

Chapter 10

Dropout and Completion in Upper Secondary Education in Finland

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The Structure of the Finnish Educational System

The basic structure of the Finnish education system is rather simple (see Fig. 10.1). Compulsory education starts from the year in which children turn 7 and ends when they are 16 years old. In addition, all 6-year-olds are entitled to pre-school education for 1 year before starting comprehensive school.

The Finnish comprehensive school includes primary and lower secondary schools and is uniform in nature; different tracks leading to different educational outcomes are not part of the system. However, inside the comprehensive school there is an extensive special education system for at-risk students, which has expanded systematically and rapidly since the comprehensive school reform in the early 1970s (Kivirauma, 1989; Simola et al., 1999; Jahnukainen, 2003; Myllyniemi, 2008) (Fig. 10.2). Special education can be either full-time or part-time in nature, the latter alternative being more common. The number of special education students in Finland is high by international standards. Approximately 8% of those in comprehensive school can be classified as full-time special education students (officially transferred to special education – mainly full-time) and some 22% as part-time special education students (Kivirauma et al., 2004; Statistics Finland 2005, 2008).

This new division within the common comprehensive school has seen not only a growing numbers of pupils going to the special education track, but also a growing *proportion* of pupils going there. The proportion of pupils transferred to special education in Finnish primary schools, for instance, has consistently increased over the past 10 years.

The post-compulsory upper secondary level comprises general and vocational education, which are delivered in different schools. Education in upper secondary general schools is based on courses, without traditional year classes, and ends in a nationally comparable matriculation examination. This usually takes 3 years.

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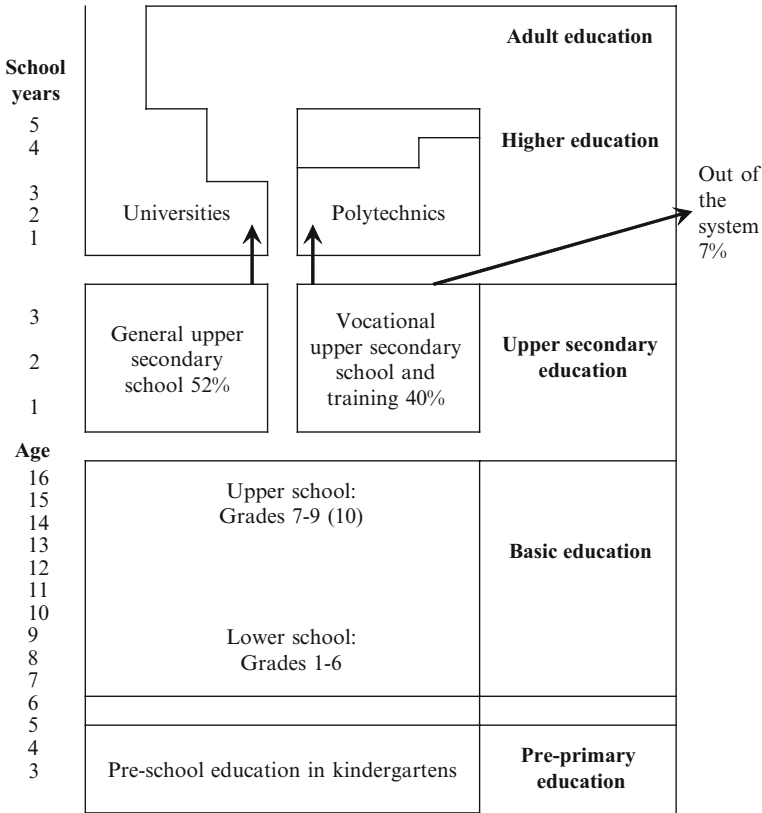


Fig. 10.1 The Finnish educational system in 2007

Note: The flow sizes of pupils into the secondary branches of education and out of the educational system after completing comprehensive school are based on estimates derived for 2006. See Vanttaja & Rinne (2008)

In vocational education and training, study is primarily organised in year classes, meaning full-time studies for 3 years. The admission requirement for upper secondary education is a comprehensive school certificate. Students apply to both forms of education through a joint application system, and the selection is based on students' school reports.

