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Leading Complex Educational Change Via National Participative Reforms? A Case of Finnish Core Curriculum Reform Leadership

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Abstract
National-level educational administrators constantly face the question of how to ensure that the basic education system successfully meets complex local, national, international, and global challenges, and what is the best way to initiate and drive systemic changes in education amid such complexity and to create value for society. Studies have shown that participative approaches to reform leadership are beneficial; however, in practice, participative incentives are randomly used in national reform contexts. In this article, we present a Finnish case of national participative leadership regarding the Finnish Core Curriculum Reform of 2014 (hereafter FCCR2014). We interviewed key leaders in the FCCR2014 process (n = 23) and analyzed the data from social, personal, interpersonal, and organizational viewpoints with this question in mind: How did administrators responsible for leading the reform develop and lead the participative FCCR2014 process? Sub questions were: (1) What were their goals in developing and leading the reform, and (2) how did they succeed in developing and leading the reform in line with their goals—what was effective and what was not? The results show how participative leadership in a national curriculum reform calls for top leaders to include stakeholders, build and support strong and open collaboration processes, take the risk of losing some of their control, reject strict dichotomizations between strategy formulation and implementation, and consider change leadership a responsible act of giving stakeholders a fair chance to participate in the decision-making that affects their lives. Key aspects to participative leadership included building participation, not quasi-participation; building coherence in complexity—together; and fitting change to the education system with responsible leadership.

Keywords Curriculum reform · Reform leadership · Participative leadership · Collaboration

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Introduction

National basic education systems are in continuous need of change leadership to reform national strategies, like the national curricula, and define the main principles and content of teaching, taking into account the complex network of aims and needs from pupils, parents, teachers, principals, schools, municipalities, book publishers, professional unions, and so on (Fullan, 2007; Tikkanen et al., 2017; Tsiouplis & Stamovlasis, 2019). National-level administrators, the officials in charge of making national-level decisions and system-wide strategies in education, constantly face the question of how to ensure that the basic education system successfully meets complex local, national, international, and global challenges, and what is the best way to initiate and drive changes in education amid such complexity to create value for individual pupils as well as the whole society.

National level decision-making in reforms sets the pace for the entire system but how to successfully lead national reforms remains as a controversial question. Research and practice have proved that a traditional, top-down leadership approach that treats people in the system as recipients of ready-made national change initiatives is incapable of building lasting, legitimate change in complex, networked educational systems fraught with diverse stakeholders' contradictory interests, needs, and values (Collinson, 2019; Gray & Purdy, 2018; Maritz et al., 2011). Further, studies have shown that such traditional top-down leadership in reforms often causes dissatisfaction, lack of motivation and understanding, and resistance to the system (Robbins & Judge, 2014, pp. 213). On the contrary, involving stakeholders in decision-making has proven to be a functional approach to building change (Akpoviroro et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022) and a national reform could be built to embrace the networked nature of system-wide change by adopting *participative* leadership approaches to national decision-making (cf. Salonen-Hakomäki & Soini, 2023).

In this article, we present a Finnish case of leadership in national reforms in the education sector—the most recent national-level curriculum reform in Finland, the Finnish Core Curriculum Reform of 2014 (hereafter FCCR2014). We viewed the reform as a *participative* leadership challenge and interviewed key leaders in the process (n = 23) to examine how they led participative national reform. Participative leadership simply refers to leadership based on the idea that giving stakeholders genuine opportunities to participate in decision-making is the best route to success (Akpoviroro et al., 2018; Fung, 2006; Kujala et al., 2019; Rok, 2009; Waldman & Galvin, 2008; Wang et al., 2022) and we were interested in how the reform leaders envisioned leading educational change and their reflections on how they achieved their goals through participative reform, which refers to a reform process built to embrace stakeholder participation and build on participative leadership. Our main research question was as follows: *How did administrators responsible for leading the reform develop and lead the participative FCCR2014 process?* and we added two sub-questions: (1) What were their goals in developing and leading the reform, and (2) how did they succeed in developing and leading the reform in line with their goals—what was effective and what was

not? Through this study, we aimed to discover the tangible challenges and benefits of leading national participative reform as a step toward supporting system-wide change and general good governance in complex education systems.

Reform as a Leadership Challenge and a Participative Approach as a Solution?

First, we problematize systemic reform. Social change flows somewhat uncontrollably from different sources that are difficult to fully perceive and understand (Sturdy & Grey, 2005), but reforms as intentionally led change processes that (re)define the system or parts of it are strategic attempts to influence, harness, and redirect the complexity of change (Chua, 2016) at particular times and in particular spaces and directions in a particular system to serve the system's—and society's—best interests (Salonen-Hakomäki et al., 2016). Reforms are, in a sense, distillations of change—attempts to analyze the contextual big picture and respond to the recognized needs and challenges involved. The destiny of these distillations is in the hands of reform's leaders.

To succeed in the task, leaders must first consider the relational nature of change as a continuum (Fulop & Lindstead, 2009, p. 301), learning from the contextual past to respond to current challenges and proactively and responsibly develop systems to support the future society. Furthermore, leaders must deal with pressure from diverse actors at different levels in the system. Taking the education system as an example (Fullan, 2007; Soini et al., 2021; Tikkanen et al., 2017), change happens at the levels of the pupil, the teacher, the principal, the parent, the school, the municipality, teacher education, book publishing, the labor market, the nation, the world, and so forth. Change requirements arise from outside the system, such as the need for an education system to react to changes in working life, and from inside the system, such as teachers' problems with heavy workloads.

The core leadership challenge in any reform is how to recognize, consider, and resolve all relevant aspects, challenges, and views when building the vision and strategy for the system. This task becomes more emphasized when reforms are national and the decisions made at the national level affect the entire system, like in terms of national curriculum reform. The changes ought to be implemented, understood, accepted, and legitimated across the system, at all levels of it—and in the case of the education system even outside it, in society (Rok, 2009; Salonen-Hakomäki et al., 2016; Soini et al., 2021). A strong stability-building strategy, in terms of how and why the system or organization "is" and what it "does," now and in the future, is crucial for supporting a system, but executing the strategy in a way that enables the system to flourish and fulfil its purpose in society by inspiring people to change their behavior and work together toward relevant goals requires taking into account the system's complexity (Chua, 2016; Moos et al., 2020; Sturdy & Grey, 2005).

