Chapter 3
Finland – The Late-Comer That Became the Envy of Its Nordic School Competitors

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Abstract Finland has lived a centuries long history under the rule of Sweden. In 1809 the country was transferred from the rule of Sweden to become a grand duchy of Russian empire. In 1917 Finland became an independent nation between the west and the east. Although Finland is currently strongly devoted to the west, this has not always been the case, and the country has to take into account carefully its historical, cultural, geopolitical and economic roots as well as the long Eastern border of 1340 kilometers with Russia.

Finland has several political, economic, cultural and educational features that are similar to the other four Nordic countries. Defining examples are the so-called Nordic welfare model linked to the Keynesian economic model, the participation and equality of opportunities as well as the principle of equality of education to everyone independently of her or his social, ethnic, gender and regional origin.

But Finland is also the late-comer in the Nordic family. It became industrialized and urbanized much later than its Nordic neighbors and remained an agrarian country until rather recently. In summary, Finland has changed quite late but also quite fast. In recent years Finland has become one of the best educational achievers among OECD countries as well as also among Nordic counties. One of the reasons may be Finnish educational politics. So, what happened?

In this chapter I describe and research in historical and comparative terms the social and educational paths and developments in Finland, their ups and downs and why Finland and its history looks like it looks.

Keywords History of education in Finland · Equality in education · Structural change · Educational expansion

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Finland, a Late-Comer in Terms of Reconstruction, Structural Change and Modernization[1]

Finland is a country of five and a half million inhabitants in the northernmost periphery of Europe, with Russia as its neighbor. Its social, cultural and geopolitical history was strongly linked to the rule of the Swedish Kingdom (until 1809), and then to Russian Tsar Empire (until 1917) as a Grand Duchy, or autonomous province with its own legislation. As a consequence, Finland's traditions of governance have taken many models and traits from the old centralized and bureaucratic systems of its two neighboring countries. (Rinne, 2004)

During most of the years as an independent country Finland has based its cultural and political position upon Nordic neutrality between the power blocs of the east and the west. Because of its good political and commercial relations with the Soviet Union it has, now and then, been accused of "Finlandization" by Western commentators. Finland was slow to integrate into the OECD and it was not until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s that the country sought membership of the European Union and rapidly strengthened its ties with Western Europe. Up until the 1990s Finnish welfare policies were clearly based on the Nordic or social-democratic model, with an emphasis on universal comprehensive social security free of charge, strong state control, significant income transfers, full employment and a high level of equality. Educational policy has been considered one of the most influential spearheads in the removal of all types of social inequality.

Finnish society was a late-comer in terms of the modernization of the occupational structure. Finland belongs to the group of European nations that have only very recently left behind their agrarian society and lifestyle. The process of industrialization of working population and urbanization was sluggish until the Second World War, compared with Central Europe and the other Nordic countries. In 1945, 70% of the Finnish population still lived in rural areas, and almost 60% was employed in agriculture and forestry.

Following the great migration in Finland in the 1960s, half of the population lived in cities and one third (32%) was employed in industry and construction by 1970 (cf. e.g., Alapuro, Liikanen, Smeds, & Stenius, 1987).

Figure 3.1 contrasts the late but rapid change in the Finnish occupational structure with the changes in other Nordic countries. The Fig. 3.1 shows when the agrarian labor force in four Nordic countries decreased from 50 to 15%. Whereas the demise of agrarian labor took place over 80 years in Norway, and over 50 years in Sweden, it happened in Finland within only 20 years. No wonder, then, that the construction of the welfare state began a decade later than in the other Nordic countries.

[1] This section of the chapter is drawing heavily on the article "Simola, H. & Rinne, R. (2011) Education Politics and Contingency: Belief, status and trust behind the Finnish PISA miracle. In M. A. Pereyra, H.-G. Kotthoff & R. Cowen (Eds.) PISA under Examination: Changing knowledge, changing tests, and changing schools. Rotterdam: Sense Publisher, 225–244.

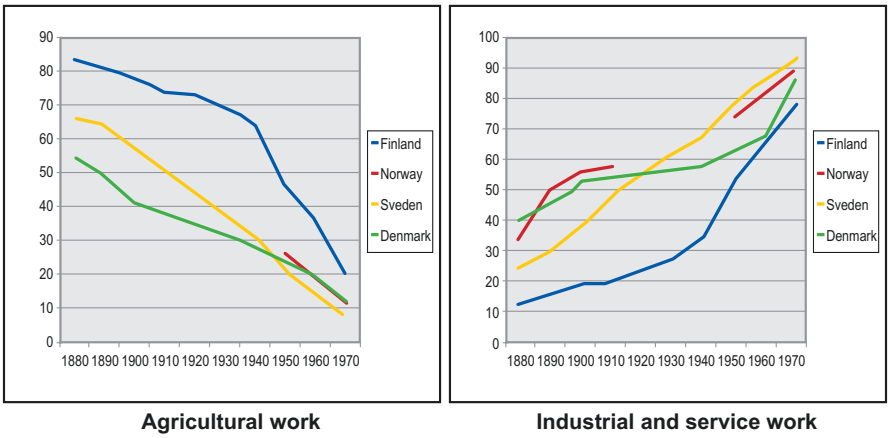

Fig. 3.1 Change of working population in agricultural work and industrial and service work in Nordic countries 1880–1970. (Source: Pöntinen, 1983)
The change in Norway and Denmark is throughout the figure very similar (from 1880 to 1910 exactly the same)

