

THE COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM AND PUBLIC LIBRARY USE IN FINLAND 1972–1977: A METHODOLOGICAL EXPERIMENT

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The article is a preliminary report of a research project that is still going on. The specific goal of the research was to see whether the comprehensive school reform in Finland in the years 1972–1977 had a positive influence on the use of Finnish public libraries. A more general interest was to find an additional proof for the supposition that a high level of education enhances public library use. The comprehensive school reform meant a dramatic rise in the quality of the Finnish basic education. The data were obtained from the Finnish public library statistics. The study follows how the number of home loans per capita changed during the years when a comprehensive school reform was being implemented in different regions of Finland. The findings are preliminary and subject to the further processing and refinement. The results show, however, that there may have been a positive influence of the comprehensive school reform on the use of libraries. Further studies are necessary to make the results more reliable.

Key words: library history, educational reform, schools, public libraries, library use, Finland.

INTRODUCTION

This is a report of a research project that is not finished. The reader, hopefully, will not judge it too harshly for its sketchy character. The author wishes to deliver a report of the project at this premature stage in hope to get feedback and information about potential other situations similar to what is described in this article.

It is a common supposition that the higher the level of school education, the more active is the use of public libraries and

the more books circulate [1; 6]. Some of the natural factors that come to mind when we talk about how the rising level of school education may increase library use are the following. Parents with good education are intellectually active using the libraries and leading their children into the libraries as well. As the number of pupils that get intellectual stimulation in schools increases, it is natural to assume that they use the library for their homework and also read more individually. The higher the competence of the teachers, the more they can inspire their

pupils to read. As societies invest in the high standard of schools, it is probable that they invest also in public libraries. When there is a positive attitude towards schooling among the population, it is natural to expect that even libraries thrive. Public libraries and schools are, after all, sharing the same ideology: to enhance the general availability of educational possibilities.

It is not easy to measure exactly what features affect library use. In a Finnish statistical study from the 1980s, in which numerous demographic, institutional and financial features were analyzed, only a couple of features were found to enhance library use. The most important feature that correlated positively with book circulation was the amount of money the municipalities invested into their libraries. Money makes wonders, after all. This factor, but not as strongly, was followed by the presence of professional and full-time staff. The high level of educational facilities in a municipality seemed to have some effect [2].

THE POSITIVE EFFECT OF EDUCATION

It is not easy to determine exactly the overall effect of libraries and other cultural activities on society at large, because in economic terms they are a marginal factor, but it is also difficult to measure the positive effect of school education, even if we intuitively see that it is important. There are so many factors at play at the same time that it is difficult to discern the effect of an individual factor, even if it is the question of an institution

attended by all members of society during their lifetime.

The educational history of Finland, however, offers a possibility to determine in exact figures the effect of a reform in the school system. Until the end of the 1960s, the Finnish school system resembled that of many other countries. It was a two-track system after the primary or "folk school" that was meant for all children (until the age of about 11 years). During the fourth or the fifth year of the primary school, the children (or their parents) had to decide whether to apply for admission in a secondary school, which was reserved for those who aimed at higher studies, or to stay a couple of years still in the primary school, after which they could go into a vocational school or directly into work life. To make such an important decision at a low age often meant that talented children did not go into the secondary school. The parents' class position and profession had a strong weight when children were making the choice. Traditional roles were not easily broken.

During the 1970s, a comprehensive school system was implemented in Finland. The same reform had been done in our neighboring Scandinavian countries many years earlier. A 9-year free comprehensive school, a combination of primary and lower secondary school, became compulsory for all children. The curriculum was ambitious. The variety of subjects became greater than in the old primary school. There was more science, mathematics and languages in the curriculum, e.g., at least two foreign langu-

ages for all, and on top of that all children had to study the other of the national languages, Swedish or Finnish. After nine years in the comprehensive school, there was either a three-year gymnasium (upper secondary school) or a vocational school, both optional.