A Participative Approach to Reform Leadership

Leading national reform refers to the various tasks of planning, organizing, and steering a national-level reform process and provides opportunities to learn about the

system's complexity, make it visible, and utilize it for strategic decision-making to benefit the system. Therefore, it is vital to consider the best approach to leadership in national reforms in terms of developing and leading such complex systemic reform to enable it to succeed (Huang et al., 2011; Mehta & Cohen, 2017; Tikkanen et al., 2017; Waldman & Galvin, 2008). *Autocratic reforms* involving traditional top-down leadership (Rok, 2009) still seem to be the main style adopted for leading change and making decisions at the national level, as well as, more particularly, in education systems (Moos et al., 2020). National reforms are often strictly in the hands of national-level administrators or politicians who, based on classical leadership in public organizations, often seem "to speak both for and to those below them" (Fulop & Lindstead, 2009, p. 279) when making system-wide decisions. However, such an approach to reform neglects the networked nature of systems and, furthermore, overestimates the wisdom and opportunities of national administrators/reformers and their ability to lead change and develop system-wide strategies that genuinely serve the complex system (Collinson, 2019). Studies have shown that such traditional top-down leadership often causes dissatisfaction, a lack of motivation and understanding, and resistance to the system (Robbin & Judge, 2014, pp. 213).

Another option is to utilize participative approaches to reform. The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council announced five key attributes of good governance—*transparency*, *responsibility*, *accountability*, *participation,* and *responsiveness* (The United Nations, 2023)—that underpin leaders' responsibilities to stakeholders in implementing change (Pless & Maak, 2011). The problem is that many reforms are advertised as participative and transparent, but they remain *quasi-collaborative,* built on mere posturing that stresses accountability and performativity and aims for strong national alignment of the system's principles and actions at the expense of local participation and implementation.

For example, education reformers often promise stakeholder inclusion but leave teachers out of national-level planning and decision-making (Broadhead, 2002; Carl, 2005; Ramparsad, 2001; Saracaloglu et al., 2010), later assigning them overwhelming and backbreaking roles as active executors, deliverers, or installers of ready-made educational strategies, such as curricula (Al-Daami & Wallace, 2007; Molstad, 2015; Murphy, 1988). Decisions are handed to them top down without giving them the opportunity to influence, understand, and internalize the decisions, but the responsibility for their implementation success is promoted as a great opportunity to participate—and controlled in terms of accountability-based monitoring.

However, true *participative reform* builds change into a complex system differently; instead of focusing on implementing the reform and separating it from the strategy formulation (Fung, 2006; Gray & Purdy, 2018; Waldman & Galvin, 2008), the aim is to build value, shared responsibility, and understanding in the system throughout the reform process in collaboration with different stakeholders (Akpoviroro et al., 2018; Soini et al., 2021; Freeman, 1984; Kujala et al., 2019; Shaeffer, 1994). Decisions are made with stakeholders, and consensus is sought (Hartnett, 2011; Pyhältö et al., 2018) from the beginning, when the vision and reform strategy are formulated (Akpoviroro et al., 2018), and problems are initially detected. The reform strategy reflects the principles of responsible (Pless & Maak, 2011; Waldman & Galvin, 2008), democratic (Akpoviroro et al., 2018) and participative leadership

(Rok, 2009; Wang et al., 2022). It considers everyone influenced by systemic change a stakeholder—a participant in the systemic work of change—and therefore acknowledges their needs and opinions. In fact, participative leadership considers stakeholders the core possessors of wisdom, competencies, and ideas for developing wise reform solutions that will serve the system and endure long term (Fullan, 2007; Kujala et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2022).

Stakeholder inclusion, participative reform, group decision-making, and responsible leadership are established ideas, and their benefits have been noted in the literature. Studies have shown that participative approaches can boost motivation, commitment, job engagement, and productivity (Akpoviroro et al., 2018; Chan, 2019; Griffin et al., 2007). Nevertheless, in practice, participatory incentives are randomly used in national reform contexts, and in educational decision-making, they have been replaced with accountability and control (Moos et al., 2020). Why? Few studies on leadership have investigated participative national reforms; therefore, there is a general need to understand leadership tasks in such a reform context (Kujala et al., 2019; Waldman & Galvin, 2008). We present the Finnish case, based on interviews with the administrators who developed and led the national Finnish Core Curriculum Reform in 2012–2014, to meet this need.

Methods and Materials

The Case

During the last decade, Finland—a former paragon of public education—has been struggling with decreased PISA ratings, which has increased the pressure to develop a stronger education system. Finland's way of leading and reforming basic education has been somewhat unusual in that it has clearly been based on *participation,* collaboration, and trust, rather than accountability and control (Fung, 2006; Moos et al., 2020; Sahlberg, 2011; Soini et al., 2021). Overall, leadership in the Finnish school system is probably somewhat similar to that in other countries, but Sahlberg (2011) pointed out two important differences. First, Finnish teachers with master's degrees in education have been traditionally greatly appreciated and deeply *trusted* by society and have high autonomy in their work of teaching children. This is important to note because autonomous professionals cannot be commanded and led in a top-down manner without demotivating them, which requires leaders to be particularly flexible and have a certain humility. Second, the entire Finnish education system has been based on the ideal of pupils' *equality*; teaching in every school should be of equal quality, and all children, with all kinds of backgrounds, should be provided with first-rate education to achieve their best in life.

These values, equality and trust, influence the Finnish education system strongly—even though the system is now struggling hard to be able to keep them under the challenges facing the school system. The requirements of equality and trust influence the leadership of education in Finland multidimensionally (Yammarino & Dionne, 2019), emphasizing the importance of participation at all levels of systemic change. Such equality rests on educational leadership's ability to ensure

system-wide coherence and consistent quality in schools. The national core curriculum as a central steering strategy and a binding norm of education provides this coherence by defining the system-wide pedagogical values, approaches, and directions to be followed in schools and classrooms (Sivesind et al., 2012).