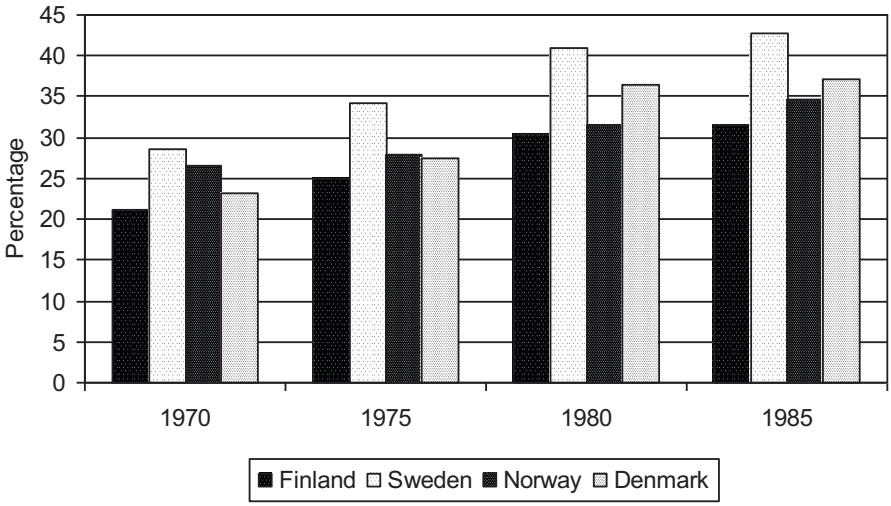

Fig. 3.2 Public employment in Nordic countries 1963–1987. (Source: Kosonen, 1998, 152)

Therefore, the high faith in schooling might well be an outgrowth from Finland's late expansion, the late modernization of the occupational structure and the late construction of the welfare state. These social changes happened gradually in most countries rather than suddenly. This rare conjunction might well have created a strong collective experience of causality between progress in formal education and simultaneous social advancement. (Rinne & Simola, 2005)

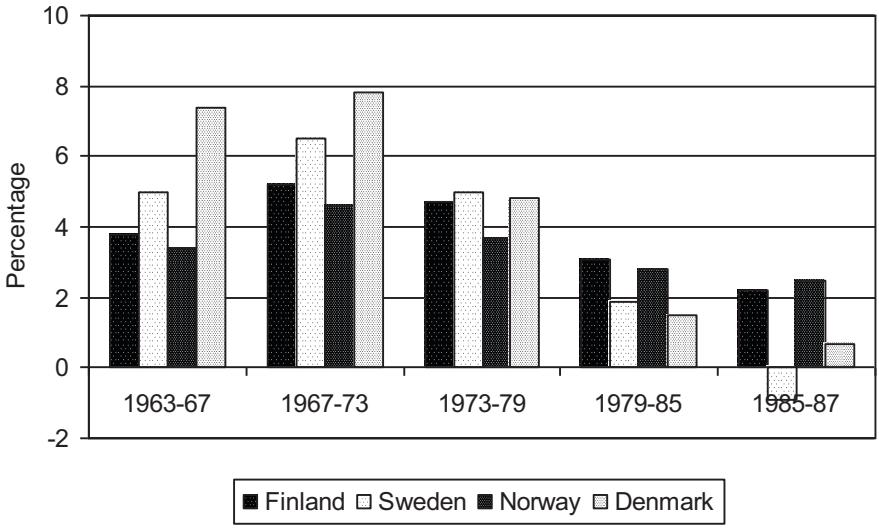

Fig. 3.3 Growth of the work force of the public sector in the Nordic countries 1963–1987. (Source: Alestalo, 2010)

Figures 3.2 and 3.3 give a compressed view of the different lengths and timing of the changes of growth of public employment and growth the work force of the public sector in the Nordic countries from 1960s to 1980s.

Expansion of the welfare state after WW2 meant an upheaval in the labor markets of the Nordic countries. Public-sector employment in Finland grew from 20 to over 30% between 1970 and 1985. Typical of the Finnish model was that the growth began later but also continued longer than in the other Nordic countries (Figs. 3.2 and 3.3).

Late But Rapid Booming… in Finnish Education as Well

There are astonishingly few comparative studies that include Finnish education, even related to the other Nordic countries. Nevertheless, there is a strong national consensus that, in international comparison, Finns appreciate education, or schooling to be more precise, very much. Therefore, the faith in schooling as an agent for social equality and as a cornerstone of continuity and consensus in Finnish education policy has remained stronger than in many other Western countries.

