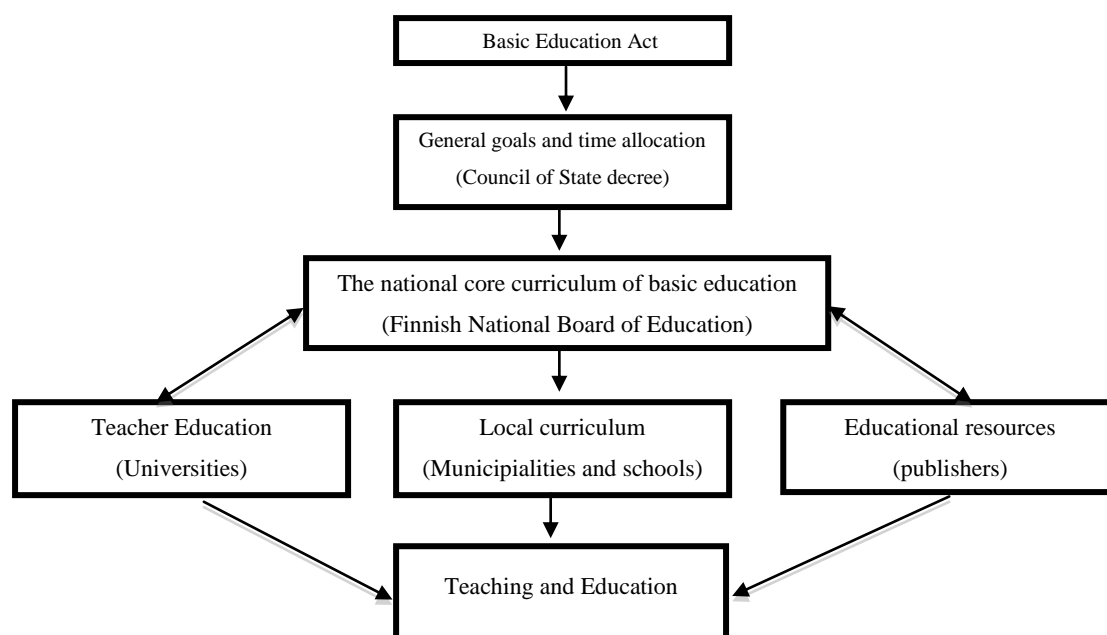


Figure 1: The Steering System of Basic Education.

In addition to the curriculum, educational recourses shape teaching and education in schools (Uusikylä and Kansanen, 1988). Textbooks and other materials produced by private publishers have a strong effect on teaching and learning (Heinonen, 2005). In Finland textbooks and other learning materials are not authorized by the government. Previously, the National Board of Education approved all textbooks, but now private publishers independently interpret curricula into educational recourses. This is the only aspect of the educational steering system, which is not governed or financed by a public organization.

The curriculum process is a product of the steering system. When the national core curriculum finally reaches local authorities it has gone through several levels of administrative work. The process of making the national core curriculum is a democratically structured and hierarchical one. Still, this is not a process purely governed by administrators. Educational professionals, parents and a wide range of society interest groups are consulted and their views are taken into account in the process. In recent reforms (in 1994 and 2004) the Finnish national core curriculum has been the result of a cooperative effort between a broad network of administrators, unions, education providers and schools. Network collaboration has been a means of increasing the ownership of education providers and schools in the curriculum process. This consensus policy has been a successful effort. Finland has well functioning practices and a strong working tradition of reforming curricula, and this is seen through the involved curriculum process. Developing and establishing structures for collaboration has been a central part of this. Collaboration between national curriculum authorities and local administrators has been a functioning practice for several decades.