Trust as a core value of the system has deterred leaders from imposing an oppressive core curriculum strategy on the system. Instead, the core curriculum has functioned as a foundation for strong local- and school-level implementation, and teachers have been trusted to implement the principles of the curriculum in their work and to do so with a professional and personal touch (Molstad, 2015). Accordingly, instead of using controls or sanctions to ensure the implementation of the core curriculum, the Finnish education system has employed only a light sample-based evaluation system and no rankings, unlike most countries. Standardized tests have also been largely avoided due to trust in the professionals, which has prevented teaching from being reduced to "teaching-for-tests."

Furthermore, curriculum reform has been built on respect for both equality and trust and has been conducted using a top-down–bottom-up implementation strategy (Tikkanen et al., 2017). The core curriculum document is subjected to state-led reform approximately every 10 years. The most recent reform, FCCR2014, employed a national-level participatory process led by Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) administrators, which was executed as a working group process involving around 300 invited stakeholders from across the education system and related systems: teachers, principals, researchers, teacher educators, union representatives (e.g., of the parents' union and cultural minority unions), ministry advocates, and so forth. It was supplemented with two public online forums that were open to all, together with various seminars and meetings. Local work started and was supported alongside national reform and interlinked with it.

Theoretically, FCCR2014 could be seen as a consultative reform rather than a participative reform because it was not based on collaboration with the entire basic education system and all stakeholders. However, since that would have been completely impossible from a leadership point of view, we take the perspective that the national reform was participative within reasonable limits. Since the core curriculum reform was seen as the first step of a system-wide curriculum reform process, and all voices were welcomed via the different representatives and open-to-anyone comment forums, we consider it a participative reform.

Data and Analysis

We focused on examining the insights of the national-level administrators (later referred to as 'administrators') who developed and led the participative FCCR2014 process, the most recent core curriculum reform in Finland, to discover how they viewed the challenge of leading such a complex reform. All administrators from EDUFI (named the Finnish National Board of Education at that time) who participated in the FCCR2014 process in leadership roles (in other words, who acted as organizers, chairpersons, secretaries, and presenters of the working groups) were identified and invited via email to participate in the interviews, and there were 27

of them. These were the key people involved in the process; however, their inputs and opportunities as leaders, and their roles as reform builders, varied considerably: some of the administrators had wider roles in the process in terms of central management and leadership tasks, whereas some had parallel responsibilities in working groups (as chairpersons and secretaries), and the rest led working groups.

Data collection was part of the bigger School Matters -research project and research permissions were acquired from EDUFI. Twenty-three administrators (85.2%; 6 men and 17 women) responded positively and participated in the semi-structured interviews. We (the authors) developed an interview protocol, which was piloted and revised before data collection in 2013, and we conducted the interviews over a one-month period between October 2013 and November 2013. The interviews were conducted in the middle of the core curriculum reform process, when the first drafts of the general principles of the core curriculum had been completed, and the subject groups were working with the subject elements based on those principles. Informed consents were asked from all participants and their confidentiality was protected in collecting and analyzing the data. Interviewees had the opportunity to withdraw from the interviews at any point and to present any views and comments related to the study or the subject, also outside the asked questions. This article focuses on the following themes of the interviews: the overall core curriculum reform process, group work within the reform, and the interviewees' own roles in the process. The interview protocol was presented in full in our previous article (Salonen-Hakomäki et al., 2016).

The first author planned and conducted the analysis of the data using the Atlas. ti program. Instead of taking theory as the basis of the analysis, the aim was to approach the phenomena by employing an inductive, multilevel (Yammarino & Dionne, 2019) approach and analyze the data from different perspectives:

Phase 1: To begin the analysis, the interview transcripts were organized so that all the segments concerning the interviewees' perceptions of the FCCR2014 process that were relevant to the following two themes were included as data for the analysis: the *intended reform* (sub-question 1: What were their goals in developing and leading the reform?) and the *realized reform* (sub-question 2: How did they succeed in developing and leading the reform in line with their goals—what was effective and what was not?). A segment coded as a unit for analysis was defined as an episode beginning when the interviewee started talking about a certain subject and ending when they changed the subject. Only segments reflecting the core curriculum process at the national level were included.

The *intended reform* category included comments that referred to the administrators' vision and goals in developing and leading the participative FCCR2014 reform: the intended, desired, or ideal change process according to them. In comparison, the *realized reform* category included comments that referred to their descriptions of how the reform worked in practice and what intentions it related to. Therefore, each segment that included information about the functionality of FCCR2014 was further categorized into two distinctive subcategories—*satisfied* or *discontented*—based on whether administrators were satisfied that the FCCR2014 process had been successful, positive, and functional, or dissatisfied because they considered it unsuccessful, negative, and non-functional.

Phase 2: To ensure that the analysis would be versatile and consider multiple levels of the reform (Yammarino & Dionne, 2019), each segment was further coded into four abductively formed categories that seemed to provide different perspectives on the complex data at the *social, personal, interpersonal,* and *organizational* levels. These categories are based on Mitchell and Sackney's (2001) categories, however a new category, "society" was added and therefore, the categories are determined somewhat differently compared to the original categorization. Social aspects in this study included all comments that concerned issues outside the FCCR2014 process that were deemed to have influenced the process, such as the history, culture, events, policy, and structure of the educational system. Personal aspects included all views reflecting the qualities, experiences, or participation of the individuals who took part in the process. Interpersonal aspects included descriptions of reciprocal interactions and collaboration that occurred within the FCCR2014 process between individuals or groups participating in the work or among participants and stakeholders in the field. Lastly, organizational aspects referred to all comments concerning the organization of the FCCR2014 process from the reformers' work perspective: planning, constructing, managing, and leading the process to consider different perspectives and establish the best possible participative reform.

Phase 3: In the third phase, comments in each category (intended/realized [satisfied/discontent] x social/personal/interpersonal/organizational) were inductively analyzed to investigate what reform administrators desired, how the realized reform matched with their desired reform, and what elements at different levels of the reform seemed to emerge as effective or ineffective. The organizational perspective, based on administrators' self-reflections, was chosen as the lens through which to present the results to minimize repetition and dichotomies and instead reflect the relatedness and complex, intertwined nature of the categories (Collinson, 2019). This approach complemented the results since reform leadership involves balancing the entire development and execution of the participative process.