Basic vocational education and training consists of eight study fields, the most popular fields being technology and transport, business and administration, and health and social services. The study fields are further divided into 119 study programs, leading to 53 basic vocational qualifications. For example, the field of technology and transport consists of 60 study programs leading to 26 basic vocational educational qualifications. Dividing study fields into specific programs is based on the aim of providing students both basic occupational skills as well as more specialised skills in some areas.

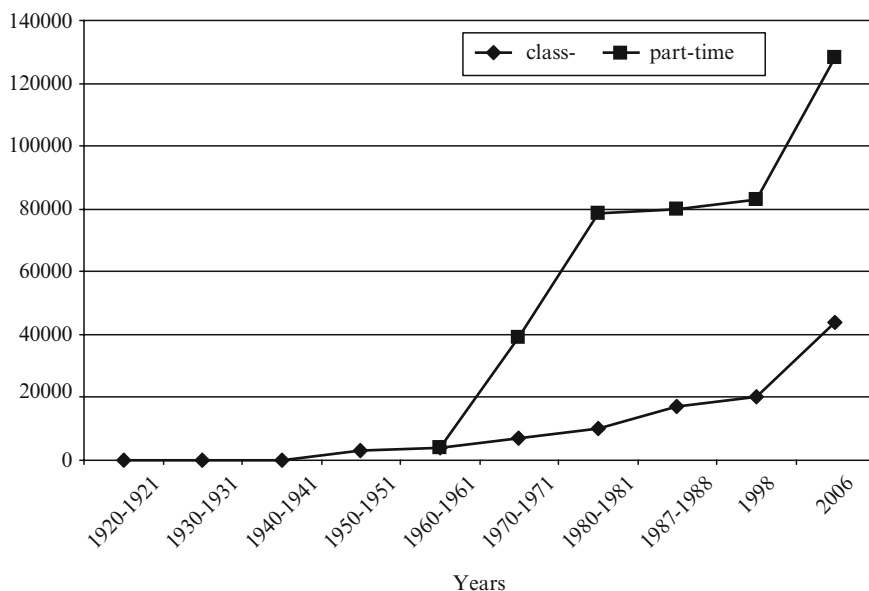


Fig. 10.2 The numbers of pupils participating in special education in Finland in the years 1920–2006 (Sources: Rinne & Kivirauma, 2005; Statistics Finland, 2008)

Upper secondary general school and a school-based vocational education are not, however, the only educational alternatives after completing compulsory education in Finland. A small minority (about 2–5%) of the comprehensive school leavers continues their studies in some other educational institutions, for example in voluntary additional basic education (Grade 10) or in adult education centres.

Finland also has an apprenticeship training system, although compared to some other European countries, such as Germany or Norway, it has traditionally been quite a marginal educational route. The popularity of apprenticeship training has, however, gradually increased. In 2006, 18% of all vocational upper secondary qualifications were based on apprenticeship training (Statistics Finland, 2008). As the apprenticeship training is based on a work contract, the practical training periods take place at the workplace in connection with ordinary work assignments. This is complemented by theoretical studies arranged at educational institutions, typically at institutions providing vocational education and training. Furthermore, upper secondary vocational qualifications may also be obtained through competence tests, independent of how the vocational skills have been acquired. In 2006, 17% of all basic vocational qualifications were obtained through competence tests (Statistics Finland, 2008).

At the tertiary level, Finland established, in 1996, a dual model of higher education, which includes universities and polytechnics. Every student who has completed upper secondary school is allowed to apply for tertiary level education. Upper secondary general school certificates and vocational school certificates are not, however, comparable, since there is no national exam included in vocational education and training,

but in general education there is. In Finland, the selection of university students is based both on entrance examination and applicants' upper secondary school certificates, and universities and faculties usually have their own minor subject quota for those students who have completed vocational school. In practice, quite a few vocational school graduates continue their studies in universities, polytechnics being the more common alternative, in addition to going to the labour market.