Development of the curriculum through a process of collaboration between national and local authorities is already a highly developed practice. This has afforded a shift in the focus of curriculum development towards the structure of the curriculum and its pedagogical functionality, areas that affect the organization of the curriculum process both locally and nationally. In the past, curriculum design was mainly based on the work of subject specialist groups, which in part has led to the fragmentation of the national curriculum. A lack of a clear set of shared approaches to reach educational aims has been a characterizing quality of the national core curriculum. Next, our focus will be on the challenges of curriculum structure and curriculum development.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE FINNISH NATIONAL CURRICULUM

The functions of Finnish curriculum

As an educational steering document the Finnish curriculum has three main functions. It is:

1. AN ADMINISTRATIVE DOCUMENT

- Part of the national steering system of education
- Part of international co-operation and development

2. AN INTELLECTUAL DOCUMENT

- Defines and recreates knowledge that is culturally significant
- Reveals current conceptions of knowledge

3. A PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENT

- A tool for teachers
- Provides pedagogical advice and support
- Sets guidelines for teaching and learning

It is obvious that the Finnish national core curriculum (2004) is a document that gives firm guidance. This is justified by the need for national unity, equity, and the basic right to education (The Finnish National Board of Education, 2006). The national curriculum has been a means of distributing clearer guidance on a national level. It follows that the curriculum has become more precise and detailed. All central aspects of teaching and education, including guiding principles and central content, have been explicitly defined.

As an administrative document, the curriculum has a strong judicial remit. The founding of the Finnish comprehensive school in the 1970s was based on the idea of equality. The whole nation is entitled to quality basic education. This principle has guided school development ever since. The aim has been that regardless of where you live, everyone is entitled to have the same education (Lampinen, 1998; Somerkivi, 1982). This requirement for equality has set clear directions for national curriculum development. As part of the steering system of education the national curriculum has been precisely aimed at building equal comprehensive schools throughout the nation. This has meant that in practice the curriculum has been controlled through a centralized system of administrators. This centralized control has been strong in the last decades, apart from a short neoliberal sprint in the 1990s, when schools were given the liberty to determine their curricula quite freely (Volanen, 2001). The current curriculum encompasses both a strong idea of individuality and pedagogical freedom, and the need for equal basic education that requires a strong centrally controlled curriculum.

In addition to its pedagogical function the national curriculum also has an intellectual function (Antikainen et al., 2003). There is a specific understanding of knowledge and learning embedded in the curriculum, and this is largely unquestioned. This understanding defines what is culturally important. In recent years technological innovations have revolutionized the meaning of information and knowledge for society and its citizens. Hence knowledge, which is deemed culturally valuable, has also undergone a profound change, but the national curriculum has yet to follow.

In Finland, the current approach for organizing teaching and learning is clearly subject-based, which means that the national core curriculum defines general aims, contents and specific assessment criteria for each school subject separately. The Finnish curriculum is highly academic in nature, which is illustrated by the fact that there are 18 different subjects included in it. The continual increase in subject contents in the curriculum has led to a justified criticism of the curriculum being too information-oriented and fragmented (Sulonen et al., 2010).

The curriculum, at its core, functions as a pedagogical guiding document (Vitikka, 2004). The curriculum entails assumptions and expressions of knowledge and skills, learning and the learning environment, as well as different work practices. It determines the aims and assessment criteria of learning, which form the bases of the teaching process. New directions in research and educational

innovation are filtered into teaching and learning through curriculum development. The curriculum is a way of distributing information concerning the latest perspectives on teaching, learning and guiding the learning process of pupils. It is a tool for developing teachers' pedagogical thinking and forming their own pedagogical praxis. The curriculum is also the basis of the school community's shared understanding of how content should be organized and what pedagogical devices are necessary in order to reach educational aims. This may seem to be conflict with teachers' pedagogical freedoms, yet the opposite is true. At best the curriculum provides teachers and school communities with tools to build and renew pedagogical practices (Vitikka & Krokfors, 2010).