At the individual level, the main objective of Finnish education policy is to offer all citizens equal opportunity to receive education, regardless of age, domicile, financial situation, gender or mother tongue. At the national level, a major objective of Finnish education policy is to achieve as high a level of education and competence as possible for the whole population.

The now defunct Finnish folk school system was established in 1866 and the act concerning universal compulsory education came into force in 1921. Compulsory education was completed once the child had successfully completed the folk school or a corresponding syllabus in some other way. The folk school offered 6 years of education. Upon completion of folk school, pupils could continue at civic school, which offered 2- or 3-years of additional education. After civic school, it was possible to move up to vocational school, for example. From the fourth form onwards of folk school, it was also possible to apply to a lower secondary school, which provided eligibility for general upper secondary school. The lower secondary school of 5 years, combined with the upper secondary school of 3 years, collectively formed a secondary school of 8 years. (Aro, Järvinen, Rinne, Julkunen, & Lunabba, 2010).

Finland was among the last countries in Europe to establish compulsory education. Six years of elementary education was made compulsory by law only in 1921, simultaneously with Thailand, whereas legislation mandating compulsory school was enacted in Denmark in 1814, in Sweden in 1842 and in Norway in 1848. Moreover, expansion of Finnish primary school expansion was slow even after enactment of the law, and compulsory education was not fully functional and did not cover all children across the country and among all social groups until just before WW2 (Rinne, 1984; Rinne & Salmi, 1998, 27; Ramirez & Boli-Bennett 1982).

The school system and, subsequently, compulsory education were reformed in the 1970s: the previous folk school, civic school and lower secondary school were replaced by 9 years of comprehensive school offering general basic education. Simultaneously, upper secondary school was separated from lower secondary school to form a distinct institution of its own. The transition into comprehensive school was carried out gradually between 1972 and 1978. The aim was to raise the level of education of the population and increase equality in education. It was argued that learning and skills potentials were wasted in a system which separated pupils into different education paths. The political support for the comprehensive school system came from the left-wing parties and the centre. In terms of basic education, the most significant recent change is the abolishment of the division of comprehensive school into lower and upper stages. Every child has a right to attend the nearest school to his place of residence or apply to a school of his choice (Aro et al., 2010).

The history of general upper secondary school dates back to the seventeenth century, when Finland was under Swedish rule. The first “gymnasium and school regulations” were enacted in 1843, when Finland was an autonomous part of Russia. General upper secondary education was part of grammar schools until the comprehensive school reform of the 1970s, when it became a separate form of education. Virtually all students who complete the upper secondary school syllabus will also take the national matriculation examination. The matriculation examination has its origins in the university entrance examination of 1852. In 1874 a uniform statute governing the matriculation examination was issued, ordering that the written matriculation examination tests be held at educational institutions providing education leading to university studies.

Development of special needs education in Finnish folk schools within the parallel school system prior to the introduction of the uniform comprehensive school system can be divided into four periods. Initially, special needs education focused on arranging instruction for pupils with sensory disabilities. In the post-war period the field of vocational rehabilitation was being developed. From the early 1970s, the philosophy of social integration came strongly to the fore in the education of pupils in need of special support. In the context of special needs education, integration means the aim to implement special needs education, as far as possible, integrated into mainstream educational services. The instruction of children with the most severe intellectual disabilities, which had long been organised by the social authorities, was transferred to be provided by comprehensive schools as from 1997. (Aro et al., 2010)

The number of pupils transferred to special needs education has been growing for more than a decade. During the 2007–2008 academic year 126,300 pupils (22%) received part-time special needs teaching. Slightly more that half of the pupils transferred to special needs education are fully or partially integrated into groups attending general education while just under one-half receive teaching in special needs groups in comprehensive schools or in special schools (Fig. 3.4).

The extensive special needs education system within the comprehensive school is one of the key reasons that explains why the dropout rate in Finnish comprehensive school has been minimal since the 1960s (Simola, Rinne, & Kivirauma, 2002a, b). For instance, in the school year 2006/2007, only 0.23% of the comprehensive school leavers, 152 pupils, did not succeed in obtaining the basic education school leaving certificate. (Myllyniemi, 2008; Rinne & Järvinen, 2010; 2011) (Fig. 3.5)