Both upper secondary and higher education are free of charge in Finland, which means that there are no tuition fees; students only need to pay for the study materials they use. There is also a multiform and extensive adult education system in Finland. Participation in adult education is among the highest in the world (Tuijnman & Hellström, 2001; Antikainen, 2005; Rubensson, 2005; Raivola et al., 2006).

Finland at the Top of the World Rankings

As a result of globalisation, and the increased influence of supranational organisations in particular, nation states such as Finland have come under increasing pressure to follow neo-liberal orthodoxy in educational policy and planning. By examining the policy documents and practices of the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union, for instance, it is possible to see the heavy influence of free-market neo-liberalism in the thinking about educational reform and policy-making, and almost no nation state can avoid its profound influence.¹

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 policy-making is always inevitably 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 re-creation in the national or local context of practice (cf. Ball 1994, 2001).

The OECD differs from the other supranational organisations, in that its influence over the education policy of the member states is based on information management. The OECD has not made any legally binding decisions or issued any obligatory education policy recommendations. On the other hand, the OECD has become established as a kind of *éminence grise* in the setting of educational policy in all industrialised 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 organising

¹Many studies related to supranational/global influences on national educational policies have recently been carried out within Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning and Education (CELE), in the University of Turku (e.g., Kallo & Rinne, 2006; Niukko, 2006; Seppänen, 2006; Kallo, 2009), but in the framework of this article it is not possible to concentrate on these in detail.

Table 10.1 The ranking of Finnish comprehensive school students in PISA studies in the years 2000–06

Year	Reading	Mathematics	Natural science	Problem-solving
2000	1	4	3	na
2003	1	2	1 ^a	2 ^a
2006	2	2	1	na

na Research results are missing

^a Tied position

Source: OECD (2006).

numerous meetings and consultations on educational politics, its impressive book series *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 education politics in many countries.

Countries have also been ranked three times with the help of a new vehicle of evaluation, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and every time, in 2000, 2003 and 2006, Finland has been at the very top of the ranking. The ranked lists presented in Table 10.1, based on PISA studies, show the excellent ranking of Finnish comprehensive school students (15-year-olds, 57 countries involved in the latest study). In addition, although differences in the performance of the students representing different sexes, regional areas and social backgrounds were also clear in Finland, these differences were among the smallest in the populations studied.

Recently, there has been a lot of discussion, both nationally and internationally, related to Finland's huge success in PISA competitions. For example, high-quality teacher education and especially the Finnish comprehensive school system related to junior years of schooling have been seen as explaining the success of Finnish students. In Finland, study results, especially those presented in the PISA 2000 study, have been enormously important in damping down heavy criticism directed towards the comprehensive school, the critics of which appeared in Finland in the early 1990s in the wake of global neo-liberal educational politics. Without PISA, the turn of the tide in educational policy would undoubtedly have been stronger, and the post-war tradition of equality in educational opportunities might have weakened more drastically than it has. The neo-liberal voices criticising the comprehensive school, as well as educational equality as one of the most important aims of the Finnish educational system, have been dampened, but have not altogether vanished.

The Main Patterns of Post-Compulsory Graduation and Dropping Out

One reason the dropout rate in Finnish comprehensive school has been minimal since the 1960s is the extensive special education system within the comprehensive school (Simola et al., 1999). For instance, in the 2006–07 school year, only

0.23% of the comprehensive school leavers, 152 pupils, did not succeed in obtaining the basic education school leaving certificate (Myllyniemi, 2008).

Annually, more than 90% of Finnish compulsory school leavers continue their studies either in upper secondary general schools or in vocational institutions. During the past 10–15 years, a little more than half of the comprehensive school graduates have continued their post-compulsory studies in general upper secondary schools, whereas the share of those continuing in vocational education and training has varied between 33% and 40%. Nowadays, it is also possible to study and get certificates simultaneously in both institutions, but this opportunity has not been popular among young people so far.

