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Adopting Finnish Schooling Models in Developing Countries: Opportunities, Challenges, and Contextual Adaptations

Barkat Bhayo[1]

[1] School of Energy Systems, Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology, Lahti, Finland e-mail: barkat.bhayo@lut.fi, ORCID: 0000-0001-7309-2880

Corresponding Author: Barkat Bhayo, e-mail: barkat.bhayo@lut.fi

Abstract

The Finnish schooling model is widely recognised for its emphasis on equity, teacher professionalism, decentralised governance, and learner-centred pedagogy. This paper examines how key Finnish schooling principles may inform educational reform in developing countries. Drawing on a qualitative synthesis of peer-reviewed sources cited in the manuscript, the study identifies the most relevant Finnish principles, analyses the main constraints affecting their adoption, and synthesises adaptation strategies supported by the literature. The findings indicate that the most relevant elements of the Finnish model are equity and inclusion, research-based teacher education, professional autonomy, trust-based governance, and flexible, inquiry-oriented pedagogy. However, the review also shows that these principles cannot be transferred as a complete institutional package because their effectiveness depends on broader social, economic, and governance conditions. Resource inequality, limited administrative capacity, rigid accountability structures, and sociocultural barriers significantly shape reform possibilities in many developing contexts. The paper concludes that Finnish schooling is most useful as a source of guiding principles rather than as a model for direct replication. Contextual adaptation, long-term capacity building, participatory curriculum reform, and school–university–government partnerships emerge as the most credible pathways for meaningful educational reform. The study contributes to comparative education research by advancing a systemic, context-sensitive framework for learning from internationally admired education systems. Methodologically, the study is designed as an integrative thematic literature review. This approach combines narrative interpretation with thematic synthesis to integrate conceptual, empirical, and policy-oriented sources and to identify recurring principles, constraints, and adaptation pathways across the literature.

Keywords: Finnish schooling, developing countries, contextual adaptation, teacher education, educational reform

Introduction

Education systems across the world face growing pressure to improve quality, promote equity, and prepare learners for complex social, economic, and technological realities. These pressures are especially visible in developing countries, where educational provision is often shaped by persistent resource constraints, structural inequalities, uneven governance capacity, and sociocultural barriers. In response, policymakers and educational reformers frequently turn to international reference systems in search of effective reform models. Among these, the Finnish schooling model has attracted sustained global attention because of its emphasis on equity, trust-based governance, teacher professionalism, and learner-centred pedagogy (Sahlberg, 2007; Niemi, 2014).

Finland's education system is widely recognised for achieving strong learning outcomes while maintaining relatively low levels of inequality between schools and learners. Unlike systems driven by high-stakes testing and external accountability, Finnish schooling relies on

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professional trust, decentralised governance, and collaborative forms of evaluation (Vainikainen et al., 2017; Mäkiharju & Smeds-Nylund, 2023). National authorities define broad curricular goals, while municipalities and schools retain substantial autonomy over curriculum implementation, pedagogy, and resource use (Risku & Tian, 2020). This governance structure is supported by a strong public education tradition, sustained investment, and a societal culture characterised by relatively high levels of institutional trust (Niemi, 2014).

A central pillar of the Finnish model is research-based teacher education. Teachers are prepared through university-based master's programmes that integrate educational theory, pedagogical practice, and research training (Niemi, 2011; Lavonen, 2016). This model positions teachers as reflective professionals who exercise both autonomy and responsibility in relation to curriculum interpretation, assessment, and instructional design (Niemi et al., 2018; Chung, 2023). Finnish schooling is also associated with pedagogical approaches that emphasise student engagement, interdisciplinary learning, and holistic development. Phenomenon-based learning, for example, encourages students to explore real-world issues through inquiry-oriented and cross-disciplinary projects (Chen & Liu, 2022). Research suggests that such approaches can promote critical thinking, collaboration, and learner motivation when supported by appropriate teacher preparation and flexible curricular structures (Chen & Liu, 2021; Bachri et al., 2023).

The appeal of Finnish schooling has made it a frequent point of reference in reform discussions in developing countries. Many such contexts face persistent challenges related to quality, inequality, teacher preparation, rural disadvantage, and limited institutional support (Ismail, 2015; Maphalala et al., 2023). Gender disparities and shortages of qualified teachers continue to affect educational access and outcomes in many low- and middle-income settings (Alderman et al., 1996; Robinson-Pant, 2004). From this perspective, Finnish emphases on inclusion, professional trust, early support, and public responsibility appear highly attractive. Yet this attractiveness has also encouraged simplified narratives that overlook the contextual conditions under which Finnish educational success evolved.

