Chapter 5
A School for All in Finland

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5.1 A 'Post-comprehensive' Era?

The neoliberal idea of 'education as a market' landed in the Nordic countries in the course of the 1980s. It was first embraced by industrialists, who demanded accountability to school. It took years before much notice of the idea was taken by big public. First, there was only talk about a need to reduce the centralisation of the school system. No stakeholders anticipated a dismantling of the comprehensive school or raised alarm over the loss of equal opportunity in education.

In Finland local school systems, step by step, adopted working patterns from the world of business, through the implementation of new school laws passed by Parliament in the early 1990s. First, the nationally determined school circuits were abolished and a free parental choice of school allowed. Then, the regulation of school finances was slackened and the local authorities made free to decide about the use of money. Popular discussion about the prospects of equal opportunity to education emerged as late as in the end of the 1990s, in the context of Parliamentary discussion around the codification of the new school laws. The pivotal nature of the recently passed laws passed became obvious, and an awareness spread of the problems related to the marketisation of school. People wondered whether a post-comprehensive era dawned for the school system.

The problems arising from the post-comprehensive reforms have been aggravated in the 2000s. Among them there is the socially splitting effect of the free parental choice of school, legislated in 1990. By the 2000s, the primary schools (*grundskola*) have been polarised in regard to their socioeconomic background. The polarisation is obvious in big cities and towns, where the big number of schools enables a school

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market, but a new kind of uncertainty about whether a neighbourhood school can satisfy families rules also in small places. Schools tend to get polarised into wanted and unwanted schools.

Even if Finland in international comparison remained as one of the most equal countries in regard to educational achievement, towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s, a gap seemed to widen between 'good' (wanted) and 'bad' (rejected) schools (OECD/PISA 2009b). The gap was obvious in regard to the socioeconomic background of the schools but discernible also in learning achievement (Seppänen 2006; OECD 2009b).

Another problem is constituted by the distribution of financial resources. As the law today allows the local authorities to use their local judgement in dispensing the public money, some municipalities are more generous to educational institutions than others. Moreover, as the provisions for an individual school depend on how many students the school attracts in the local school market, some schools within the respective municipality are left with poorer resources than others. Schools and intermediately their students can no more trust the equity of provisions.

The third post-1990s problem, apart from the polarisation of schools and the unequal distribution of resources, has arisen from the neoliberalist belief that quality and equality are incompatible in education. The quality of the educational outcome is regarded quantitatively measurable. In Finland, since 2003, the accountability of the schools was materialised in compulsory participation in national tests, through which the cost-effectiveness of the schools was estimated. Although only a sample of schools were tested, the leadership and the staff of the picked schools were bound to take the test results into account when structuring and organising the school work.

The drastic changes of school politics in the 1990s, especially when considering their effects, call for a review of the political intentions and arguments behind the comprehensive reform of the 1970s. Firstly, was the comprehensive school able to enact the equality of opportunity? Secondly, what was meant by 'equality' in the 1970s in comparison to the 1990s? Moreover, the changing relationship between social and economic arguments in educational decision-making deserves a fresh look.

In this article the focus is on the primary school, which provides education for 7–16-year-olds, but as the problems of the primary and the secondary education are intertwined, the equal opportunity in the secondary school form will be occasionally included in the discussion.

5.2 The Finnish School System

The Finnish education system, in regard to primary, secondary and tertiary education, is based on the principle of education free of charge. The vast majority of the primary schools and secondary schools are publicly administered. There are only very few private primary schools, and on the secondary level only few schools are owned by charities. The education provided by the few private primary and secondary

schools as well as the universities and polytechnics is free of charge. Straightforward educational business, meaning schools as private profit-making enterprises, has so far been rejected in Finland.

Even if the comprehensive primary school has not been exposed to a competition with private schools, the idea of competition has been brought within the comprehensive system. No fixed catchment areas (circuits) determine either the recruitment of the pupils or the number and the size of the schools in a municipality. The number of primary schools is getting reduced from year to year, and the same trend is on in field of secondary education. Small schools are being closed. The development is known as 'the rationalisation of the school net' and affects above all scarcely populated rural areas (Fig. 5.1).

The pre-school education for the 6-year-olds is a debated institution in Finland. According to the law codex of 1999, every child has a subjective right to pre-school education, and the vast majority of families use the right. The ongoing dispute concerns the administration of the pre-school. The majority, 75 % of the pre-schools are run by local school authorities, the alternative being the social services. Respectively, the school authorities tend to employ university-educated pedagogues as teachers of the pre-school classes, while social services favour polytechnics-educated nurses.

Primary education is conducted by the comprehensive basic schools, called 'primary schools' in this article. Apart from a nonsignificant number of private schools, all primary schools are administered by local authorities and subsidised by state. Within the primary schools, there is no institutionalised streaming of pupils, although recently some schools have used their curricular freedom to divide pupils into ability groups in 'difficult subjects', that is mathematics and foreign languages.