General upper secondary school has been a popular choice, especially among girls and young people from more advantaged social backgrounds, while boys and working-class youth have been over-represented in vocational schools. In addition, many fields of education are either male- or female-dominated in vocational education, with technology and transport being the most male-dominated (84% male students in 2006), and social and health services the most female-dominated field (90% female students) (Rinne, 2007; Statistics Finland, 2008). In 2006, half of the students who completed compulsory school continued their post-compulsory studies in general upper secondary education (females: 60%, males: 43%) and 40% continued their studies in vocational schools (females: 31%, males: 49%) (Myllyniemi, 2008).

In Finland, different upper secondary school forms have traditionally had different societal functions. The aim of the general schools has been to prepare students for higher education studies with higher status, whereas the objective of vocational schools has been to produce skilled (mostly manual) workers for different sectors of the labour market. It is more typical for the general school students to continue their studies after graduation, whereas the risk of being unemployed is higher among the vocational education students. While 45% of those who graduated from the general schools in 1998 were still studying in 2005, the corresponding figure among those who had graduated from vocational education and training was only 16%. The unemployment rate 7 years after graduation was 8% among the former vocational education students, whereas it was only 4% among those who had graduated from general schools (Statistics Finland, 2008).

In a situation where over 90% of those finishing comprehensive school continue their studies, upper secondary education can, in practice, be considered a part of compulsory education in Finland. Annually, only 5–8% of 16-year-olds drop out of the education system immediately after comprehensive school (Myllyniemi, 2008). On the basis of official statistics and other nationally representative data available, it is not possible to give exact numbers about how many of these dropouts will recommence their studies later on. What is known is the fact that 12% of Finnish young people aged 15–24 were outside both education and working life in 2005. Although this statistical group of ‘outsiders’ consists mainly of the young unemployed, it also includes those in military service, young housewives/-husbands and those whose situation is unknown (Länsi-Suomen lääninhallitus, 2007).

The risk of dropping out of upper secondary education has slightly increased during the past few years. Previously, students who had succeeded best in

comprehensive school almost exclusively chose the general educational route. Now, some of them are choosing the vocational route, which means that the least successful students have more difficulty getting into vocational schools than before. In 2006, 7% of those Finnish young people who completed their compulsory education did not continue their studies in post-compulsory education, while the proportion of early school leavers in the previous year was 5% (Myllyniemi, 2008).

Despite the increased popularity of vocational schools, and the fact that dropout in vocational education has evenly diminished during the first years of the new millennium, vocational schools still have the greatest dropout in the context of upper secondary education in Finland. In addition, among vocational school dropouts, interruption of studies almost exclusively (90% in the school year 2004–05) means dropping out of the whole educational system – at least temporarily; whereas for half of the general school dropouts, the interruption of studies means continuing in some other form of education (Statistics Finland, 2008).

Interruption of upper secondary education was more common among males than females in Finland until the school year 2004–05, when the situation changed in vocational education and training. However, dropping out of the educational system altogether is more typical for boys than girls, for whom dropping out more often means continuing in some other form of vocational education (Statistics Finland, 2008).

Main Predictors of Dropping Out

It has become a widely held assumption that those young people between the ages of 16 and 18 who are outside all education, training or employment are condemned to an economically and socially marginalised future. Difficulties in the early stages in one's labour market career are seen as leading to an increased risk of subsequent unemployment or insecure employment. Prolonged unemployment, in turn, has been found to be connected with health and social problems, and as a result, with economic, social and political exclusion (e.g., Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Korpi et al., 2003).

In international discourse, it has been stated that after being 2 years outside education, employment opportunities are seriously diminished and returning to education becomes less probable (Vanttaja & Järvinen, 2006; Myllyniemi, 2008). As a result, those young people who are outside both education and working life at the age of 16–18 have been called 'youth at risk'. It is worthwhile to notice that in the Finnish context, the dropout phenomenon has been examined as an issue wider than just school interruption, and it has usually been connected with those young people who are outside both education and working life. As a result, the category 'NEET' (Not in Education, Employment or Training) is much closer than that of 'early school leavers' when speaking of dropout youth in the Finnish context.