It is important to note that the Finnish education system is not a fixed or easily transferable model, but the outcome of long-term cultural, political, and social developments that have evolved over decades. Recent evidence also suggests that the current Finnish education landscape is more complex than simplified success narratives imply, with ongoing policy adjustments, pressures on tertiary attainment, changing funding conditions, and broader governance challenges shaping the system today (OECD, 2025; Risku & Tian, 2020; Hidayat & Suoranta, 2022).

Comparative education research consistently warns against uncritical policy borrowing. Education systems are not neutral technical arrangements; they are embedded in specific historical, political, cultural, and economic contexts (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). Finland's schooling model evolved gradually over decades through reforms aligned with broader social policies, public institutions, and governance capacities (Niemi, 2014; Risku & Tian, 2020). These conditions differ substantially from those of many developing countries, where governance systems may be fragmented, funding may be limited, and accountability frameworks may be externally shaped or politically contested. Empirical studies also show that the selective adoption of individual Finnish practices, such as teacher autonomy or decentralised governance, may produce unintended effects when implemented without corresponding systemic support (Chung, 2016; Hossain, 2023).

Against this background, this paper examines how Finnish schooling models may inform educational reform in developing countries while recognising contextual constraints and the risks of uncritical policy transfer. The study pursues three objectives: first, to identify the core principles of the Finnish schooling model that are most relevant to developing countries; second,

to analyse the structural, cultural, economic, and governance-related challenges that affect their adoption; and third, to synthesise evidence-based strategies for contextual adaptation. By integrating research from comparative education, teacher education, curriculum studies, and development research, the paper advances a systemic and context-sensitive framework for learning from Finland without reducing reform to imitation.

The original contribution of this study lies in synthesising Finnish schooling principles into an adaptation-oriented framework for developing countries. Unlike a conventional literature review that only describes Finnish educational features, this paper links each principle to the enabling conditions, implementation risks, and contextual modifications required in low- and middle-income settings. The proposed framework was developed through thematic comparison of the cited literature across three analytical dimensions: core Finnish principles, constraints in developing contexts, and feasible adaptation pathways. It differs from general policy-borrowing accounts by specifying how Finnish-inspired ideas may be translated into locally realistic reforms rather than simply transferred as models.

Literature Review

The literature on Finnish schooling consistently characterises it as a coherent and values-driven system rather than a collection of isolated reforms. Scholars repeatedly stress that its effectiveness emerges from the alignment of governance, teacher education, curriculum, assessment, and support structures (Sahlberg, 2007; Niemi, 2014; Niemi et al., 2018). This section organises the literature around the three research objectives of the study.

Core Principles of the Finnish Schooling Model Relevant to Developing Countries

Equity is frequently identified as the normative foundation of Finnish education policy. The system is designed to minimise disparities between schools and learners through publicly funded comprehensive education, early support, and inclusive provision (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008; Niemi & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015). Students with diverse learning needs are supported within mainstream schools through flexible measures rather than systematic exclusion or segregation (Sassi & Moberg, 1990; Mitchell, 2014). For developing countries, where educational inequality often mirrors broader socioeconomic, geographic, and gender-based disparities, this emphasis on inclusion and early intervention is especially relevant (Ismail, 2015).

At the same time, Finnish equity is closely connected to broader welfare-state arrangements, including public investment, social support, municipal services, and early intervention structures. These background conditions are not automatically present in many developing countries. Therefore, equity-oriented borrowing must consider not only school-level practices but also the wider social policies and support mechanisms that make inclusive schooling feasible in Finland.

Teacher education is consistently identified as a central pillar of Finnish educational success. All teachers are prepared through university-based master's programmes that integrate educational theory, pedagogical practice, and research (Niemi, 2011; Lavonen, 2016). Research-based teacher education is intended to build analytical capacity, pedagogical judgement, and reflective professional identity (Aspfors & Eklund, 2017; Mikkilä-Erdmann et al., 2024). This model positions teachers as autonomous professionals who can interpret curricula, design learning experiences, and engage in continuous improvement (Niemi et al., 2018; Chung, 2023).