The reform was realized in six years (1972–1977). The implementation was started in Lapland, the northernmost region of the country. After that, the new system was gradually implemented in the rest of the country, region by region towards the south. The last region in which the system was implemented was Helsinki, the capital. The process meant that Finland became a huge social laboratory in which the old and the new school systems were functioning side by side. It is possible to follow the effects of the reform because of its gradual implementation. It would be much more difficult to discern the effects of the reform, if it had been implemented in the whole country at the same time.

This quasi-experimental situation was used by a group of Finnish public economists to determine the effect of the educational reform on the level of earnings of Finns, thus it is a question of a really precise numerical indicator. Tuomas Pekkarinen, Roope Uusitalo and Sari Kerr (2009) [5] were able to show that the earnings of the sons that went to the comprehensive school were 7% higher than the earnings of their fathers that attended the old system, the “folk school”. This means that the comprehensive school reform, to a considerable degree, increased

the mobility of the level of earnings between the generations and thus opened new possibilities for the new generation which was not any more tied to the vocational careers and lifestyle of their parents. It apparently increased also the equality of the Finnish people, and this, of course, was the goal of the reform. It is one of the most important goals of public libraries as well.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The Pekkarinen–Uusitalo–Kerr study proves the positive effect of the educational reform and shows that schools make a difference, but what about libraries? Could we apply the same methodology to show the positive effect on public libraries? There were, after all, public libraries in all municipalities in Finland during the implementation of the school reform. To get a valid result would probably be impossible in this case, since public libraries are too marginal (even in Finland where they are heavily used), but it may be possible to show that there exists a relationship between the school and the library. Statistical studies (e.g. [1, 2]) suggest a positive correlation to exist between a high level of education in the population and a high use of public libraries. It is interesting to see whether a single educational reform can have a direct effect on library use. We can formulate the following research question: Did the implementation of the comprehensive school system have an effect on library use?

There are several possible answers to the question. We may come to the conclusion

that there was a positive, a negative, or no effect at all, but we may have to be satisfied even with the result that it is not possible to solve this question in this manner. The ideal answer to the question could be that there was an increase in library use in Finland around the years when the school reform was conducted. It may, however, be probable that the effect is clearer in the more remote and less developed areas where both the library and the school were not as highly developed as in the more prosperous parts of the country. We may safely assume that in Helsinki, the capital, the effect of the school reform was least perceptible.

The reader may ask: why should we expect a visible growth in library use during the first years of the new school system? Wouldn't it be more natural to expect an increase some years after the reform was made? The children do not change so quickly from lazy library users to eager ones. This is certainly true, but the assumption of an accelerated growth, even during the first years of the new system, is based on the assumption that the municipalities put more emphasis on their library situation when they knew that a more ambitious school system was to be adopted. There are no statistical studies to prove that the presence of a secondary school in a municipality during the earlier decades would have enhanced investment in libraries and caused an increase in library use. There is, however, an indirect evidence from the 1950s and 1960s that state library inspectors strongly demanded that library matters should be put in order in the municipalities

where a secondary school existed or was to be established. This is documented in their inspection reports (about the role of state library inspectors, see [3]). More research is needed to show that this was still the case during the 1970s, but we can assume that library inspectors were not idle in the case of the comprehensive school, either. This benefited all library users, but we can also expect that the more ambitious curriculum and the more liberal and stimulating atmosphere in the comprehensive school, inspired the pupils to read more even on their own.

We are using home loans of books and other material as the indicator of the library use. It is clear that to consider only home loans per capita is not enough. It is only one feature of the libraries' activity, and it may not capture the real value of what the library has to offer to the user. Even when we are speaking of the purely statistical features, there are strong reasons to enlarge the perspective, e.g., to the libraries' material resources, personnel and the percentage of users in the population. All this must be taken seriously, but it will be possible only later. This time, it is important to learn whether this kind of study is productive at all, and this can be solved using the rather crude data of book circulation per capita.

METHODOLOGY

We shall follow the rate of growth in library loans per capita step-by-step as the comprehensive school reform was implemented in different parts of the country during

consecutive years. There are many possible counter-arguments to this method. For example, the development of libraries in Finland was extremely rapid during the 1970s, but there still were considerable differences in various parts of the country. How can one say what changes in the use of libraries were dependent on the school reform?