During the past few decades, Finnish girls and boys have had almost an equally great likelihood of being outside education and working life at the age of 16–18. In turn, young people from disadvantaged social backgrounds, immigrant youth, disabled young people as well as former full-time special education pupils have had

the greatest risk of being excluded from education and working life immediately after comprehensive school. These groups are not mutually exclusive, but partially overlapping. For instance, both the disabled and immigrants can be found among the typical group of special education pupils (Järvinen & Vanttaja, 2001; Järvinen & Jahnukainen, 2008).

In Finland, on average, the children of parents in weak labour market positions, with low incomes and basic education, have a greater probability of being excluded from education and working life at the age of 16–18 than the rest of the population (Järvinen & Vanttaja, 2001; Vanttaja, 2005). The connection between social background and one's educational career has long been known, and it has been documented in many studies in Finland and elsewhere (e.g., Kivinen & Rinne, 1995; Järvinen, 2003; Kivinen et al., 2007). On the other hand, the educational situation of immigrant youth, including Finnish-born youth with immigrant parents, is relatively new in Finland, since the number of immigrants has increased in Finland only during the past few decades.

Unfortunately, there is no information available in official Finnish statistics related to the social, regional and ethnic background of young people outside both education and working life. However, based on the census register data gathered for research related to the living conditions of Finnish young people (Autio et al., 2008), it is possible to examine the different background factors related to being outside education and working life among Finnish young people aged 15–24. This information is presented in Table 10.2.²

Gender and region are not very closely connected with young people's exclusion from education and working life in contemporary Finland, whereas the educational level of parents, and especially immigrant status, are strong determinants of young people dropping out of those fields. The less educated the mother or father is, the greater the likelihood that their offspring is outside education and working life. In the whole population aged 15–24, the proportion of these young outsiders was 11.8% in 2004, whereas among those whose mother had not continued schooling after compulsory school, the proportion of dropout youth was 18.3%. Among immigrant youth, the proportion of those outside education and working life was 30%, and among those born outside the European Union as many as 38.6% were outside education and simultaneously without a job in 2004.

According to research, finding employment is difficult for immigrants in Finland (e.g., Jaakkola, 2000; Forsander, 2002). The employment status of immigrants weakened especially in the 1990s due to the recession, and this affected both those who had been in Finland for a longer time and new arrivals. In a few years the unemployment rates increased several-fold, and at worst, that of immigrants was over 50%. In addition to high unemployment rates, the problems that immigrants face include unstable work careers and, in the case of more highly educated immigrants, finding work that corresponds to their level of education and professional training, as they are usually employed in jobs for which they are over-educated. Immigrants also often work in jobs that are of low status

² Those in military service or retired are not included in the numbers presented in the Table 10.2; the group under examination hence consists mainly of unemployed youth and those at home with their children.

Table 10.2 The proportion of young people outside education and working life in the Finnish population aged 15–24 by gender, region, country of birth and parents' educational level in 2004 (%)

Background characteristic	Rate
Gender	
Males	11.3
Females	12.0
Both sexes	11.8
Region	
Countryside	12.1
Small town	11.4
City	11.3
Country of birth	
Finland	11.0
Other European Union country	22.9
Countries outside the European Union	38.6
Mother's educational level	
Basic education	18.3
Upper secondary education	11.9
Higher Ed./Bachelor's degree	7.8
Higher Ed./Master's degree	5.7
Father's educational level	
Basic education	16.3
Upper secondary education	11.7
Higher Ed./Bachelor's degree	7.4
Higher Ed./Master's degree	5.8

Source: Statistics Finland (2008).

where it is difficult to motivate Finnish employees to accept them (Forsander & Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2000; Kyhä, 2006).

The problems of the post-compulsory education of immigrant youth have been examined in several studies, many of which are local in nature (e.g., Romakkaniemi & Ruutu, 2001). One problem relates to participation in post-compulsory, secondary level education. The difference in participation between immigrant youth and the other Finnish youth is significant. First of all, immigrant youth complete secondary education (general or vocational) at an older age than among the general population. Of those young people born in Finland, 65% have completed some sort of secondary education by the age of 19, while among immigrant youth over half do so only at the age of 21. Secondly, only 14% of the general population have completed only compulsory education at the age of 24, but among immigrants of the same age the corresponding figure is as high as 43%. Thirdly, although one half of all 20- to 24-year-old Finnish-born youth are general upper secondary school graduates, only 3 out of 10 immigrants of the same age are, and among those of African background, the proportion is as low as 1 out of 10 (Järvinen & Jahnukainen, 2008).