However, the feasibility of implementing a Finnish-style teacher education structure is limited in many resource-constrained systems. University-based master's preparation requires sustained funding, qualified teacher educators, research infrastructure, and strong links between schools and higher education institutions. For this reason, developing countries may initially

need staged alternatives, such as school-based mentoring, practice-oriented professional development, teacher learning communities, and gradual upgrading of teacher education programmes, rather than immediate replication of Finland's full model.

Professional autonomy in Finland is closely linked to trust-based governance. Teachers are trusted to make instructional decisions, adapt curricula, and design assessments within national frameworks (Haapaniemi et al., 2021; Chung, 2023). External inspection and high-stakes testing play a limited role, while quality assurance relies more on peer collaboration, sample-based evaluation, and local responsibility (Vainikainen et al., 2017). Decentralised governance supports this autonomy because municipalities and schools have substantial authority over implementation and resource allocation, while national authorities define broad aims (Risku & Tian, 2020; Mäkiharju & Smeds-Nylund, 2023).

Finnish teaching and learning practices also emphasise learner engagement, interdisciplinary inquiry, and holistic development. Phenomenon-based learning is a prominent example, encouraging students to investigate real-world themes across subject boundaries (Chen & Liu, 2022). Empirical studies associate this approach with improved engagement, scientific reasoning, and collaborative learning when supported by appropriate teacher preparation (Chen & Liu, 2021; Bachri et al., 2023). Flexible curricula allow teachers and schools to contextualise learning in relation to local needs. This flexibility is often highlighted as a potentially valuable principle for developing countries where curriculum relevance and student engagement remain pressing concerns.

Challenges and Constraints in Adopting Finnish Schooling Principles

While Finnish educational principles are widely regarded as relevant, the literature also identifies substantial challenges that complicate their adoption in developing country contexts. A major constraint concerns resource disparities. Many developing countries face uneven school funding, infrastructure gaps, shortages of qualified teachers, and limited access to learning materials, especially in rural and marginalised areas (Maphalala et al., 2023). In such settings, equity-oriented reforms may be difficult to implement without significant and sustained public investment.

Trust-based governance and professional autonomy presuppose strong professional preparation, institutional stability, and norms of shared responsibility (Niemi et al., 2018). In many developing settings, schooling remains shaped by centralised administration or examination-driven accountability (Kim & Yun, 2019). Studies warn that increasing teacher autonomy without parallel investment in professional support may intensify uncertainty and implementation gaps rather than improving quality (Chung, 2016; Hossain, 2023). The relationship between school autonomy and inequality is especially context-sensitive, with evidence suggesting that academic autonomy may widen achievement gaps in some settings if broader supports are absent (Hossain, 2023).

Cultural and societal factors also shape reform possibilities. The literature documents tensions between learner-centred pedagogy and examination-oriented traditions, hierarchical teacher–student relations, and local expectations about authority and success (Robinson-Pant, 2004). Gender norms and social inequality further affect access and participation, especially in poor rural environments where girls have historically experienced lower access to educational opportunities (Alderman et al., 1996). These findings show that reform is not only a technical matter but also a cultural and political process.

Contextual Adaptation Strategies Supported by the Literature

In response to these constraints, comparative education research increasingly emphasises

contextual adaptation rather than direct policy transfer (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). One widely supported pathway is localised and research-informed teacher development. Rather than reproducing Finland's full teacher education structure, the literature supports programmes that emphasise reflective practice, school-based inquiry, and collaborative professional learning (Mikkilä-Erdmann et al., 2024; Fiskum et al., 2025). Evidence from Tanzania suggests that school-based professional development can promote pedagogical change when it is continuous, context-sensitive, and linked to teachers' classroom realities (Hardman et al., 2015).

A second adaptation strategy is collaborative curriculum design and participatory reform. Finnish curriculum reform emphasises shared interpretation among teachers, school leaders, municipalities, and other stakeholders (Soini et al., 2018). In developing countries, this implies that reform is more likely to succeed when teachers and communities participate in curriculum adaptation and when curriculum frameworks leave space for local relevance. A third adaptation pathway concerns school–university–government partnerships. Such partnerships can support teacher learning, curriculum innovation, and institutional development when they are sustained and grounded in mutual trust (Halász & Thant Sin, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023).