Results

Table 1 shows that administrators talked primarily about their tasks as reform leaders and the interpersonal aspects of the reform but talked least about the personal level of the change. The table also shows that, in general, administrators embraced the FCCR2014 reform, as almost 75% (f = 568) of the analyzed comments reflected satisfaction (see Table 1). Satisfaction was highest for the interpersonal (86%, f = 164) and personal (83%, f = 101) aspects of the reform, and clearly lowest for the social aspects (51%, f = 68). Furthermore, the success of administrators' own actions as leaders and the organizational view of the reform were contradictory.

Table 1 Reflections on reform in administrators' comments (N = 23)

Perspective on the reform	Reflections on the "desired" reform	Evaluations of the FCCR2014		
Personal (stakeholders)	Total f = 152	Satisfied: 83% Discontent: 17%	f = 101 f = 21	Total f = 122
Social (context)	Total f = 155	Satisfied: 51% Discontent: 49%	f = 68 f = 66	Total f = 134
Interpersonal (interactions and collaboration)	Total f = 266	Satisfied: 86% Discontent: 14%	f = 164 f = 26	Total f = 190
Organizational (reform leadership)	Total f = 422	Satisfied: 74% Discontent: 26%	f = 235 f = 89	Total f = 324
	Total f = 995	Satisfied: 74% (f = 568) of total Discontent: 26% (f = 202) of total		Total = 770

Personal Aspect: Stakeholders

The results clearly showed that the EDUFI officials had a simple, shared goal: to organize and lead the core curriculum process in a participatory manner. As one of the interviewees explained:

> Regulations are based on the premise that the task of EDUFI is to establish the core curriculum, and for a long time, we have seen that not all the wisdom lies in EDUFI—although we have lots of it here . . . Therefore, it is organized to be a very wide, clustered, collaborative process at different agentic levels . . . The process is built in a way that, for example, all the groups we have are represented [by] different people . . . Of course, we wanted to involve them in the process, but also hear different voices. And that is the strength of this process, in my opinion.

First, this meant that the reform was enacted as group work intended to be representative-rich. To build participation in national decision-making, administrators aimed to build strong human resources within the reform and invited approximately 250 experts from the education field to participate in working groups, the purpose of which was to reform the curriculum. Certain groups worked on the general principles of the curriculum, while others worked on certain parts of the curriculum. The chosen representatives included professionals with different perspectives, skills, and knowledge from different areas of the education field, representing wide networks, versatile perspectives, and best practices. They included, for example:

- Teachers (class + subject teachers) and principals who provided knowledge based on school experience.
- Researchers and teacher educators who provided evidence from the most recent studies on and theories of pedagogy, teaching, learning, and subject content.

- Administrators (e.g., chief education officers and ministry officers) who were responsible for the administration of education and familiar with its organizational and resource aspects.
- Participants who had worked on previous curriculum reforms, who could provide historical perspectives, and younger future-oriented participants.
- Professionals from different locations in Finland.
- EDUFI administrators who acted as educated experts in various areas of education and administration.

EDUFI members functioned as chairpersons in all groups, and they were encouraged to suggest representatives for their own working groups, with the help of reform managers, if necessary. Administrators were generally pleased with the diversity of the participants in their groups, although not everyone had all the representatives they wanted, and some reported that they would have preferred, for example, more class or subject teachers in their groups. Some administrators purposely chose working groups that included people with various, contradictory views, and some deliberately invited the participation of "people whose courses were in roughly the same direction" to facilitate the process.

There was also an FCCR2014 steering group that evaluated ideas from multiple perspectives and aligned and steered the work toward a coherent, legitimate outcome. The steering group was led by the head of reform (from EDUFI) and included representatives of many of the most influential organizations involved in basic education in Finland (e.g., the Trade Union for Education in Finland, the Finnish Association of Principals, the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, the Confederation of Finnish Industries, the National Institute for Health and Welfare, and the Ministries of Education and Culture and Social Affairs and Health, plus representatives of various cultural groups). The steering group's work involved receiving curriculum drafts from the working groups, having important discussions regarding them, viewing them from many different social perspectives at the national level, and based on that preparation, commenting on the drafts to steer the work in an appropriate direction.

In addition, all Finnish citizens were welcome to participate in the national work by viewing updated reports on the official reform website and commenting on the core curriculum drafts online twice during the reform process. These open commentaries were considered to be one of the best aspects of the process, as an interviewee explained:

> I personally think that this open conversational approach and kind of exposing oneself by publishing unfinished drafts in the early phases proved worthwhile because it produced only good things, and it's probably been one of the most important elements of this process.

The open commentary phases were deemed essential for informing the nation, particularly the education sector, of possible upcoming changes to the curriculum, since the work was still in progress and plans remained open to change. The aim was to collect opinions, tips, ideas, and critical views from any interested participants in Finland and to turn the curriculum-forming process into a comprehensive,

system-wide evaluation at the earliest opportunity. Discussing the received comments in the working groups, efficiently utilizing them during the work, and basing necessary changes to the curriculum on them were considered essential. In addition, the commentaries were vital in triggering local curriculum discussions as a basis for early implementation, thereby supporting the success of the system-wide change.

However, the working group participants were the "main participants" in the reform, as they were the ones ultimately responsible for reforming various aspects of the curriculum. Administrators praised the participants for their commendable professionalism and competence, claiming that they actively offered their knowledge and skills to the groups, commented on issues, had good debating skills, were dedicated and involved, participated regularly in meetings, and completed their assigned tasks effectively and on time: "They tried to bring their own competence and views [to the work]. They did not sit with their mouths shut!," as one of the interviewees delightedly explained about the members in their working group.

Administrators highlighted that most of the participants seemed to be extremely engaged, well informed, motivated, and enthusiastic about the work—they sacrificed time and effort for it, as the work was entirely voluntary. However, administrators pointed out that a few participants were not sufficiently engaged in the tasks and group meetings due to a reported lack of time, and some resisted the shared direction or withdrew from the work. Some administrators also reported that their workload was heavy, and they truly struggled to find time for the reform—along with their other duties in EDUFI. Whatever the reason, administrators were concerned that without giving full contribution, participants would not necessarily understand the reform principles and would remain outsiders.