The consequences of exclusion from education and work on the later lives of Finnish young people have also been studied using longitudinal data and methods

(Järvinen & Vanttaja, 2006; Vanttaja & Järvinen, 2006; Järvinen et al., 2007).³ Based on the results of this follow-up study, it seems that on average, the assumption that unemployment at the beginning of one's work career combined with limited education has negative consequences on one's later life course holds true. Those Finnish young people who are outside both education and working life at the age of 16–18 often end up in weaker labour market positions and with lower income levels as adults than others belonging to the same age cohort. As young adults, half of the target group had been either unemployed, or for some other reason outside the labour market (e.g., on a disability pension). Over half of the women and two thirds of the men had not completed any kind of education after compulsory education, and hence still had only a basic education at the age of 31–33 (Vanttaja & Järvinen, 2006). In addition, less than one third of the early school leavers had managed to carve out a stable labour market career (Järvinen & Vanttaja, 2006).

Although integration into society had been more difficult for those belonging to the group of unemployed early school leavers than in the population as a whole, life courses representing both exclusion and inclusion were found in the study. Despite the weak 'societal prediction', there were many in the group of early school leavers who had continued their education at a later age and succeeded in finding their place in the world of work. About 10% had continued higher education and ended up in the high-income group. The correlation between one's total education and career was strong. Those who had participated in adult education, especially those who had completed a higher education qualification, most often ended up in a successful labour market career; whereas those with only basic education had most often ended up outside the active labour force and/or in the low-income group (Vanttaja & Järvinen, 2006). Also, the social background of early school leavers was closely connected with the kind of labour market careers they came to have, and the link between parents' educational level and the later success of their offspring was especially strong (Järvinen & Vanttaja, 2006).

Programs, Policies and Practices in Reducing Dropout in Finland

Since the 1990s, and especially after Finland's entry into the European Union in 1995, different types of educational and labour market projects and practices intended to reduce the social exclusion of young people have become more common. In the course of time, the emphasis in these practices has shifted from offering employment to offering education, with combinations of education and work-based training being more and more common. Despite the fact that the youth unemployment rates have been higher in Finland than in European Union and OECD countries on average

³In this particular research project, the target group consisted of a 50% sample of all Finnish youth aged 16–18 (except those in military service) who were unemployed and had not continued their schooling after compulsory school in 1985 (n = 6,983). The life courses of these young people were followed at 5-year intervals up to and including the year 2000.

during the past 10–15 years, the length of unemployment periods are usually quite short for most young people (Järvinen, 2006). This is not, however, the situation in the case of the least educated young people, who have serious difficulties in both getting and keeping a job, and who quite often have problems in their personal lives as well. To support these young people, alternative forms of education, new kinds of pedagogical practices and vocational guidance as well as various methods supporting young people's life management have increasingly been developed during the past 10–15 years (Järvinen & Jahnukainen, 2001; Silvennoinen, 2002; Opetusministeriö, 2005).

Transition from basic to secondary education has been seen as a critical stage from the points of view of the educational and social exclusion of young people. In 2005, the Finnish Ministry of Education appointed a committee whose task was to make proposals for action which will guarantee that the whole age group has opportunities for further education and training. The committee's final report set a goal that in the year 2009, 97.5% of compulsory education school leavers would start in upper secondary education or training, or in additional basic education (Opetusministeriö, 2005).

Related to transition from basic to secondary education, two main problems in Finland are young people's dropping out of the educational system immediately after compulsory school, and failure to complete vocational education. During the past few decades, an attempt has been made to reduce young people dropping out of education as well as interruption of (vocational) schooling, for example by increasing vocational guidance and individual counselling (both in basic and secondary education), by adding more work-based learning into the curriculum of vocational education; and by paying special attention to the teaching and learning of certain 'risk-groups' of young people, such as immigrant youth, disabled youth and young people with learning difficulties or social problems.