The literature also points to the role of digital tools and hybrid pedagogical models. In Finland, national and local programmes have supported collaborative design and implementation of digital tools within a decentralised system (Lavonen & Villalba-Condori, 2019). For developing countries, this suggests that technology can support adaptation when it is integrated into teacher learning, curriculum development, and local implementation rather than introduced as a stand-alone reform.

Taken together, the literature shows both convergence and tension. There is strong convergence around the importance of equity, teacher professionalism, curriculum flexibility, and trust-based governance in explaining Finnish schooling. However, the studies diverge on the ease with which these principles can be transferred. Finnish-focused studies often emphasise coherence and professional trust, whereas studies from developing contexts foreground resource scarcity, governance fragility, examination pressure, and sociocultural constraints. This tension supports the need for a contextual adaptation framework rather than a descriptive review of Finnish practices.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative literature-based research design. The analysis is based on a structured review and synthesis of the peer-reviewed sources cited in this manuscript, all of which were identified with the help of Scopus AI. The source base spans comparative education, teacher education, curriculum studies, governance, inclusion, and development research and includes journal articles, books, and book chapters.

More specifically, the study follows an integrative thematic review design. The review was not intended as a full systematic review with meta-analysis, but as a transparent qualitative synthesis of peer-reviewed literature relevant to Finnish schooling, policy borrowing, and educational reform in developing-country contexts. The search focused on English-language peer-reviewed publications and authoritative education policy sources available up to 2025. The final retained corpus consisted of the sources cited in the manuscript, including journal articles, books, book chapters, and selected policy material directly relevant to the research objectives.

The literature search was conducted through Scopus AI as an exploratory retrieval tool and was supplemented by manual screening of the sources cited in the manuscript. Search prompts combined terms such as 'Finnish education model', 'Finnish schooling', 'teacher education Finland', 'trust-based governance', 'equity in Finnish education', 'policy borrowing', 'developing countries', and 'contextual adaptation'. Sources were included when they addressed

Finnish schooling principles, comparative education, teacher education, curriculum reform, governance, inclusion, or educational development. Sources were excluded when they were not peer reviewed, were not directly relevant to the research objectives, or discussed Finland only in passing. Scopus AI was used to identify potentially relevant literature and thematic links; it did not determine the final inclusion of sources, coding decisions, or interpretation. Final source selection and synthesis were completed by the author.

The selection process involved four stages: exploratory identification of potentially relevant sources through Scopus AI; manual screening of titles, abstracts, and source relevance; exclusion of sources that did not directly address the study objectives; and final retention of sources that supported the thematic analysis. Because Scopus AI was used only as a discovery aid, all decisions concerning relevance, inclusion, exclusion, coding, and interpretation were made by the author. This procedure was used to improve transparency while avoiding reliance on AI-generated selection decisions.

The study uses thematic document analysis and qualitative synthesis. First, the selected literature was grouped according to the three research objectives: identifying the core principles of the Finnish schooling model that are relevant to developing countries; examining the structural, cultural, economic, and governance-related challenges that constrain adoption; and identifying evidence-based strategies for contextual adaptation. Second, recurrent concepts and patterns were coded across the literature, including equity and inclusion, research-based teacher education, teacher autonomy, trust-based governance, curriculum flexibility, rural and gender inequalities, school–university partnerships, and digital or hybrid pedagogical approaches.

The coding process followed three stages. In the first stage, initial descriptive codes were assigned to statements related to Finnish schooling principles, adoption barriers, and adaptation strategies. In the second stage, similar codes were merged into broader thematic categories, such as equity, teacher professionalism, autonomy, governance, curriculum flexibility, and contextual constraints. In the third stage, these categories were compared across sources to identify converging claims, tensions, and gaps in the literature.

Third, the coded findings were synthesised into an interpretive framework that emphasises contextual adaptation rather than direct policy transfer. This analytical stance is consistent with the comparative education literature, which repeatedly warns against decontextualised borrowing and stresses the importance of local capacity, stakeholder engagement, and systemic alignment (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014; Chung, 2016). A qualitative synthesis is appropriate because the topic is conceptual, comparative, and policy-oriented. The aim is not to test causal impact statistically, but to interpret existing evidence across different settings and to draw analytically grounded conclusions about opportunities, constraints, and adaptation pathways.