There are some evident phenomena that partly explain the increase in the use of libraries. The most important individual factor affecting the library development in Finland was the Library law of 1961, which gave good state subsidies to the municipalities for library activities. In comparison with the earlier library law adopted in 1928, the new law was generous. It gave two thirds of the library expenses as state subsidies to the rural municipalities and a third to the urban libraries. State subsidies could be used to hire a full-time competent librarian or to run a mobile library. The new law pushed the Finnish public libraries to a completely new level, and they soon attained the same high level as had been usual in our Scandinavian neighbour countries. (For a concise presentation of the development of Finnish public libraries, see [4].)

Finland's urban centers are in the south-western parts of the country. Most of the regions in the implementation plan were rural, and even cities in these regions could not make a great difference in the statistics. Helsinki is, of course, an exception, because it is a big city with half a million inhabitants. The library law of 1961 was spurring library development especially in the rural parts of

Finland where the attendance in the secondary schools before the reform had been lower than in the urban centers, especially in Helsinki. Therefore, it is to be expected that the extra effect of the comprehensive school reform was more visible in the remote rural parts in the north and northeast of the country than in Helsinki and the other regions closer to the financial and cultural centers. In cities, and especially in Helsinki, the level of library services had been already high, so we can expect that there library use could not increase as much because of the school reform.

The high level of subsidies to rural libraries can be seen in the light of a more general policy to support rural and remote areas. There was a general consensus that the whole country should be kept inhabited and the migration into urban centers (and even to Sweden) that had already started should be stalled. During the 1960s and 1970s, Finland underwent great social and economic changes. A vogue of industrialization and the growing foreign trade increased the incomes. Important social legislation was passed, which was part of constructing a welfare state. There were also changes in the intellectual life, and more liberal influences were introduced. Besides the basic education, even higher education was given a new impetus. New universities were established and the old ones were strengthened.

All these phenomena form the background to hope that the comprehensive school reform and its effect on library use add a clearly discernible feature.

THE DATA

Detailed library statistics on the municipal level are available from the years when the comprehensive school reform was adopted. They were gathered by the State Library Bureau and were published in the national library journal, *Kirjastolehti*, but they are only in printed form, so they had to be inserted manually into the statistical tables. There are some details that are problematic, especially the sudden jump in loans per capita in Lapland in the years 1975 to 1976. This must be studied more carefully, but, unfortunately, there was no time to do it for this article.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

As mentioned above, the research project is still unfinished and there are no final and verified results. It is possible, however, to give some preliminary statistical tables that may give some hint of the final results of the study.

In order to make clearer a comparison of the development in the regions where the comprehensive school was adopted during the years 1972–77, I have calculated the relative growth of library use (items borrowed per capita), i.e. how much library use increases from year to year. If the figure is 1, there has been no growth from one year to another. If it is above 1, there has been a growth; with less than one, there has been a reduction in library use. It is certain that the comparison should be extended to some years before the reform was started and after the reform was completed, but this has been impossible this time. We shall see what we can learn from the data that we have at hand.

First, it is perhaps good to look at the relative growth of lending in the whole country. One must bear in mind that all years of the 1970s were the years of growth in the Finnish public libraries. So it is the question of different growth rates from year to year. During the years of the implemen-