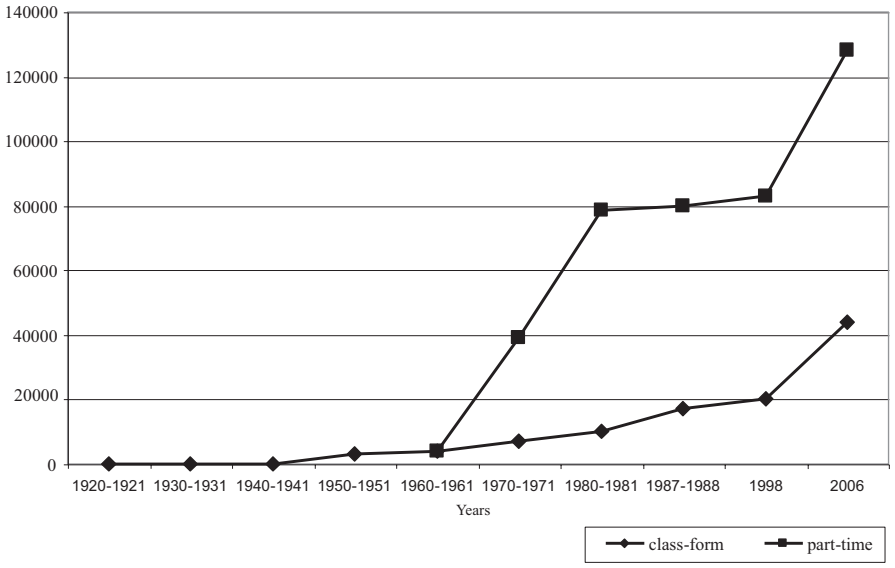

Fig. 3.4 The numbers of pupils who participated in special needs education in Finland in the years 1920–2006. (Source: Statistics Finland)

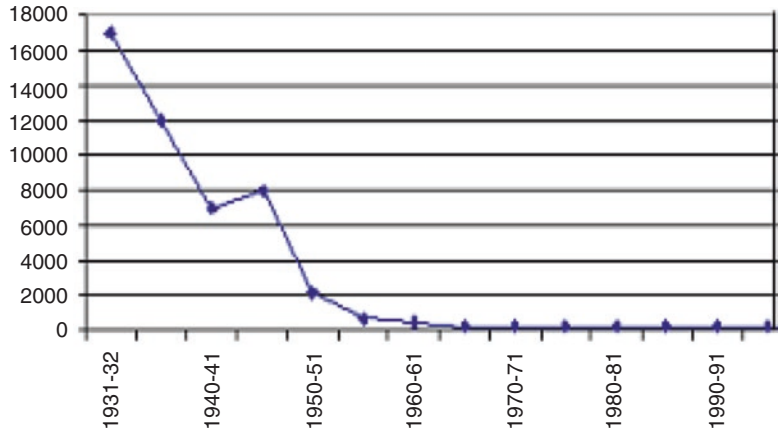

Fig. 3.5 Those neglecting their compulsory education in Finland during the years 1931–1995 (Rinne 2001; Kivirauma, 1989, 28; Statistics Finland, KO 1996: 2)

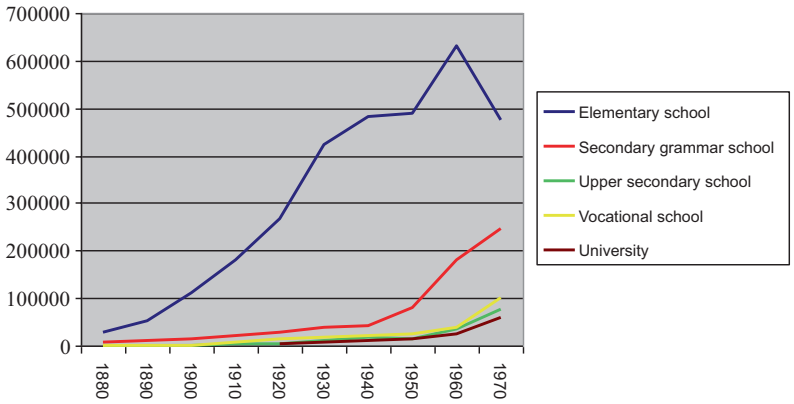

Fig. 3.6 The expansion of schooling in Finland 1880–1970 (number of pupils by year). (Source: Kivinen, 1988; Kivinen, Rinne, & Ahola, 1989; Kerr, 2012)

All this is indicative of the fact that the Finnish success story in education is a very recent event in historical terms. Whereas almost 70% of the younger generation nowadays aspire to a higher-education degree, about the same proportion of their grandparents obtained the full elementary-school certificate. Figure 3.6 clearly illustrates the late blooming of Finnish education (Fig. 3.6).

Because of the late formation of the educational system, educational gaps between older and younger generations are among the widest in Europe (Simola & Rinne, 2011). Nonetheless, this serves as a powerful indicator of the symbolic power of traditional social democratic-agrarian *equality* in Finnish educational discourse.

The late development of the educational system at the secondary level in Finland and the previously low percentage of participation in secondary education compared to the other Nordic countries are clearly visible. In 2001 only about half of 55–65-year-olds had a certificate of secondary education (51%) compared to 65–72% in the other Nordic countries. The differences were still remarkable – well over 10% in 2005 – compared to the other Nordic countries. It may be that this rare conjunction created a strong collective experience of causality between progress in formal education and simultaneous social advancement.

The other strong evidence and fact behind the late but rapid booming success of Finnish education may be anchored in the broad and intensive use of soft technology of governance coupled with extensive use of school autonomy, which allowed everyday life in schooling and education practice to be carried out by highly educated academic teachers. The evidence of Finnish success in education is presented in various comparative research and measurements by international organizations like the OECD's PISA surveys, where Finland has remained consistently in the top.