The pedagogical and ideological background of Finnish curriculum design

As part of the national steering system of basic education, the design of the curriculum defines and frames the content and pedagogy in basic education. When designing curricula, choices have to be made between the different elements. The essential difference in curriculum design is the relationship between aims and content. This relationship shapes the curriculum as a whole. From a historical perspective, the essence of the Finnish curriculum can be traced to two very different didactic schools, much like the curricula of other Nordic countries and Germany (Autio, 2002, 2006; Gudem & Hopman, 1998; Kansanen, 1990; Malinen, 1977). Firstly, the Finnish curriculum owes much to German didactics and the so-called Herbart-approach. This school of thought with its concept of "Lehrplan" was introduced into Finnish discussion in the early 1930s (Kansanen 1990, 1995; Siljander 2002). The Herbart school focused on content as the centre of teaching and learning, which led to a subject-based approach to education. Secondly the North American school of thought affected the Finnish curriculum in the 1960s by bringing Dewey and his concept of curriculum into the Finnish educational literature. This view of curriculum stated that the curriculum should be organized around more child centred and comprehensive goals, and mere subject matter could not be the centre of learning when organizing the learning experiences of younger children.

The introduction of curriculum thinking happened at a time when the content of the Finnish curriculum was deemed in need of reform (Kansanen, 1990). It followed that the curriculum-perspective inspired wide discussion of the content of education and the social meaning of schooling. Instead of teaching and content, learning became the focal point of education. This meant, that in addition to subject specific goals, the curriculum also included wider learning goals, i.e., learning outcomes. Still today, this dual structure is the basis of Finnish curriculum design.

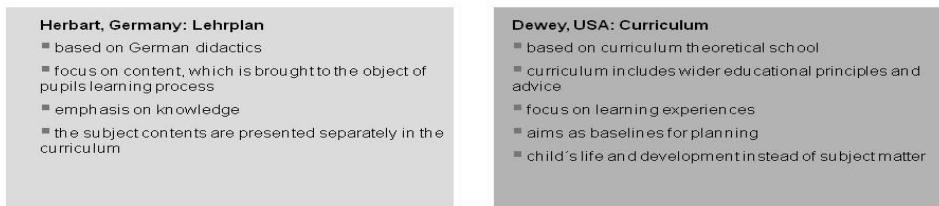


Figure 2. Two traditions of the curriculum.

In practice the dual structure has become a discussion about integrated curricula and subject-based curricula. Maybe because of our parallel tradition of schooling before comprehensive school, curriculum reform in Finland has always been a debate about whether the core curriculum should be subject oriented or a more integrated view on teaching and learning. This balance between two different traditions is also at the centre of curriculum design internationally (Eisner, 1975). When writing a curriculum the result is always a compromise between subject sciences and student needs.

The latest shift in curriculum development has been the redefinition of educational aims from fragmented subjects towards competences (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010). Traditionally the Finnish curriculum design for comprehensive school has represented a subject-based approach, but the exponential increase of knowledge, the ever more prominent role of technology, and social changes have created a demand for new kinds of skills. Future curriculum reforms must take these new conditions into account.

The role of competencies and skills as the central aims of the curriculum is at the heart of curriculum development. Curriculum design is always based on certain ideologies, which define teaching and learning. Saylor & Alexander (1981) introduce one possible ideological division. They suggest that curricula can be divided into four basic designs that each reflects a unique ideology (Saylor et al, 1981; McKernan, 2008; McNeil, 1985; Schiro, 2008). In the field of curriculum design these types rarely exist as such, rather they characterize the principal idea, which the curriculum is based on.

Table 1: Curriculum designs according to Saylor (1981).