Participants were mainly described as "insiders" who actively participated as representatives in the reform and as informants in interactions with different stakeholders. Administrators described the participants as being enthusiastic about developing a better education system and having positive and respectful attitudes and good interpersonal skills. They collaborated with each other willingly, presented their views politely, allowed space for others to be themselves, and were willing to reflect critically on their own views and opinions to learn and develop their thinking. Rather than only pursuing their own interests, participants seemed to genuinely desire collaboration, actively commit to common goals, avoid conflicts, and accept the need for compromise. One interviewee summarized it as follows:

> Yes, it sounds sublime, but it's the commitment and will of people to develop further and aim for the best teaching in the world. I see this great professional pride and competence—people thinking about what is best for the kids and the future, best for the Finnish school system. It is such a gratifying situation to be able to be part of this kind of work.

Social Aspects: Supportive Context

The reform was generally described as a shared system-wide responsibility, an aspect of sustainable school development, and a way to serve the nation's children and build a better future. To understand the participants' strong mutual

motivation, we need to do it through social lenses. Administrators pointed out that Finland was an ideal context for developing and leading participative education reform in terms of cultural support. The core curriculum was reformed in the context of a culturally embedded national appreciation for basic education that had become rooted in society over years of sustainable, system-wide, participation-oriented education development. An important characteristic of this development was the strong, somewhat autonomous local implementation promoted by local officials and school staff during the national core curriculum reform process. Therefore, the overall attitude toward the reform in Finland was described as inquisitive, trusting, and positive. Stakeholders in the reform participated not just in a reform, but in a chain of sustainable school development, and they considered it an honorable duty. As one interviewee explained:

> EDUFI is extremely lucky that people see this as such important work and want to join . . . Otherwise, we'd be totally in trouble—and that's probably a Finnish secret, this amazing spirit of volunteering—that our top researchers want to participate, and our best teachers want to come to work.

This was exemplified in many ways in the administrators' stories. The participants participated voluntarily in the reform without payment or reward, and numerous Finns made thoughtful comments in the public open commentaries, trusting that their opinions would be read and considered. Furthermore, administrators explained how important it was for key national interest groups, such as teachers' unions, to support and participate in the work. Administrators also emphasized the role of universities as important collaboration partners throughout successive reforms. Universities provided new and relevant research results and provided experts who could support the work. Moreover, teacher educators could further support curriculum development by educating professional teachers and incorporating the reformed curriculum into teacher education.

However, the social aspect was also the most criticized element of the reform (see Table 1). On the one hand, administrators highlighted the importance of favorable political decisions and supportive legislation concerning education issues as the basis for sustainable educational change and functional curriculum reform—which was considered a crucial element of FCCR2014 work. On the other hand, administrators pointed out that it was important for the planning and leading of curriculum reforms to be part of sustainable school development, the responsibility of an independent national agency (as it was), and in the hands of skilled educational administrators and experts—not legislators and politicians, due to the non-sustainable nature of politics and the changing interests and volatile views of political parties (i.e., the *trias politica principle*). Although this was the case, administrators also claimed that they did not have the best conditions and support for working independently and reported dissatisfaction with the negative attitude of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture toward the work. Administrators primarily criticized the Ministry for providing inadequate resources, too short a time limit, and an insufficient budget for the reform work, which they claimed significantly hindered the participative FCCR2014 work. One interviewee described resource deficiency as follows:

In this curriculum reform, the contradiction is incomprehensible . . . We have such poor financial conditions to develop the process in a way that will enable participation and interaction among people from the beginning . . . People are actually volunteering for the work, both here [in EDUFI] and in the field, and I find that interesting . . . I think there is a misunderstanding about the nature of such [a] participatory process. If we want participation and involvement, it takes time, space, and resources to create the right conditions; not everything can happen online.

Administrators reported that resource limitations impeded their goals of participative reform, and they mentioned problems such as, for example, not having sufficient funds to engage enough EDUFI administrators to complete the work, organize enough meetings with the groups, invite experts, book rooms for meetings, cover the travel costs of group members from distant parts of Finland, or organize seminars in the field. Lack of sufficient time for developing and steering the reform in an optimal way was described as a problem, as administrators reported not having enough time to work truly collaboratively, meet with their group frequently, genuinely co-write papers, and discuss and internalize changes alongside the participants. The resulting workload that some administrators faced was reported as extremely heavy.

Interpersonal Aspects: Reform as an Interactive and Collaborative Process

The overarching goal of the FCCR2014 was to provide a stage for interpersonal processes to flourish and for the different participants to meet, discuss, and interact to build a shared, enhanced curricular understanding. As one interviewee explained, “It is the communication between people that matters and has proved to be the source of something new and valuable.” Overall, the core curriculum was reformed in small work groups and these groups were responsible for writing their part of the curriculum—one group was responsible for e. g., the math section and another one for the section that determined how “learning” was understood in the curriculum. These groups followed the same guidelines, met in seminars, and had the ability, at least to some extent, to read and comment on each other’s drafts during the work. The chairpersons also met regularly during the chairpersons’ meetings.

Overall, the interviewees were extremely pleased with the interpersonal aspects (see Table 1) of the FCCR2014 process. They saw open, collaborative work as a desirable operating model and culture for local work across the entire education system. One interviewee described participative, collaboration-boosting leadership as an example: “We want our actions to be a model of how to do it, and to work with as wide and versatile [a] collaboration as possible at different agentic levels so that [the process] is as transparent as it can rationally be and can work successfully.”

Administrators reported being delighted with the spirit of collaboration in the groups and described it as pleasant, warm, committed, and intensive; participants interacted fruitfully with each other, worked actively together within the organized structure of given tasks, and welcomed differing views in conversations. Supporting the principle of democracy in the work and decision-making was reported as important for building a collaborative spirit and shared responsibility

for the task: each member of a group was equal and had an equal responsibility and privilege to participate in conversations and tasks. One interviewee described great satisfaction with this collaboration: “The atmosphere of respect is pretty good; people listen to and hear each other and respect each other’s opinions and truly take them into account.” Furthermore, administrators reported that supporting the initial work was crucial for instilling a fruitful culture of collaboration among the participants. If the group grew together from the beginning, it would be easier to overcome conflicts and difficulties.