Analytical trustworthiness was strengthened through iterative reading, comparison across sources, and continuous checking of coded themes against the research objectives. Codes were first generated inductively from repeated concepts in the literature and were then refined into broader analytical categories. Themes were retained only when they were supported by more than one source and when they contributed directly to explaining opportunities, constraints, or adaptation strategies. The final synthesis was reviewed for coherence, internal consistency, and alignment with the cited evidence.

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and by the uneven availability of long-term empirical evidence on Finnish-inspired reforms in low- and middle-income settings. In addition, the category ‘developing countries’ covers highly diverse contexts. For this reason, the findings should be interpreted as analytical guidance rather than as universally applicable prescriptions.

To address this heterogeneity, the analysis treats developing countries not as a single uniform category but as a broad group of contexts that may share some development-related constraints while differing significantly in governance capacity, public finance, teacher supply, cultural expectations, language ecology, and regional inequality. The implications presented in this paper should therefore be adapted through country-specific and region-specific needs assessment.

Use of AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Scopus AI and Microsoft Copilot (GPT-5.4) as supplementary tools to support selected stages of the research and writing process. Their use was limited to literature exploration, identification of potentially relevant thematic links, and assistance in organizing author-developed material. These tools were not used to generate original scholarly claims independently, to make interpretive decisions, or to determine the final content of the manuscript. All AI-assisted outputs were carefully reviewed, critically assessed, and, where necessary, revised by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the content, interpretation, and conclusions presented in this paper.

Research Ethics

This study did not involve the collection of any primary data from human participants. All analyses were conducted using publicly available secondary data and did not include any identifiable or sensitive personal information. As a result, the work does not meet the criteria for human subjects research and therefore did not require review or approval from an institutional ethics committee.

Findings

The findings are presented in direct relation to the three research objectives. Because the study is based on a qualitative synthesis of literature, the results do not report statistical outcomes. Instead, they represent recurring patterns, converging interpretations, and evidence-based insights identified across the reviewed studies. Overall, the literature does not support simplistic policy borrowing. Instead, it shows that Finnish educational success is linked to the interaction of teacher education, trust-based governance, curriculum flexibility, inclusive support systems, and relatively stable public investment.

The findings extend the literature review by moving from description to analytical synthesis. Rather than repeating individual studies, this section identifies cross-cutting patterns across the reviewed sources and interprets how Finnish principles interact with enabling conditions and constraints in developing country contexts. The findings therefore represent the outcome of the thematic coding and synthesis described in the method section.

Core Principles Most Relevant to Developing Countries

The first major finding is that the Finnish schooling model is most relevant to developing countries through a set of interconnected principles rather than through a package of institutional arrangements that can be copied directly. Across the reviewed sources, five principles recur most consistently: equity and inclusion, research-based teacher education, professional autonomy, trust-based and decentralised governance, and learner-centred pedagogy (Sahlberg, 2007; Niemi, 2011; Niemi & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015; Lavonen, 2016; Mäkiharju & Smeds-Nylund, 2023).

These five principles were selected as the most salient themes through a combined analytical criterion. They appeared repeatedly across the reviewed literature, were conceptually central to explanations of Finnish schooling, and were directly relevant to the three research objectives of this study. The selection was therefore not based on frequency alone, but on the

extent to which each principle connected Finnish educational success with the opportunities and constraints identified for developing countries.

Equity is the most prominent principle identified in the literature. Finnish schooling is widely represented as a system intentionally designed to reduce disparities between schools, promote equal access to quality education, and provide early support for learners with different educational needs (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008; Sassi & Moberg, 1990; Mitchell, 2014). For developing countries, where education systems often struggle with inequality linked to poverty, geography, gender, disability, and exclusion, this principle provides an important conceptual direction for reform.

Teacher education and professionalism form a second major lesson. The literature strongly suggests that the quality of Finnish schooling is inseparable from the quality of teacher preparation. Finnish teachers are educated through university-based, research-oriented programmes that support reflective judgement, critical thinking, and long-term professional agency (Niemi, 2011; Aspfors & Eklund, 2017; Mikkilä-Erdmann et al., 2024). For developing countries, the key lesson is not necessarily the formal requirement of a master's degree, but the broader idea that educational quality depends on strengthening the intellectual and professional foundations of teaching.