Secondary education is offered by gymnasia and vocational schools. Traditionally, the two school forms function in their own right, but since the 1990s students have been provided by some local authorities with an opportunity to take courses in both gymnasium and vocational school. The academically oriented gymnasium ends with a matriculation examination. A vocational school student, who takes a sufficient amount of courses in a gymnasium, is entitled to take part in the matriculation examination. However, less than 10 % of matriculation examinations are constituted by such a combination.

On the tertiary level, the matriculation examination is the precondition of the entrance to university, while the polytechnics choose their students from both gymnasiums and vocational schools. The polytechnics are a new school form, established in the early 1990s. Their existence has increased the attraction of the vocational schools. By 2010, the numbers of the applicants to vocational schools had grown remarkably bigger than of those who choose the gymnasium. Only 2 % of the age group in 2010 failed to apply to any secondary school, but the proportion of those who were not enrolled because of the shortage of places in some very popular programmes was almost 20 %.

The policy intention since the 1990s is to have nine of ten basic school leavers aiming at a graduation from a gymnasium or a vocational school. Apart from raising the educational level of the population, the aim is to combat youth unemployment through education.

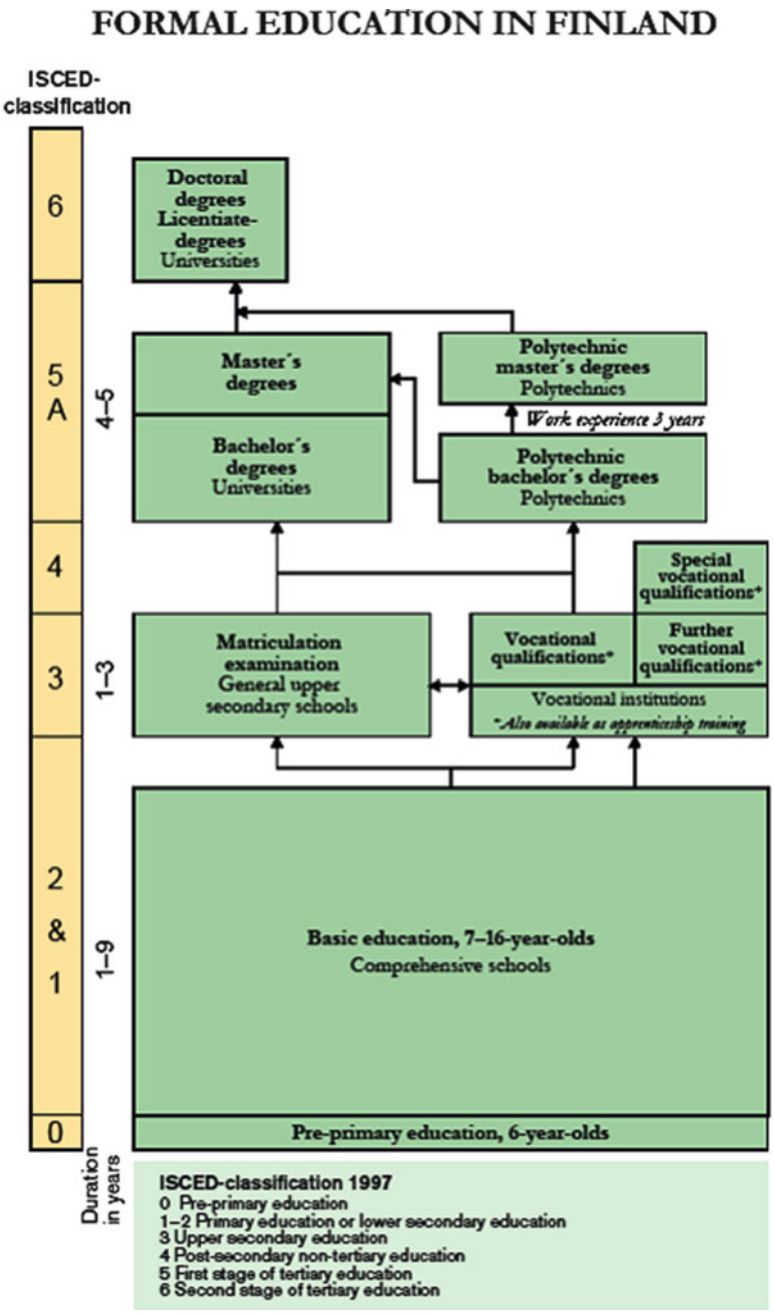

Fig. 5.1 Structure of Finnish education system

Children with special needs are provided special educational services. Since 2010, every pupil has a subjective right to a remedial support. Half of those in need of support were in 2009 taught in special education classes or special education schools. The other half was taught together with other children, either part or full time, having possibly a teacher assistant for a remedial support in the classroom.

The official intention in school politics is to integrate the children with special needs into their age group. This concerns both physically handicapped children, children with behavioural problems and slow learners. Despite the intention, the proportion of pupils in special education has grown between 2000 and 2010 from 5 to nearly 9 %. However, within the 9 %, a growing number is segregated from the age group only part time.