Curriculum design	Subject matter/disciplines	Specific Competencies	Social Functions	Individual needs and interests
Source for goals and objectives	Subject matter to be learned	Competencies to be acquired	Needs of society	Needs and interests of the learner

In subject-based curricula the bases for aims and content come from the discipline, therefore mastering the subject specific content becomes the central goal of learning (Pinar, 1995; McKernan, 2008). The competence-based curriculum highlights skills and competences deemed central by society. The curriculum defines the skills and knowledge needed to attain these competences, which are also the bases for forming aims and content. (Saylor et al, 1981). The aims and content of a curriculum based on social functions are determined by social needs and problems. Socially relevant issues always find their way into the curriculum, one way or the other (Kansanen, 2004a; Saylor, 1981). The learner-centred curriculum is about the needs of individual learners, which defines its content and aims. The learner-centred curriculum includes information on the interests and needs of certain age groups, as

well as individual students (Saylor, 1981).

The subject-based curriculum stresses both the aims and content that are associated with disciplines, whereas the competence-based curriculum is structured primarily on skills, making discipline content and aims secondary. Moving from a subject-based curriculum to a competence-based curriculum requires changes to be made throughout the whole education system, most notably to teacher education.

The need for Coherence between Aims, Contents and Practices

As we have previously stated in this article, the Finnish curriculum is seen not only as a national steering instrument, but also a pedagogical tool, a direction towards which the curriculum is also continuously developing. The curriculum's part in school development is dependent on the meaning teachers give to it as a regulator of their work. In Finland, one goal of the curriculum reforms has been to change teachers' curriculum thinking and deepen their commitment to it. The meaning of a curriculum in teaching and school pedagogy has not always been self-evident (Kosunen, 1994). Teachers need clearer guidance on how to plan and develop teaching in line with educational goals. The curriculum should be a meaningful, relevant and a clear entirety that supports teachers' work, and provide space for students and teachers to develop their own pedagogy.

The curriculum is meant to function as a teachers' tool and thus it is essential that it is coherent, whatever its design or pedagogical background. In a curriculum, like in any plan, the goals, substance and details of the action must be clear (Foshay, 2000). In Finnish curriculum thinking, the structure of the curriculum, has traditionally, been understood as a one-dimensional chronological text comprised of separate elements. Subject matter is perceived as separate sections, even as kinds of miniature curricula within the curriculum. In Finnish curriculum development there is an on-going debate about the need for structuring the national core curriculum as a coherent model where each dimension of teaching is in balance. It is a challenge to write the curriculum so that educational starting points permeate the subject matter systematically. This is a challenge with which we have yet to succeed.

Instead of a chronological construct made of separate elements, the curriculum must be viewed as a three-dimensional matrix (Foshay, 2000) or as a cube that brings the different levels and aspects of the curriculum together and depicts them as one entity. The curriculum is easier to comprehend through this three-dimensional model, which highlights the unique shape and function of different sections. This meta-level structure can, at its best, create a common base for curriculum thinking and the central concepts of the curriculum.

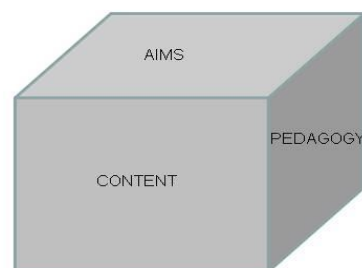


Figure 3: The curriculum as a whole: aims, content and pedagogy.

The cube model depicts the three central aspects of curriculum: aims, content and practice. Formal education always has certain aims, content and a clear form. Curriculum development is actually the act of redefining these three basic elements (Bernstein, 1975). Curriculum development must focus systematically on all three aspects in order to create a balanced reform. The relationship between aims, contents and pedagogical principles needs to be clear in order to create an inner coherence in a curriculum. This applies, not only to the relationship between the educational starting points and subjects, but also to coherence between and within subjects. In order to broaden curriculum thinking, it is necessary to perceive a curriculum as a framework that binds aims, content and pedagogy into a seamless whole. The systematic organization and depiction of these elements would enable inner and outer integrity in school education.

THE FINNISH CURRICULUM IN AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

A national curriculum in its essence is a means of social and cultural reproduction (Lundgren, 2006), and as such cannot be taken out of the national context it is applied to. Each country has its own cultural identity, value system and educational content that are deemed valuable, even irreplaceable. This cultural content is transferred to the next generations as a self-evident part of education. National curricula both pass on this cultural knowledge and reinvent it. These cultural values determine the functions of a curriculum.