The same is true of the modernization of the occupational structure in a country that was until very recently agrarian. The comprehensive school reform in the 1970s was thus followed through by cooperation of the Left and the Agrarian Party that still nowadays form part of the rare trident Party constellation of Finnish policy making: the Right (National Coalition Party), the Left (Social Democrat Party) and the Agrarian (Centre Party). Finnish culture may therefore emphasize more than in other Western countries a traditional understanding of egalitarianism.

We may conclude that the high faith in schooling resulted from the contingent conjunction of its late expansion, the late modernization of the occupational structure and the late construction of the welfare state. The eminent Finnish sociologist of education Ari Antikainen (2008) referred to the strong collective experience of causality between progress in formal education and simultaneous social advancement when he wrote that the overall rise in student enrolment brought increasing numbers of students from the lower classes, even though their proportion of the total number remained low. This might be "a shared experience among the common people", who also have their own experience of education as a real resource in the rapid transformation of Finnish society, not least as a channel of migration from rural areas and agriculture to the cities in the period of the 'Great Migration', 1960–1975.

The Steps Closer to the Western World and Capitalist System

Finland took its first steps towards the West already in 1969, when it became member of the OECD. After the fall of the Berlin wall (1989), the "velvet revolution" in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), the march towards a capitalist economy and an ideology promoting neo-liberal values have proceeded all over Europe and also Finland. The subject matter and aims of education have also changed. "Management by objectives, accountability, and evaluation [have] become

the new dogma for educational policy implementation in Scandinavia", as Arild Tjeldvoll (1998, 15) puts it. (Rinne, 2004).

As a member of the Nordic family, Finland has also invested heavily and systematically in education. The level has risen rapidly, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, and is nowadays among the highest in the OECD countries. Only a tenth of those born in Finland before the country became independent in 1917 completed more than basic education, whereas as much as half of the baby-boom generation born after the Second World War has acquired at least a vocational qualification. Of those born in the early 1960s only a fifth entered working life with no more than the basic 9-year schooling behind them, and among those born in the late 1970s the proportion has dropped to less than one in ten (Antikainen, Rinne, & Koski, 2000; Kivinen & Rinne, 1998; OECD, 1996, 1998, 2000; Pöntinen, 1990; Rinne, 2004).

Finland's position between east and west framed most of the international cooperation of the country until the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in Europe in the 1990s. Openness of influence to the OECD and the west came late, and openness to neoliberal system redesign even later (Grek et al., 2009).

In the 1990s the political context in Finland was rapidly changing. The great recession at the beginning of the 1990s had severe consequences for Finland and weakened the defense of comprehensive provision of education. The conservative governments allied with the employers in promoting the market-liberal values of effectiveness, marketization, parental choice and management by results. More weight was also given to international comparisons and cooperation as well as to the recommendations of the supranational organizations. The collective narrative of education as a national enterprise was weakened during the 1990s. The hard years of the recession strengthened the Nordic egalitarian ethos again, and Finland became a 'model pupil' in applying neoliberal innovations in education, but through technical and incremental policy rather than through making strong neoliberal declarations. Curiously enough, no political actors were willing to question the ethics of equality in education discourse (Kallo & Rinne, 2006; Patomäki, 2007; Rinne, Kivirauma, & Simola, 2002; Simola et al., 2002a, 2002b).

Finland actively participated in the PISA project since its beginning in 1995 and has been a model pupil of the OECD while also being active in the work of PUMA, the Public Management Committee of the OECD. Finland adopted the ideas of the New Public Management Committee, especially at the municipal level (Haveri, 2002, 5, 6 and 17). There were a number of influential conduits of OECD influence in the first Conservative Party-led coalition government in the 1990s. Other important networks involved permanent officials specializing in education, who spent 3–5 years in Finland's Permanent Delegation to the OECD and UNESCO in Paris and who became important brokers of OECD ideas. Finland was represented on the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) Governing Board and also on the Education Committee of the OECD. The exceptionally receptive stance of the Finnish education policy elite towards the OECD has been noted by various commentators. Interviewees in Niukko's (2006a, 2006b) study and in our own

research refer to mutual respect especially following the recent attention given to Finland after its national success in PISA. (Grek et al., 2009)

Finland, as indicated above, is the OECD's 'model pupil' (Rinne, Kallo, & Hokka, 2004). This characterization is contained in the OECD's own account of Finland (Grek et al., 2009):

> Finland has a record of heeding the advice of past OECD education reviews. The review seems likely to continue that pattern, helping to shape the future of a dynamic education sector. (OECD, 2003; cited in Rinne et al., 2004)

The former longstanding head and a kind of founding father of the education office of OECD, George Papadopoulos (Papadopoulos, 2004, 2006 cited in Niukko, 2006b, 14) refers to the same phenomenon:

> I have the impression that Finland has an exaggerated perception of the role of what experts say. (…) Some countries are very hostile to foreign criticism. I think Finland, from what I guess, is not hostile but would like to get assistance.