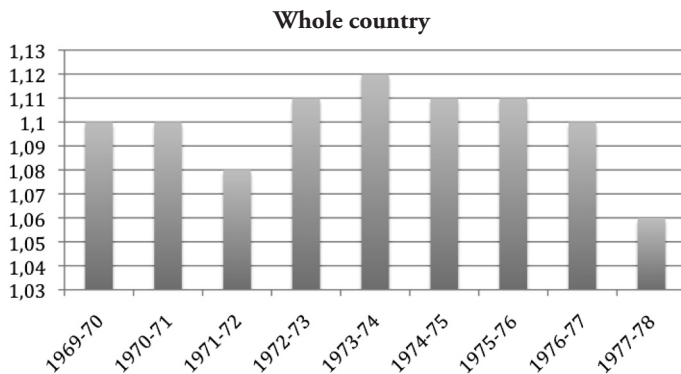


Chart 1. Relative growth of loans per capita, 1969–1978

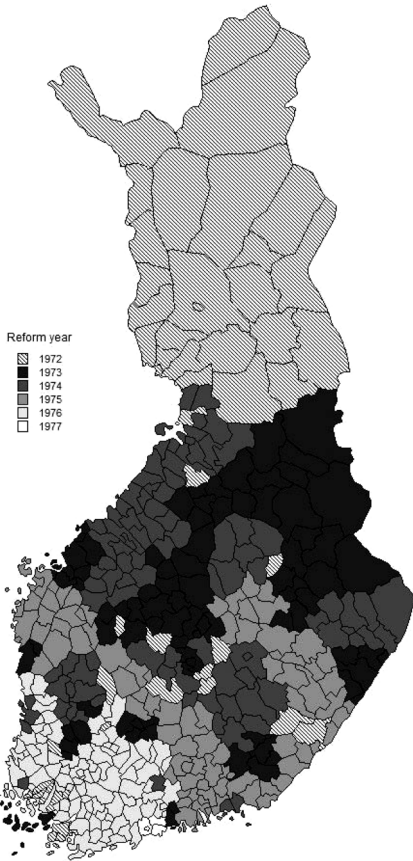


Figure 1. Regions in which the comprehensive school system was adopted in 1972–1977 (source: [5])

tation of the school reform (1972–1977), the growth rates build an arch or a vogue with peak years in the middle. At present, there is no explanation why the years were different. The reasons may be the economic fluctuation, the uneven introduction of new mobile libraries in different years – or it may be the comprehensive school reform.

Figure 1 illustrates the order in which the school reform was gradually conducted. The reform was first adopted in Lapland and in a group of municipalities scattered all over the country (here called “experimental municipalities”). Lapland is geographically a rather consistent region with mostly rural, sparsely populated municipalities. Its cities were small in the 1970s.

The rate of growth in library use in Lapland was phenomenally high during the 1960s and 1970s in comparison with other parts of the country, partly because public libraries there had started to develop dynamically not long before. They started from a low level. The growth continued even during the years of the school reform. There was a clear acceleration in the growth in the years 1972–73 after which the growth seems to diminish. We can say that during the first years of the school reform era, the growth in library use was exceptionally high.

There was a group of municipalities, scattered more or less randomly all over the country, that had been experimenting with the new school system since the 1960s. They were, besides Lapland, the first to move totally to the new system in 1972. There is a clear peak in the growth of loans per capita in these municipalities during 1972 to 1973. Even after that, the growth continues briskly.

The majority of municipalities that adopted the new school system in 1973 were sparsely populated remote rural communities that were developing their service infrastructure. Therefore, it had to be expected

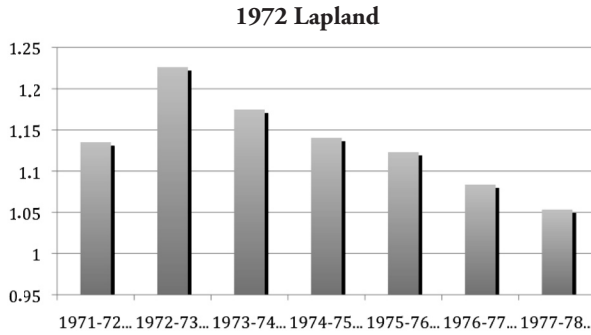


Chart 2. Relative growth of loans per capita in Lapland with adopting the comprehensive school system in 1972

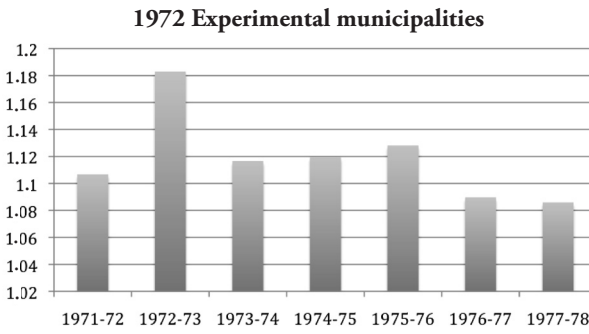


Chart 3. Relative growth of loans per capita in the group of municipalities in various parts of the country that adopted the comprehensive school system in 1972 (experimental municipalities)