Administrators further emphasized that a central aspect of group work was conversation. Knowledge, experiences, views, ideas, and opinions regarding possible problems and solutions were shared, discussed, and reflected upon through dialogue, discussion, negotiation, and debate among the professionals. Even “the wild ideas” were welcomed in the groups, as an interviewee eagerly explained. An open-ended, rich conversational culture was recognized in the reform, especially within the working groups, but also across the groups and in the field as representatives worked together for common goals. Sharing and exchanging views was considered important for familiarizing the participants with each other’s perspectives, gaining an understanding of the big picture, and formulating a shared language about the change. Furthermore, individual knowledge and views were collaboratively considered, reflected on, compared, combined, prioritized, amended, and translated into a shared understanding of the reformed curriculum that could be approved and owned by all participants. One interviewee described this shared sense-making process as follows:

> At the beginning of the conversation, we might have very different viewpoints. However, when this happens, throughout the day, everyone starts to understand that we are writing more than just a curriculum for “our school,” and it takes a long time for a common vision to be decided.

Administrators reported that they aimed to start the work in all the groups by discussing the big questions and meta-level decisions regarding the general aspects of the curriculum (e.g., the concept of learning) and then working on certain subject specific parts; however, the phases of the work were not fully synchronized, which undermined the achievement of this goal to some extent.

Administrators’ main concerns about the reform, and almost all their dissatisfaction regarding the interpersonal aspects of the reform (see Table 1), were attributed to the lack of organized meetings and spaces to engage in such long, open-ended conversations and a lack of ways to share knowledge and understanding within and across groups. Administrators reported that they would have liked to meet with their groups more often, which was not possible due to a lack of resources. Insufficient meetings between participants, the people in charge of different groups, and different stakeholders in the education system were reported as limiting opportunities to talk, share knowledge, learn from each other’s views, negotiate meanings, form shared understandings, and agree on common concepts and language across groups—in short, to work more slowly but meaningfully. In particular, some of the subject group chairpersons reported concern and anxiety that they could not obtain timely information about general principles as a basis

for their subject-specific work and, were possibly not able to build coherence in the curriculum.

Organizational Aspects: Building and Leading Reform

Administrators' stories reflected a strong appreciation for the participative and collaborative organization of the work, but they also agreed that the lack of sufficient time and financial resources greatly hampered the successful achievement of their goals. Most administrators said that the reform was conducted "as well as it could with the money received" with the support of the head and manager of the reform and the help of the counseling steering group and all the administrators. Administrators also pointed out many clever choices they made to support maximum participation within the allocated budget, such as using technology to allow distant group members to participate online. The reform was praised in many ways, and most administrators reported being completely satisfied with it. However, the way the reform was conducted elicited tension and contradictory opinions, as did the implementation of the process.

The central challenge was to ensure the level of leadership needed to support participation and collaboration without suffocating participation, creativity, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Therefore, administrators sometimes felt the need to step back, which basically meant not determining preconditions or directions for the work, but instead enabling true, collective responsibility and democratic, professional work processes to evolve. Administrators said that they appreciated the shared leadership practices of the heads of the reform: administrators had the opportunity to lead their groups as chairpersons with a personal touch, allowing groups to work in their own way within the structure. As chairpersons, administrators reported providing enough space for open-ended conversational processes within the planned structures, leading the work and the planned meetings with a conversational rather than commanding or information-only tone, emphasizing that the tasks were a shared responsibility, allowing experts to do their jobs without constantly interfering, promoting shared leadership, and sometimes taking the role of peer in the group and not having the casting vote in decision-making situations. Instead of taking a commanding role and driving forward in difficult situations when conversations seemed stuck, administrators emphasized the importance of inspiring and encouraging participants: "All the time, we ask if any ideas have come to mind and encourage people to raise their questions." Their goal was to foster a democratic process that, despite its difficulties, would result in a new, enhanced understanding. Administrators pointed out that leading such open work was unpredictable, even for the administrators in charge, but worth facilitating:

> For me, understanding the value of the process has become stronger. This is absolutely an open process, and we filter the expertise sincerely into this thing, [and] that is wonderfully good. I see in the international arena that countries are in different situations. A new curriculum just pops out of some closet . . . or they do nothing for years because they cannot reach consensus. I just trust

> the process to allow us to discuss and look for a third or fifth solution, which . . . is usually a very good one.

Administrators also highlighted that participation and collaboration needed to be organized and actively facilitated to flourish and achieve goals, as "the eternal challenge for chairs is that everyone has so much to say, but the matter must always result in a decision." Administrators stated that it was vital to support participants and give them opportunities to contribute to and engage in the collaborative work processes toward shared goals, get the best out of organized meetings rather than wasting time and energy, and have all the necessary information to build shared understanding in the groups. Administrators stressed the importance of planning and organizing a functional meta-level timetable and process that included various face-to-face and online meetings among different people and groups—and making sure that the groups were on the right track, following the planned schedule and agenda.

Administrators claimed that they had ultimate responsibility for completing the curriculum work, and they emphasized the importance of on-time decision-making, encouraging the participants to stay on track during discussions, watching the clock, following the schedule, forming conclusions from the group discussions, acting as mediators between participants and groups, heading the process if necessary, and continually providing support and information for the groups. This caretaking leadership role was emphasized by two interviewees as follows:

> My role is to fit things together because there are many perspectives and fields of information . . . and so that this does not swell like bread dough . . . I am also an enabler, but if necessary, I take on the role of mediator or referee. I start putting limits on the area so that we can work within it, and everyone must give up on something so that we can move forward.
>
> Yeah, well, of course we must plan and organize it . . . so that we can get it out of those people (talks about work results) [based on] what materials are sent to them. There are, of course, schedules, and the whole core curriculum process . . . We must make sure that those threads are in everyone's hands, that we follow the schedule . . . and then we work . . . Even though we have innovative and enthusiastic people . . . we work and always have things ready and on the table, in time.

Administrators unanimously agreed that their task was to steer the work toward a somewhat predetermined vision. It was clear that certain main principles and relevant laws underpinned their work, and administrators described their tasks in terms of making sure that those aspects were considered by the groups. However, some administrators emphasized their influencing role more than others. Whereas some claimed that they only supported the collaborative work and tried not to dabble in the subject matter, even stating that "the question is dangerous, because I should not drive my own agenda or pursue my own interests," others explained that they aimed to influence the content based on their expert positions and duties as chairpersons. Administrators mainly described influencing the work directly by participating in discussions and explaining their opinions and why the work could, should, could not, or should not proceed in a certain direction. Additionally, they sometimes

reported influencing indirectly, for example, by inviting guest speakers who had known views on the issue.