From 1987 Prime Minister Harri Holkeri's right-left coalition cabinet aimed to bring about an essential change in politics in what has been called the Third Republic in Finland (see, e. g., Alasuutari, 1996, 263; Simola, 2004). For the first time since World War II, the conservative National Coalition Party now held the post of Prime Minister and its two decades in opposition were over. As far as education was concerned, this marked the end of the deal between the Center and Social Democratic parties.

As a result of globalization, and increased influence of supranational organizations in particular, nation-states have come under increasing pressure to follow neoliberal orthodoxy in educational policy and planning. By examining the policy documents and practices of the World Bank, the OECD and the European Union, we see the heavy influence of free-market neo-liberalism in thinking about educational reforms and policymaking, and almost no nation state can avoid this profound influence.[2]

It is, however, important to remember that even if the same policy discourse does enter the policy systems of different countries, policy implementation is a highly complicated and fortuitous affair. National policymaking is inevitably always a process of bricolage; a matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas amending locally tried approaches, theories, research, trends and fashions and flailing around for anything that might work. Many policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs which are reworked and tinkered with and inflected through complex processes of influence and ultimately recreation in national or local context of practice (e.g. Ball, 1994, 2001).

[2] Many studies related to supra-national/global influences on national educational policies have recently been carried out within CELE, university of Turku (e.g. Kallo, 2009; Kallo & Rinne, 2006; Niukko, 2006a, 2006b; Rinne, 1999; Rinne, 2001; Rinne, Kivirauma, & Hirvenoja, 2001a, 2001b; Rinne & Ozga, 2011; Seppänen, 2006; Simola, Rinne, & Kivirauma, 1999), but in the framework of this article it is not possible to concentrate on those in detail.

The OECD differs from the other supranational organizations, in that its influence over the educational policy of the member states is based on information management. The OECD cannot make any legally binding decisions or issued any obligatory education policy recommendations. On the other hand, the OECD has become established as a kind of 'eminence grise' of the educational policy of industrialized countries (Rinne et al., 2004; Kallo, 2009.)

The OECD has been quite diligent in making and publishing country reviews, as well as thematic reviews concerning educational issues. In addition to organizing numerous meetings and consultations on educational politics, its impressive annual flagship publication "Education at a Glance", in which countries are ranked on the basis of various educational indicators, has had a great influence in steering the direction of national education politics.

Finland has repeatedly succeeded well with top positions in OECD's PISA evaluations of 15-year-old school pupil's scholastic performance. In 2000, 2003, 2006, and 2009 Finland has been at the very top of the ranking with a slippage in 2012 and 2015 (Seppänen, Rinne, Kauko, & Kosunen, 2019). In addition, although the differences in performance of the students representing different sexes, regional areas and social backgrounds were also clear in Finland, these differences were among the smallest. (Rinne & Järvinen, 2010; 2011). In the latest PISA-survey from 2019 the Finnish results were still rather high, but they had clearly dropped down from the most top places. Especially the differences of results between girls and boys had grown quite bit in Finland in favor of girls.

According to Aho, Pitkänen and Sahlberg (2006, 126–133), however, there are six possible factors in the Finnish education system and society that may contribute to these achievements. The factors include the following: (1) comprehensive school is same for all, (2) teachers are highly educated and teacher education stands out in international comparison for its depth and scope, (3) sustainable political and educational leadership, (4) recognition and appreciation of existing innovations (i.e. a culture of innovation in the education system), (5) focusing on deep learning instead of testing (the only standardized test in Finnish education system is the matriculation examination in the end of the upper secondary school), and (6) a culture of trust (i.e. the Ministry of Education and Culture and the National Board of Education believe that teachers together with principals, parents, and their communities know how to provide the best possible education for their children and youth), which is enabled by an environment that is built upon good governance and close-to-zero corruption. However, it is important to note that Finnish children do not reach the PISA kind of top rankings in all the other comparative research. For example, in 2004 in an international comparative study by the World Health Organization, it came to light that only a small minority of Finnish children and adolescent truly enjoy being at school. (Rinne & Järvinen, 2010; 2011.)

Free school choice policy, which was introduced to comprehensive school system in the 1990s, has sparked a lot of public debate in Finland. According to this supranational policy, parents can choose the school that their child attends and schools can partially select their pupils. Free school choice policy is perceiced to contradict the goals of equal educational opportunity and equality also mentioned in

the law (Rinne & Tikkanen, 2011; Vanttaja & Rinne, 2008, 26). According to Seppänen (2006, 4) the features of the education markets, where school choice policy is conceptualized to take place, in the Finnish cities are similar to those in other countries. Selection of pupils by their ability is vastly used, and on average, every other family considers applying or applies to another school than the neighborhood school. The popularity of the schools differs and the application flows between schools are mainly directed towards the city centers. Simultaneously, comprehensive schools have started to specialize and create individual school profiles. In the last couple of years, the Ministry of Education and Culture has become conscious of the potential negative effects of the free school choice policy, and the development plan for education and research 2003–2008 states that one of the goals is to strengthen the neighborhood school principle and prevent inequality of schools (Vanttaja & Rinne, 2008, 26–27). In addition to the free school choice policy, another distinctive feature in the new Basic Education Act is the role of evaluation. The law obliges education providers to evaluate their education and its effectiveness. Education has to be evaluated also by external evaluators. (Vanttaja & Rinne, 2008, 27)