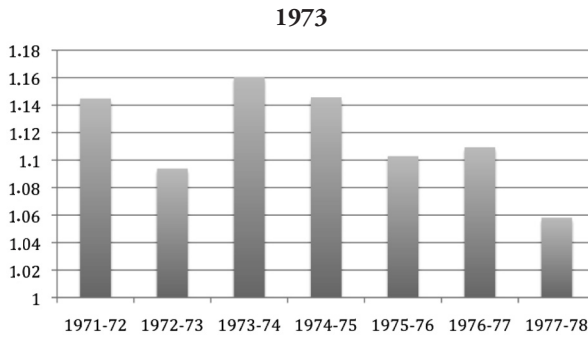


Chart 4. Relative growth of loans per capita in the region that adopted the comprehensive school system in 1973

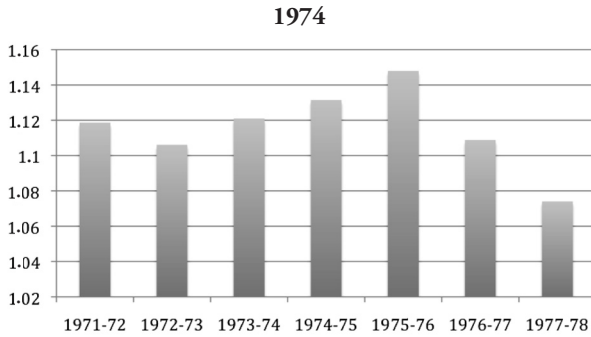


Chart 5. Relative growth of loans per capita in the region that adopted the comprehensive school system in 1974

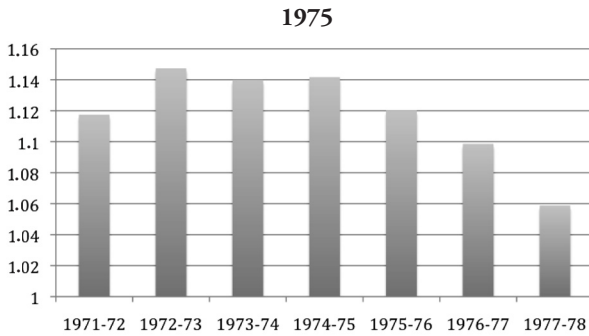


Chart 6. Relative growth of loans per capita in the region that adopted the comprehensive school system in 1975

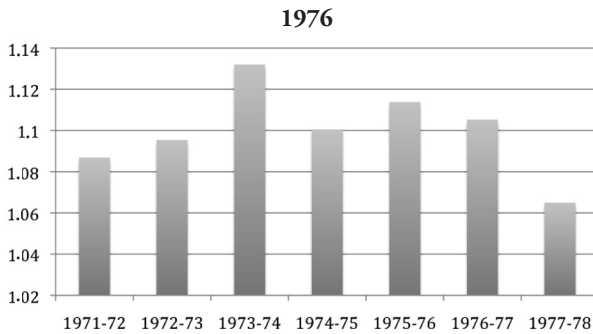


Chart 7. Relative growth of loans per capita in the region that adopted the comprehensive school system in 1976

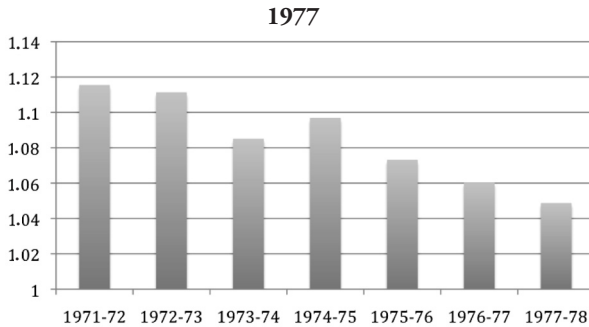


Chart 8. Relative growth of loans per capita in Helsinki with adopting the comprehensive school system in 1977

that in these municipalities the new system would make a real difference. And this seems precisely to be the case. There is a clear peak in the growth of loans per capita from the year 1973 to 1974, and even after that the growth continues.