A third result concerns professional autonomy. Finnish teachers are trusted to select instructional approaches, adapt content, assess students, and respond to local needs within broad national frameworks (Niemi et al., 2018; Haapaniemi et al., 2021; Chung, 2023). This autonomy is linked to competence, ethical responsibility, and collaboration rather than to the absence of accountability. The fourth result is that trust-based and decentralised governance provides an alternative to rigid centralisation, although the literature also makes clear that decentralisation works in Finland because it is supported by strong institutions and relatively equitable resource distribution (Risku & Tian, 2020; Mäkiharju & Smeds-Nylund, 2023). Finally, learner-centred pedagogy is consistently highlighted as a relevant principle because it offers a way to connect learning more directly to students' lives and local realities (Chen & Liu, 2021, 2022; Bachri et al., 2023).

Challenges Constraining Adoption in Developing Countries

The second major finding is that the adoption of Finnish schooling principles is constrained by a complex set of resource, governance, cultural, and structural barriers. The literature does not suggest that these barriers make adaptation impossible, but it shows that they significantly shape the form, pace, and sustainability of reform.

The most frequently identified challenge is resource inequality. Many developing countries face uneven distributions of funding, teachers, infrastructure, and learning materials across regions and social groups. Rural and marginalised communities often experience lower school quality and weaker physical infrastructure (Maphalala et al., 2023). From the perspective of Finnish-inspired reform, this matters because principles such as inclusion, curriculum flexibility, and learner-centred pedagogy require a minimum level of material and organisational support. Where schools lack stable staffing or essential resources, reforms may remain symbolic rather than transformative.

A related challenge concerns governance capacity and accountability pressures. Trust-based governance presupposes professional competence, institutional stability, and public confidence in education. In many developing contexts, however, schooling is shaped by centralised bureaucracies and examination systems that prioritise measurable outputs over professional discretion (Kim & Yun, 2019). Studies suggest that introducing autonomy into such environments without systemic support can create confusion and implementation gaps (Chung,

2016; Hossain, 2023).

Cultural norms and educational traditions further affect adoption. Learner-centred pedagogy, student agency, and reduced dependence on external testing may conflict with local expectations about discipline, authority, and educational success (Robinson-Pant, 2004). Gender and social inequalities also remain powerful constraints in many contexts, particularly in poor rural environments where girls have historically experienced lower access to educational opportunities (Alderman et al., 1996). These findings underline that educational reform is embedded in broader social structures and cannot be understood only through policy design.

Contextual Adaptation Strategies Supported by the Literature

The third major finding is that the literature strongly favours contextual adaptation over direct borrowing. Successful international policy learning depends on translation, reinterpretation, and local negotiation rather than imitation (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). In the case of Finnish schooling, the literature suggests that the most productive approach is to adapt principles in forms that are institutionally feasible, culturally legitimate, and educationally meaningful in the local setting.

The first adaptation pathway strongly supported by the literature is localised and research-informed teacher development. The studies do not recommend that all developing countries attempt to reproduce Finland's teacher education structure in full. Instead, they emphasise teacher capacity through reflective practice, classroom inquiry, mentoring, and collaborative professional learning (Mikkilä-Erdmann et al., 2024; Fiskum et al., 2025). Evidence from Tanzania indicates that school-based development models can improve pedagogy when they are continuous, practical, and linked to teachers' working conditions (Hardman et al., 2015).

A second adaptation strategy is collaborative curriculum design and participatory reform. In Finland, curriculum reform relies on shared interpretation and local participation rather than top-down prescription alone (Soini et al., 2018). In developing countries, this implies that reform is more likely to succeed when teachers, school leaders, and communities participate in curriculum adaptation and when curriculum frameworks leave space for local relevance.

A third adaptation pathway concerns school–university–government partnerships. Such partnerships can function as bridges between policy and practice by supporting teacher learning, curriculum innovation, and institutional development. Evidence from Myanmar and Vietnam suggests that partnerships can support teacher learning, research collaboration, and reform implementation when they are sustained over time and grounded in mutual trust (Halász & Thant Sin, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023).

The review also finds support for hybrid and digitally supported implementation models. Finnish experience suggests that collaborative design and implementation of digital tools can strengthen national and local reform processes in decentralised systems (Lavonen & Villalba-Condori, 2019). For developing countries, this indicates that technology can be useful when it is embedded in capacity building, curriculum work, and local adaptation rather than treated as a standalone solution. Overall, the literature supports gradual, systemic, and multi-level reform rather than rapid or fragmented change.