Another distinct trend in Finnish basic education in the last two decades has been the constantly increasing number of immigrant pupils. In 1999, 4% of comprehensive school pupils had an immigrant background, which still places Finland as a country with few immigrants by international standards. Immigrants are not evenly distributed in Finland or in Finnish cities, and thereby the amount of immigrant pupils varies significantly between cities and schools. (Tuittu, Klemelä, Rinne, & Räsänen, 2011, 13, 21.) Those immigrant pupils, whose knowledge of Finnish (or Swedish) language is not yet sufficient to study in a Finnish-speaking class, attend to instruction preparing for basic education. For children between ages 6–10 the minimum of preparatory instruction is 900 h, and for children older than 10 years the minimum is 1000 h. Pupils can transfer to mainstream education before the minimum is reached, if he/she can follow instruction in Finnish (National Board of Education, 2009). There is also a variety of different support measures for immigrant pupils after they have transferred to a Finnish-speaking class. According to the principles of the Ministry of Education, it will foster good relations between different ethnic groups when the right of immigrants to their own language and culture as well as their equal treatment regardless of the reasons for their immigration are respected. The main goal is to take into account the needs of immigrants within the regular framework of services and systems and avoid, whenever possible, to resort to extraordinary and tailored measures. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2011)

We may emphasize that since the early 1990s there has been an extraordinary strong contradiction between *convergence* and *path dependence* in Finnish education policy. After the decades of *Finlandization* there was an extremely strong pursuit towards convergence: to be accepted as a genuine Western advanced liberal society. On the other hand, Finland was so strong path dependence of social and educational decisions based on traditional social democratic and agrarian values of equality.

Finland's position between east and west framed most of the international cooperation of the country until the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of 'Real Socialism' in Europe in the 1990s. Openness of influence to the OECD and the West came late, and openness to neoliberal system redesign even later. In the 1990s the political context in Finland was rapidly changing. The conservative governments allied with the employers in promoting the market-liberal values of effectiveness, marketisation, parental choice and management by results. More weight was also given to the international comparisons and cooperation as well as to the recommendations of the supranational organizations. The collective narrative of education as a national enterprise and comprehensive provision was weakened during the 1990s. According to the true declaration of the era, the "Proposal of the NBE for a structural programme of education" (NBE, 1992), the development of the Finnish comprehensive school would be characterized by concepts such as 'decentralized and consumer-based accountability', 'result-based public funding' and 'self-responsible individual learning' (Simola, Varjo, & Rinne, 2011).

To mark the beginning of the new era after the nearly 50 years of the 'Red-Soil' (*punamulta) governance and* hegemony, conservative Prime Minister Holkeri (National Coalition Party) gave an epoch-making address in 1987 in which he redefined the very central concept of Finnish education policy so far. His message was that people were different in terms of capacity, and equality meant the right of every pupil to receive education that corresponded to his/her prerequisites and expectations rather than the delivery of universal *Bildung* for everybody regardless of his/her socio-cultural background. It is clear that this new definition referred to *equity* rather than to *equality*.

Some top level politicians interviewees refer to the OECD as 'the instrument, catalyst and certain framework for comparison' for Finnish education policy (Niukko, 2006a, 2006b, 130) and admit that *Education at a Glance* and rankings in PISA do have clear effects to policy, especially if you are ranked below average' (ibid., 141). In Niukko's (2006a, 2006b) study, the decision-makers and civil servants saw the most important function of the OECD in its role 'as a neutral tool of the national education policy'. Some of them criticized OECD as 'the judge', and others characterized it as 'the doctor' or 'the psychiatrist'. (Grek et al., 2009, 15–16)

From the path dependence side, however, Finland was strongly bound to traditional social democratic and agrarian values of equality that make the call of neoliberalism extremely contradictory.

As a symptom of the symbolic power of traditional social democratic-agrarian *equality* in Finnish educational discourse, there is no analogous concept for *equity*, even though it would be easy to find one (*oikeus, oikeudenmukaisuus*). The concept of equality is used in two contrasting ways. These two conceptions were connected in a curious formulation in a major document published by the Educational Evaluation Council:

> The economic and social welfare of Finnish society is based on an egalitarian public system of schooling. Its mission is to guarantee for every citizen *both* educational opportunities of good quality regardless of his/her sex, dwelling place, age, mother tongue and economic

position *and* the right to tuition accordant with his/her capabilities and special needs and his/her self-development (emphasis added).

The implementation of the new understanding of the sacred notion of equality appeared to be a much more complicated mission than Prime Minister Holkeri and his party colleagues could ever assume.