No curriculum can be developed in a void. In recent years it seems that curricula have not only been shaped by national culture, but more and more by global discussion and comparisons. The interest in global evaluation of schooling, such as PISA, has been based on a notion that there is a best practice that can be copied and transferred to different cultural contexts. Curriculum study has not received much attention in these comparative studies, yet the curriculum is a fundamental guiding document and a central part of the steering system of education. In reality there is no single best educational system or curriculum model that automatically results in higher student learning. The curricula of the most successful PISA countries differ largely in content and design (Anderson-Levitt, 2008). Still there are common factors to be found (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

There are two central, globally shared directions curricula seem to be developing to; national curricula are at the same time beginning to resemble one another more and at the same time to differentiate from each other. It seems that the matter of subject, content and skills is globally agreed on, and when different curricula are compared it can be seen that they are developing in the same direction (Vitikka & Hurmerinta, 2011). At the same time, curricula are differentiating in the implementation of their most central function, guidance. When searching for success stories or best practices, this might be the one thing that can “make or break” curricula.

The subjects taught in schools are widely agreed on globally (Vitikka & Hurmerinta, 2011). Historically, languages, mathematics and social studies have been part of the ‘global-curricula’ since the beginning of the 20th century. Time allocation and central content in these subjects entail remarkably little variation. Art and physical education became common after the Second World War and the natural sciences boomed in the 70’s and 80’s. (Meyer, Kamens & Benavot, 1992).

Subjects and subject content is not the only bridge between different curricula. In recent years a growing trend is to focus on the different skills global citizens require. In Anglo-American countries basic skills have been objects of discussion since the 1970s (Franklin and Johnson, 2008). Basic skills include reading, writing and mathematics, i.e. literacy and numeracy. In recent years this thinking has been taken further. The trend seems to be that the curriculum should entail practical skills and higher skills, such as the skills of thinking and application. The quality of these higher skills is widely agreed upon (Vitikka & Hurmerinta, 2011).

It seems that the pedagogical functions of the curriculum contain most national and local variation (Vitikka & Hurmerinta, 2011). *Curriculum guidance* is multiform in different curricula and is based on cultural knowledge, national educational policy and tradition. Questions of teacher autonomy vary between countries. Finland is known for its high level teacher education and teachers are trusted

educational professionals who play a central role in curriculum development. This has meant that teachers have been awarded pedagogical freedom in choosing their materials and methods, and curriculum guidance has been more focused on content and aims.

Student assessment often seems to be a source of controversy in curriculum development. Globally, student assessment is a question between teacher autonomy and external evaluation: nationally standardized tests are widely in use as evaluative tools in many countries seeking to fortify national control. The common factor between successful PISA countries, such as Finland, Singapore and South Korea, is that they do not use standardized tests to stream their students in a way that limits their access to secondary education (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In Finland national testing is only used as a diagnostic tool, and has no implications for individual students or teachers.

Student assessment in a curriculum can be viewed as two-dimensional. On one hand the curriculum defines the principles and pedagogy of assessment, on the other hand it defines standards, which are the assessment criteria for learning outcomes. In Finland the emphasis is on the pedagogy of assessment. Standards were first introduced in the latest national core curriculum (POPS, 2004) and they are still loose when compared to those of other nations (Vitikka & Hurmerinta, 2011).

The rationalization of international comparative studies has been to find the best possible curriculum – yet the idea of a universal curriculum has been generally rejected. A national curriculum is a deeply national and cultural interpretation of knowledge, learning and education and as such cannot be transferred to another cultural context. Therefore the greatest gain in comparing well functioning curricula lies in the development of national curriculum thinking. Different models and new interpretations can produce meaningful national innovations. Global collaboration and discussion can produce shared development and progress.

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