Administrators' descriptions of the desired and realized aspects of leadership and open-ended participation varied. Some considered that the reform leadership was too predetermined, centralized, and strict, and called for greater openness, discussion, and sharing of responsibility. In contrast, others longed for stronger steering and wondered whether such an extremely open reform could ever succeed in delivering a coherent document in time. One interviewee reached the heart of this dilemma, by saying:

> The question of participation is very interesting—as it is really a question of leadership. If everything is terribly well planned, then the process may be followed in a way that leads to a certain, predefined goal . . . The other option is a participative process, and the end result is not totally clear. I am not sure which one this is.

This statement reflects the close and somewhat blurry connection between participation and leadership: leaders are responsible for supporting or suppressing participation. However, they are also responsible for finishing the work in a proper manner. How to find a proper balance between open-ended participation and functional steering and leadership remains a challenge to be resolved in each case.

Discussion: Leading Participative Reforms in Complex Systems

Ideal participative approach

As discussed earlier, one of the central leadership challenges is to make system-wide decisions that are wise and functional enough to be legitimated, implemented, and sustained in the everyday interactions of individuals across the education system. Through the results, we learned that participative reform could be beneficial for responding to this challenge by providing support, recognizing, and resolving problems, building shared understanding and functional solutions in the system, and engaging professionals to boost long-lasting, desirable system-wide change (Akpoviroro et al., 2018; Fullan, 2007; Robbin & Judge, 2014; Sturdy & Grey, 2005; Tikkanen et al., 2017). We came to understand the complexity of participative reform as a social, organizational, interpersonal, and personal challenge which helps administrators evaluate the costs, opportunities, challenges, and value of participation.

The results of this study showed that the ideal organizational capacity, based on administrators' understanding of their desired and actual leadership in the participatory process, was a complex mix. Participation was evidently considered a desirable way to lead system-wide change and national reform. Furthermore, the goal of participative leadership—to find functional, fruitful, lasting coherence in complexity together with central stakeholders in the system—is noble and shared. The results revealed agreement that participative leadership calls for top leaders to include stakeholders, encourage collaboration, take the risk of losing some of their control, reject strict dichotomizations between strategy formulation and implementation, and

consider change leadership a responsible act of giving stakeholders a fair chance to participate in the decision-making that affects their lives (Fung, 2006; Gray & Purdy, 2018; Waldman & Galvin, 2008). But how can this be done in practice, and to what extent should participation and openness be taken in the context of national-level reform and decision-making, given the inevitability of divided opinions? Based on the results, we now discuss the results from three viewpoints: *building participation, not quasi-collaboration*; *building coherence in complexity—together*; and *fitting change to the system.*

Building participation, not quasi-participation

Our results showed some possible ways of developing a participative reform process, such as strengthening personal capacity by inviting a wide spectrum of stakeholders to participate in national reform and organizing open-to-all online commentaries and seminars with different stakeholder groups. The essential participation and competence to ensure lasting change must come from the system in which the changes are to be implemented (Collinson, 2019; Kujala et al., 2019; Maritz et al., 2011; Rok, 2009; Waldman & Galvin, 2008). However, although a reform process may seem participative based on a large number of participants or widespread feedback collection, the main challenge is managing the change process so that participants and their professional experience, opinions, views, ideas, and concerns are truly considered in decision-making and influence decisions in practice (Senge, 1990).

Our results showed, in line with previous literature, that the motivation and commitment of individuals in systems to move toward reformed visions and strategies is believed to be what makes reforms successful (Senge, 1990). However, if participants are invited to reform a system but realize that their input is not genuinely welcomed, does not make a difference, and is merely posturing, the quasi-participative reality could potentially have a negative influence on implementation. Previous studies on education reforms suggest that quasi-participative reforms are fruitless and can harm systems, since only true participation can help individuals understand, engage in, and internalize changes well enough to change their own behavior and, thus, change systemic everyday interactions (Al-Daami & Wallace, 2007; Broadhead, 2002; Carl, 2005; Molstad, 2015; Murphy, 1988; Ramparsad, 2001; Saracaloglu et al., 2010; Senge, 1990). Participative reform differs therefore from consultative reform because the urgency of involving people in systemic change is a priority, going beyond the mere collection of tips for decision-making.

Studies have also shown that genuine participative reform starts early in national-level decision-making when problems are first detected and can provide the basis for reform strategies (Akpoviroro et al., 2018). Participative leadership is, therefore, a whole-reform initiative that requires careful consideration of stakeholder involvement and the organization of stakeholder collaboration from start to finish—and proper resources (Anderson, 1999; Shaeffer, 1994; Wang et al., 2022). Based on the results, elements such as a well-structured reform timetable, many opportunities for stakeholders to participate, work in small groups, leading discussions with a democratic style, sharing information system-wide, thoroughly reviewing and

utilizing feedback, writing the curriculum drafts in collaboration with participants, and organizing discussion-based meetings can engage participants and support their input to the work.

Building coherence in complexity—together

However, truly participative reform also involves challenges, one of which is the risk of complexity chaos. Diverse people with different views and interests, genuinely participating in decision-making, can potentially lead to conflicts and discord rather than coherent visions and strategies. Therefore, stakeholder inclusion and priority are also debated issues because, despite their inherent importance, there may be situations in which all interests do not fit neatly together, and prioritization is needed. If an attempt is made to include everyone and everything in a reform, there may be no clear direction. Compromise is probably the second worst result of participative, collaborative work, as it truly satisfies no-one. Because the goal of systemic reform is to foster a vision—a coherent strategy for a system to navigate by in a complex world—there needs to be both the will and the means to make good decisions and reach a desired, coherent end result.

An interpersonal capacity perspective can shed light on the benefits of participative reform decision-making, the aim of which is to build a new understanding out of individual, shared understandings via the interpersonal processes of conversation and shared sense-making (Soini et al., 2021). After all, a shared vision should not be delivered *to* the system but formed via a process in which participants share what is important to them in the system, in their work, and in the change (Senge, 1990). The education system provided us with an excellent contextual metaphor for this. The traditional core of education—empowering people and developing them to become critical, active members and builders of society—aligns with the core idea of participative leadership: the goal is not to make people in a system follow blindly but to involve them in the active process of collaboratively building shared understanding and better solutions (Collinson, 2019). This is precisely what the results reflected: different, active participants can collaboratively develop something valuable through discussions and negotiations and learn from each other, with each other—which is more than the leaders and stakeholders can achieve alone (Anderson, 1999; Fullan, 2007; Gray & Purdy, 2018; Hartnett, 2011, Soini et al., 2021).