Some Conclusions and a Widening of the Perspective: Finland – Finding Its Own Way in Between and Not Only at the Top After All?

Finland is riding along on its fame in the OECD international educational ranking. In the 2006 PISA survey Finland achieved a first place in natural sciences as well as a second place in reading and mathematics. In 2000 and 2003 Finland was also ranked among the best, awarded a first place in reading in both reviews, and thus the national success story seems steady enough. In addition, in the Finnish comprehensive school the interdependent differences in achievement are comparatively small in international comparison.

Further, Finnish young people are more highly educated compared to youths in many other OECD countries, and young people's exclusion from both education and working life is less of a problem in Finland than in many other countries belonging to the EU. (European Commission, 2005; OECD, 2008).

On the other hand, success at school, choice of educational careers and climbing up the educational ladder are still closely connected with one's parents' social status and level of education, even in the Finland of the twenty-first century (Järvinen, 2003; Kivinen, Hedman, & Kaipainen, 2007). Even though the significance of the home as the definer of school success has weakened during recent decades, the clear discrepancies have not disappeared anywhere. Due to the recession in the beginning of the 1990s and the simultaneous new course taken in educational policy, clear internal differentiation within the school establishment as well as the genesis of educational routes for the haves and have-nots can be seen. For instance, in relation to choices concerning upper secondary education, choosing general school is more common among children with highly educated parents than among children of less educated parents and it is even eightfold more probable for the offspring from a highly educated family to end up in a university than for a child from a family with lower education (Kivinen et al., 2007).

It is also of importance to note that Finnish children do not reach the PISA-kind of top rankings in all comparative surveys and research. For example, in an international comparative study by WHO, it came to light that only a small minority (5%) of Finnish children and young people truly enjoy being at school. When comparing 15-year olds regarding this issue, Finnish young people brought up the rear.

In a comparative study published by UNICEF regarding the overall well-being of children and young people, Finland was ranked as third out of 15 countries in 2005.

Only the Netherlands and Sweden were ahead of Finland in this study. However, even in this comparison, Finland received low scores when comparing the "family- and friend–relations" of children (12th.) and "experience of subjective well-being" of children (9th). Regarding those issues, Finland's ranking was clearly below average. (Kangas, 2008.)

In Finland, there has recently been a lot of discussion related to the polarization of young people into those who are coping well in many areas of life and those who are in a serious risk of social exclusion. Fear has been expressed that these groups of young people are becoming increasingly separated from each other (Autio, Eräranta, & Myllyniemi, 2008). Based on available official statistics as well as recent survey studies, one can argue that, on a general level, this polarization hypothesis holds true. It seems that the proportion of young people who are at risk of social exclusion has increased during the past 15 years in Finland. Firstly, exclusion from the family sphere has become more common among children and young people; the proportion of children and young people placed outside their home or in custody has constantly increased during the years 1991–2006. Also, the proportion of young people with low income as well as young people with mental health problems has increased during the same period. In addition, youth unemployment rates are higher in Finland than in other countries belonging to the EU on average. (e.g. Järvinen & Vanttaja, 2005; Myllyniemi, 2008; Rinne & Järvinen, 2010).

There are several differences related to the well-being of boys and girls in Finland. Loneliness, for instance, is more common among young males than among young females, as is a negative attitude towards schooling. Mental health problems, in turn, are more common among girls than boys. One must note, however, that although the risk of becoming socially excluded has somewhat increased during the past 10–15 years, the great majority of Finnish young people are satisfied with their life as a whole, and with their health and social relations in particular. In a nationally representative study, when asked what school grade (using the Finnish scale of 4–10) young people aged 15–29 – would give to their overall life satisfaction, 92% of them responded at least 8/10. In all, it seems that the life situation of the majority of Finnish young people is good or even extremely good, whereas a minority of young people have serious life-management problems and severe difficulties in many areas of life. In this respect the above-mentioned polarization hypothesis holds true. (Myllyniemi, 2008.)

This small, although growing minority of Finnish children and youths seems to be at risk of wider social exclusion and this social truth has strong influences on both everyday life at school and the whole educational system. The idea of raising the educational level of the entire population and establishing educational equality has been at the center of Finnish education policy since World War II. For over a century, the country has struggled to guarantee the offspring of all families an optimal level of education despite their economic, social, regional or educational background or status, and regardless of gender or ethnic origin. In Finland, there has been a strong faith in national solidarity which means that the weakest have also been taken care of.

During almost the past two decades, however, there have been clear signs of change in the attitude climate of education. The goals and activities of education have more radically than before been based on ever hardening competition. There has been a tendency to regard education more and more as being the servant of the production economy and in terms of economic investment and efficiency. These steps towards ever deeper neo-liberalistic educational policy may threaten to marginalize and cause difficulties to an ever-growing number of children and young people.

The signs of change are clear enough to warrant stopping to contemplate further and more widely, to ask seriously what the future of Finnish children and youngsters will be like, not only as regards their academic success, but also concerning their well-being at school and the quality of their future. (Rinne & Järvinen, 2010).

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