Across the reviewed studies, the strongest convergence concerns the need for systemic alignment: teacher education, curriculum reform, governance, inclusion, and assessment must develop together rather than as separate initiatives. The main divergence concerns feasibility. Studies on Finland emphasise trust, autonomy, and research-based professionalism as strengths, whereas studies from developing contexts caution that these principles may reproduce inequality if introduced without adequate resources, institutional capacity, and social support. This

synthesis shows that Finnish schooling is most useful as a source of adaptable principles, not as a complete institutional model.

Conclusions

This paper examined the relevance of Finnish schooling models for developing countries through the lens of opportunities, challenges, and contextual adaptation. The overall conclusion is clear: the Finnish schooling model can offer valuable guidance for educational reform in developing countries, but it cannot be transferred as a complete institutional package. Its relevance lies not in direct replication, but in the careful adaptation of its core principles to local realities. Finnish educational success is rooted in the interaction of equity-oriented policy, research-based teacher education, professional autonomy, trust-based governance, and learner-centred pedagogy. These features operate as parts of a coherent educational ecosystem rather than as isolated reforms.

The educational ecosystem identified in this study can be understood as a set of mutually reinforcing relationships: equity-oriented public policy creates the social foundation for inclusive schooling; research-based teacher education strengthens professional judgement; professional autonomy enables teachers to adapt curriculum and pedagogy; trust-based governance supports local responsibility; and learner-centred pedagogy translates these conditions into classroom practice. The central insight is that weakening one component also weakens the others, which explains why isolated borrowing of a single Finnish practice is unlikely to produce similar outcomes.

The first major conclusion is that equity and teacher professionalism are the two most important Finnish principles for developing countries to consider. In many developing contexts, education systems continue to struggle with unequal access, weak teacher preparation, rural disadvantage, and limited institutional support. The Finnish model is particularly relevant because it demonstrates how long-term commitment to inclusive public education and high-quality teacher development can strengthen both quality and fairness in schooling. However, these principles are meaningful only when supported by adequate structures, resources, and policy coherence.

The second major conclusion is that the adoption of Finnish-inspired reforms is constrained by deep structural conditions. Resource inequality, limited governance capacity, rigid accountability systems, and sociocultural barriers all affect the feasibility of reform. In low-resource settings, decentralisation may increase inequality if local actors lack the means to act effectively. Similarly, teacher autonomy may not lead to improved teaching if it is introduced without strong professional preparation and institutional support. Educational reform is therefore not simply a matter of selecting good ideas from successful countries; it requires attention to context, timing, institutional readiness, and broader social conditions.

The category of ‘developing countries’ should therefore be read as analytically broad and internally heterogeneous. Resource constraints, governance arrangements, teacher education capacity, language diversity, rural–urban inequalities, and welfare provision differ substantially across national and regional contexts. Consequently, the relevance of Finnish-inspired reform will vary across settings, and any application should begin with a local diagnosis rather than with a universal reform template.

A third conclusion is that contextual adaptation provides the most credible pathway for learning from Finnish schooling. The reviewed literature strongly supports gradual and locally grounded reform strategies rather than direct policy borrowing. Promising approaches include localised teacher development, participatory curriculum design, school–university–government partnerships, and flexible pedagogical models supported by digital tools where appropriate.

These strategies preserve the educational logic of the Finnish model while allowing implementation to reflect local constraints and priorities. In this sense, the most useful policy question is not whether developing countries can adopt the Finnish system, but how they can reinterpret selected Finnish principles in ways that are educationally meaningful and institutionally realistic.

This analysis contributes beyond the established policy-borrowing argument by specifying which Finnish principles appear transferable only as reform logics, which conditions make them feasible, and which risks may arise when they are adopted without systemic support. The resulting contribution is therefore not a generic claim that context matters, but an adaptation-oriented reading of the Finnish model that connects principles, enabling conditions, and likely implementation constraints for developing country settings.

The theoretical contribution of the proposed framework is its shift from policy borrowing as transfer to policy learning as conditional adaptation. The framework brings together three elements that are often treated separately in comparative education: the internal coherence of the Finnish schooling ecosystem, the contextual constraints of developing-country systems, and the adaptive mechanisms needed to translate principles into feasible reforms. This offers a conceptual tool for analysing internationally admired education systems without assuming that their practices can be directly replicated.

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