The complexity of arguments, facts, and views presented and shared by all stakeholders and processed during respectful conversations provides a platform for fruitful reform and effective decision-making. Such a platform allows needs to be recognized and met, appropriate resources to be allocated, and the possible tensions, contradictions, pitfalls, and threats of the intended changes to be resolved throughout the system (Salonen-Hakomäki et al., 2016). It also ignites essential conversations in the system (Mehta & Cohen, 2017), making reform a truly interlinked sense-making process within and across the system's various levels (Soini et al., 2021; Tikkanen et al., 2017).

As the results indicated, leadership as its best supports such an open, collaborative reform process (Gray & Purdy, 2018; Tikkanen et al., 2017) by organizing and

supporting participants to collaborate and deliver their best—establish coherence in complexity. Leaders need resources, skills, and opportunities to conduct democratic, fruitful group meetings with functional agendas and open-ended discussions, room for different views and good team spirit, fluent knowledge sharing among participants, and collaborative decision-making, as well as to find ways to encourage the entire system to participate in the change process. To achieve genuine collaboration and shared sense-making among different participants, leaders also need to step back from a control-it-all position and tolerate and support the incomplete, unpredictable, and adventurous nature of the process—to take a learner role themselves (Wagner & Kegan, 2013).

Obviously, cultural capacity plays an important role in guiding and supporting the effectiveness of participative approaches (Huang et al., 2011). In some contexts, participation is built into the culture, whereas in others, it is difficult to build a spirit of participation due to the strong influence of, for example, top-down leadership and patriarchy. Cultures change slowly, but new ways of doing things can prove functional and underpin a new culture of sustainable development, which, in turn, may influence social capacity and culture. If system leaders are courageous enough to face the problems and challenges inherent in change, instead of being victimized by them (Barth, 2013), they can support these cultural, multi-level processes with their leadership. If participation is considered valuable, administrators who plan and steer national reforms can take the courage to build participative change into systems and lead system change slowly and thoroughly to learn this new style of collaborative decision making.

Fitting change to the system with responsible leadership

The paradox of a truly participative but still system-fitting, coherent, professional reform that enhances decision-making and avoids complexity chaos is probably something that all leaders in participative settings struggle to deal with. An important aspect to consider is that if the means and ends of the reform work are fully open to emergent participative decision-making, the reform may go in any direction the participants suggest. This cannot be the case in sustainable reform (Fullan, 2007), which requires national-level administrators to have opportunities to lead the system's way forward based sustainably, professionally, persistently, and strategically on the institutional essence and purpose of the system. For core curriculum development in a basic education system, national-level administrators and other central decision-makers at the national level have the final responsibility for protecting and incorporating into the reformed curriculum the values that influence the teaching of a nation's children. Therefore, these national-level leaders are responsible and must be accountable for acting as protectors of both the values and the system, which could mean that if conflicts or chaos control the work, they may be forced to make decisions that are unacceptable to stakeholder participants. Furthermore, exclusion, prioritization, boundary setting, and a healthy decision-making attitude are important tools for leaders to solve such problems and finish the work in time to serve the system's best interests (cf. Wang et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, the results revealed the administrators' concerns that too strict leadership in a predetermined direction may drown out participation and opportunities for shared sense-making and result in quasi-participation, since open-ended participation and collaboration are the keys to wise, legitimate, system-wide, implementable decisions that meet the needs of system stakeholders (Mehta & Cohen, 2017). Therefore, participative leadership calls for transparent, responsible, and constructive (rather than suppressive) decision-making (Collinson, 2019). If certain stakeholders' views or decisions in working groups cannot be accepted, allowing the work to proceed democratically, this should be explained and discussed with them openly to reach shared understanding, rather than ignoring the stakeholders' views.

Balance and wisdom are vital in participative reform leadership for achieving the genuine participation and safe decision-making necessary to support the system (Salonen-Hakomäki & Soini, 2023). Reform leaders face the challenge of supporting both the change process and the stability of the system and its values. Every curriculum reform process produces a *new* vision (Wagner & Kegan, 2013) of how children should be educated, but simultaneously, a somewhat predetermined one that must fit well with the institutional goals and purpose of the basic education system.

Senge (1990) used the term "shared vision" to refer to this issue and explained that people who feel they are making something good, meaningful, valuable, and important are motivated to do their best for it in the long term. Furthermore, they are willing to forfeit some of their personal interests for the common good and be learning-centered (Salonen-Hakomäki & Soini, 2023; Senge, 1990). Therefore, success in participative reform could be connected to how committed the participants are to the purpose and core values of the system. To help the system engage in reform, reform leaders especially at the national level must commit to developing common ground, serving the system, bridging interests, building strong processes, and preparing functional solutions in collaboration with stakeholders. With such strong, responsible, and versatile leadership, participative national reform provides a way to maximize complex social changes and build better systems—together.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we call for open conversation to determine the role of participative reform and what participative leadership is (or should be) in changing educational systems –and societies. Leadership is important for establishing coherence in complexity, developing and supporting participation in a system, and preserving the values that underpin the systems that keep our societies together. However, participation keeps systems going (cf., Salonen-Hakomäki & Soini, 2023; Wang et al, 2022); therefore, strong leadership and stakeholder participation should not be competing, conflicting themes, but a mutually supportive, dialectic duo (Collinson, 2019). A participative approach somewhat shakes the traditional idea of leadership. Leadership is not about leading from the front but walking with people. People change and change their behavior when it matters deeply to them (Senge, 1990). Therefore, to make systems change, participative leaders must walk the road of change with others in the system to join the meaningful adventure of learning and the collaborative search for what is important, true, and good.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Ethical Approval The ethical principles of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) have been followed in conducting the study. Research permissions were acquired from the EDUFI. Informed consents were asked from all participants and their confidentiality was protected in both collecting and analyzing the data. The study did not require an ethics review in Finland (cf. TENK).

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