The municipalities adopting the new school system in 1974 were situated in the northwestern (Ostrobothnia), middle and eastern parts of the country. The majority of these communities are rural and not very prosperous. Thus, it seems natural that they profited from the school reform which brought new energy into the municipalities. The peak years of the growth in loans per capita fall just after the reform.

The municipalities adopting the reform in 1975 formed a belt from Vaasa in the west to Lappeenranta in the south-east plus parts of North Karelia and Savo regions, most of these communities being also rural, but many of them had already been closer to the more prosperous regions of the country. The active growth during the reform seems to continue with a slight increase in 1974–1975, but later the growth becomes more modest.

In 1976, the most prosperous southwestern part of the country adopted the new school system. The municipalities in this part of the country had already developed their libraries and there were many secondary schools. Nevertheless it seems that, if we exclude the peak growth in 1973–74 (which should be studied more carefully), there is an acceleration in the growth around the years when the new school system was adopted.

The library system, as well as the network of secondary schools, were well developed in Helsinki during the seventies, so we cannot expect any dramatic changes in the library scene there because of the school reform. Helsinki was developing towards saturation in library use with or without the school reform. The analysis of the development of library use in Helsinki should be continued to the years after the reform.

CONCLUSIONS

Nothing definite can be said yet about the validity of the preliminary results. There is a lot to do to improve the reliability of the data and to learn about the other features, both

structural and accidental, that influenced library use. Still there seems to be a pattern emerging, which may not be completely random. In certain groups of municipalities, the peak years of acceleration in the growth of library use seem to coincide with the im-

plementation of the comprehensive school system, and these municipalities benefited most from the reform. There is a reason to continue on the chosen path, using better methodologies and enlarged data, and maintaining a critical mind.

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VIDURINĖS MOKYKLOS REFORMA IR NAUDOJIMASIS VIEŠOSIOMIS BIBLIOTEKOMIS SUOMIJOJE 1972–1977 METAIS: METODOLOGINIS EKSPERIMENTAS

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Santrauka

Straipsnis parengtas vykdomo mokslinio tyrimo projekto pirmine ataskaita. Šio tyrimo tikslas yra nustatyti, ar Suomijos vidurinės mokyklos reforma 1972–1977 metais turėjo teigiamos įtakos naudojimuisi Suomijos viešosiomis bibliotekomis. Taip pat bandoma rasti papildomų įrodymų prielaidai, kad aukštesnis išsilavinimo

lygis didina naudojimąsi viešosiomis bibliotekomis. Tyrimą paskatino T. Pekkarineno, R. Uusitalo ir S. Kerr (2009) straipsnis, kuriame įrodoma, kad mokyklos reforma padidino uždarbį tų asmenų, kurie įgijo išsilavinimą naujojoje mokyklos sistemoje, palyginti su jų tėvais, baigusiais senosios sistemos mokyklas. Vidurinės

mokyklos reforma ypač padidino Suomijos pagrindinio išsilavinimo kokybę. Tyrimas nustato, kaip keitėsi namų paskolų vienam asmeniui skaičius tais metais, kai vidurinės mokyklos reforma buvo įgyvendinama įvairiuose Suomijos regionuose. Rezultatai kol kas yra preliminarūs ir juos reikia toliau tikslinti. Tačiau grafikais vaizduojami rezultatai rodo, kad vidurinės mokyklos reforma galėjo turėti teigiamos įtakos

naudojimuisi bibliotekomis. Atrodo, kad ši įtaka buvo stipresnė kaimo vietovėse, kai tuo tarpu turtingesniuose regionuose, o ypač sostinėje Helsinkyje, jos poveikis nebuvo toks akivaizdus arba visai nepastebimas. Tai aiškinama jau buvusių aukštu vidurinės mokyklos tinklo lygiu ir naudojimusi viešosiomis bibliotekomis miestuose. Tolesni tyrimai gali padidinti rezultatų patikimumą.

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