In Finland, instead of emphasising the societal nature of the dropout phenomenon and concentrating, for example, on the social inequalities related to it, the problem of dropout has typically been viewed as an individual-level phenomenon. Partly as a result of this kind of understanding, system-wide reforms in reducing dropout have been unusual in Finland.

However, besides the extensive special education system described earlier, the establishment of additional basic education (Grade 10) can also be mentioned as an example of these kinds of system-wide reforms. This educational program – targeted at those young people who have difficulties in continuing their schooling after compulsory school or who have difficulties in making their educational choices – started as a project as early as 1977, and it was systemised several years later, in 1985. Under the circumstances of rapidly increased youth unemployment rates in the late 1970s, the aim was to offer an extra year in basic education for those young people who had dropped out of education immediately after compulsory school, or who wanted to improve their grades in order to get into the educational track of their choice (Silvennoinen, 2002).

Those young people who have completed basic education in the same or the previous year are eligible to apply for this program. Instruction is often carried out in cooperation with compulsory schools and vocational schools, and representatives of working life are also often included in the cooperation, mainly by offering places for students' practical training, which is an important element in this form of education. Another key element in this training program is individualised vocational guidance.

An individual study plan is formulated for every student, often in cooperation with the representatives of the local employment authority (Opetusministeriö, 2005).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, measures of support targeted at young people considered 'youth at risk' have expanded, and partly as a result of this, the number of pupils in additional basic education has decreased (Opetusministeriö, 2005). At the beginning of the 1990s, about 5% of those completing their basic education continued their studies in additional basic education annually. During the first years of the new millennium the proportions varied from 2% to 3%, the proportion being 2% in 2006 (Statistics Finland, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998; Myllyniemi, 2008).

Despite the decline in the number of students in additional basic education, it is still seen as an important measure of support in combating the educational exclusion of young people. In its report, a committee appointed by the Ministry of Education proposed that voluntary additional basic education must be made the young person's statutory subjective right, and participation in this form of education should be made possible not only for school leavers of the same and previous year, but also for those who have finished their schooling 2 years earlier (Opetusministeriö, 2005).

In addition, the gender division of students in voluntary basic education has changed over the course of time. At the beginning, most of the students were boys, whereas the majority are now girls. It seems that boys who have problems in transition from basic to secondary education prefer work to education, and try to get a foothold on the labour market as soon as possible. Their participation in education varies depending on the youth labour market situation, whereas girls take a more positive stand on education as a means to improve one's possibilities of getting a job. Although the proportion of boys in additional basic education declined in the course of the 1980s, it increased again immediately at the beginning of the 1990s, when youth unemployment rates rose rapidly in Finland (Silvennoinen, 2002).

Another supporting measure worth mentioning is a program called youth workshop activities, which in the range of public sector services is located partly in the field of social work and partly in the fields of education and labour markets, and as such is a multidisciplinary activity. This also means that the measures of support offered by youth workshops are based on multi-professional cooperation between the representatives of the educational system, employment authorities, and welfare, health care and youth work (Opetusministeriö, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2008).

Youth workshops have developed from projects to permanent services. Currently, approximately half of the Finnish municipalities organise youth workshop activities, and about 7,000 young people participate in these activities (Ministry of Education, 2008). The aim of the youth workshops is to promote young people's integration into labour markets, as well as to support their future planning and life management. The workshops offer young people a chance to work under the supervision of a youth workshop trainer, as well as an individually tailored path to education or working life. In the youth workshops, the participants work and receive on-the-job training while simultaneously improving their life-management skills. Individual counselling and life-management support is offered by a multidisciplinary team consisting of special education

teachers, psychologists, guidance counsellors, social and youth workers and representatives of the health service (Opetusministeriö, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2008).

Young people involved in activities offered by youth workshops can be either unemployed or still in education, in which case the aim is ensuring that they get a basic or vocational school certificate. The typical client involved in youth workshop activities is a young person who is under 25 years of age, unemployed and who has not completed any post-compulsory schooling. Since immigrants are quite well represented among young people involved in youth workshop activities, the need for experts in immigrant work has increased during the past few years. In 2006, a total of 52 different mother tongues were spoken in the workshops. The duration of youth workshops is individually determined; they usually last 1 year, but shorter periods are also possible (Opetusministeriö, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2008).

In vocational education and training, the correspondence of education to the world of work has been a key development focus area. For example, the proportion of studying at the workplace through learning at work has been increased and competence tests as a form of quality assurance have been included in the study program. Since 1998, and with the financial support of the European Union, various types of workshop activities have also been introduced in regular vocational education and training in Finland. The central idea of vocational schools' own workshops is learning by doing, which has been seen as an efficient method of increasing commitment in those young people who have difficulties in handling the theoretical contents of instruction in vocational education. Students can be involved in workshop activities a few hours a day on a regular basis, or they can get individual guidance a few times a week or month, or even more rarely, depending on their personal needs (Opetusministeriö, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2008).

One of the recently introduced measures of support targeted at young people at risk of educational exclusion is preparatory training for vocational education, from which students can flexibly move on to attain education leading to qualification. This program involves vocational counselling as well as teaching and learning the basic study skills that are needed for completing vocational education. The aim of the preparatory training is also to strengthen the general life-management skills of the students. The length of the study period in preparatory education varies individually; the aim is that students can move from preparatory to vocational training, leading to a qualification as soon as it is seen as appropriate from the point of view of each individual student. In preparatory training, special attention has been paid to the learning and schooling of certain groups of young people, such as disabled youth and immigrant youth (Opetusministeriö, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2008).

Individual support for young people at risk of educational and social exclusion is also offered by local employment authorities in Finland. Young people outside educational institutes have the opportunity to utilise the educational and occupational career counselling services of employment offices. Despite scarce resources, the social guarantee that has been implemented since the beginning of 2005 obliges local employment authorities to offer an activation plan for every unemployed job seeker below 25 years of age after they have been unemployed for 3 months. Activation plans can include offering education, work-based training, preparatory training of

different kinds or employment, with offering education being the prime measure of support for those young people who lack upper secondary education qualifications.

Some Conclusions and Widening the Perspective: Finland – Not at the Top After All?

Finland is riding along on its fame in the OECD international educational rankings. In the latest country review (OECD, 2006), Finland received first place in natural sciences as well as second place in reading and mathematics. In 2000 and 2003 Finland was also ranked among the best, awarded 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 youth in many other OECD countries, and young people's exclusion from both education and working life is also less of a problem in Finland than in many other countries belonging to the European Union (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 21st century (Järvinen, 2003; Kivinen et al., 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 in the school establishment as well as the genesis of educational routes for the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' can be seen. For instance, in relation to choices concerning secondary education, choosing general school is more common among children with highly educated parents than among children of less educated parents (Rinne, 2007), 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 utmost importance to note that Finnish children do not reach the PISA kind of top rankings in all the other comparative research. For example, in an international comparative study by the World Health Organization (2004, pp. 43–44), 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 the '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 polarisation of young people into those who are coping well in many areas of life and those who are at serious risk of social exclusion. Fear has been expressed that these groups of young people are becoming increasingly separated from each other (Autio & Eräranta, 2008). Based on available official statistics as well as recent survey studies, one can argue that on a general level, this polarisation 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 both low incomes and mental health problems has increased during the same period. Although the employment situation of young people has become better during the past few years, youth unemployment rates are still higher in Finland than in other countries belonging to the European Union on average (e.g., Järvinen & Vanttaja, 2005; Myllyniemi, 2008).

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 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 the minority of young people have serious life-management problems and severe difficulties in many areas of life. In this respect, the above-mentioned polarisation hypothesis holds true (Myllyniemi, 2008).

This small, although growing minority of Finnish children and youth 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 centre 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 in every possible way, 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.

Over the past 2 decades, however, there have been clear signs of change in the thinking around the aims, delivery and organisation of education. The provision of education has 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 marginalise 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, the goals of education: to ask seriously what the future of Finnish children and young people will be like, not only as regards their academic success, but also concerning their well-being at school and the quality of their future.

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