5.3 The History of the Equal Opportunity in Education

5.3.1 A Quest for Common Basic Education

Elementary common school, *folkskola*, was established by State in 1866. Previously, the Lutheran church had for two centuries run a literacy programme, the aim of which was modestly restricted to basic reading skills, considered sufficient for peasants. Only in towns, children not belonging to nobility or clergy received more advanced education, meant to support them in their future trade as artisans and merchants.

The idea of *folkskola* as 'a School for All' means making basic education universally available and expanding it to all layers of society, thus providing all people with equal opportunities to schooling.

Finland was at the time, 1809–1917, an autonomous grand duchy of Russia. The cultural and social tradition was yet firmly rooted in the six centuries of history as a part of Sweden. In the course of the 1800s, a strong national awakening took hold of the people. Finnish language became gradually the language of culture and trade, at the side of Swedish.

The new *folkskola* was ideologically bolstered by nation-building. Apart from social liberalists who expected the basic school to counteract poverty, nationalists urged universal education. The schools were expected to fulfil a nationally unifying legacy. The developments were in accordance with an all-European quest for universal education (Lindert 2004). According to J. V. Snellman, the leading national philosopher in Finland, the main precondition of a nation was education, as only through education a national consciousness could be developed. As a senator, Snellman was in the position to promote *folkskola* in both the Diet, constituted of four estates, and in the central administration. Beside him, a socially liberal clergyman Uno Cygnaeus pivotally contributed to the establishment of the common elementary school.

The two historical actors of the elementary school, the nationalists and the liberalists, did not work in full agreement. Their views deviated from each other in two respects.

Snellman wanted a broad general curriculum for the elementary school. He emphasised the role of 'national subjects', including apart from mother tongue also history and geography, which were needed for the construction of national consciousness. In difference, Cygnaeus, who had during his study tour of Central Europe assumed philanthropic and pedagogically progressive ideas, wanted to have an ample scope for practically useful crafts in the curriculum.

Another schism between the two actors of the elementary school concerned the access to the school. According to Snellman, for a Finnish nationhood to be built, the peasants needed to be both enlightened farmers, capable of prospering, and nationally conscious citizens, prudently running the recently legislated municipal self-government. However, even more crucial a precondition of nationhood was a national high culture, produced in the national language, which according to Snellman would be Finnish. The problem was that the residual high culture existing in Finland was produced in Swedish, which in the course of the previous centuries had been adopted as the language of interaction by nobility, clergy and bourgeoisie. Using the nationalist argument of 'one country–one language', Snellman urged a rapid construction of a Finnish-speaking elite through education. The future elite was meant to be raised in the schools of their own following a curriculum that would be more academic than that of the common elementary school. In Snellman's view, the elementary school would be left as common people's school, while Cygnaeus wanted it to be attended by all children together.

The new elementary school, *folkskola*, was adorned with an ambitious curriculum that was a compromise between the aspirations of Snellman and Cygnaeus. The pupils, aged 9–12, would study both elevating 'national subjects' and useful crafts. As the curriculum set high demands on teachers, teachers' seminars started working simultaneously with the common schools.

In regard to the second schismatic issue, the attendance of the new elementary school, according to the Act of 1866, the children of peasants and elites were in principle expected to go to school together. In practice, the elites preferred to send their children to private preparatory schools, wherefrom the children could in 3 years time move to grammar schools, from which a road opened to higher education. The common elementary school was not inevitably dead end, as through an entrance examination any pupil of elementary schools could at the age of 11 years enter a grammar school. However, only a tiny proportion of children went to grammar schools, partly because the schools charged a fee. The parallel school system, with adolescents divided into *folkskola* and grammar school students, was maintained until the comprehensive reform of the 1970s.

Moreover, a rivalry between the traditional church schools and secular basic schools slowed down the development of common primary education in Finland. The traditional literacy teaching by the church provided an economical even if educationally poor alternative for local authorities. As the establishment of secular elementary schools, *folkskola*, was not obligatory, many local authorities neglected

their introduction. In 1917, when Finland became independent, only two in three children attended a secular elementary school. It seemed that universal education did not fit the poor agrarian society.

The education was made obligatory for 7–12-year-olds in 1921. Nevertheless, only after the Second World War, every Finnish child was secured an opportunity to attend a local elementary school.

5.3.2 A Quest for a Comprehensive School System

After the Second World War, the idea of equity in educational services gained momentum in Europe. As common people had fought side by side with the elites in the war, they were considered justified to have an equal opportunity to pursue good life with education as a resource (Lindert 2004).

The building of the Nordic welfare state was accompanied by the pursuit of a comprehensive school reform, which would abolish the dual system of primary and grammar schools and remove the dead end the system meant for the career of a *folkskola* pupil who could not apply for a place in a grammar school because of economic or geographical reasons. By 1960, Finnish people had voted for the school reform with their feet, as the majority of 11-year-olds went to a grammar school, and new grammar schools mushroomed on private initiative.

Finland was the last Nordic country to undertake the comprehensive reform. The political Left had urged the state to grab the reform since the end of the 1940s, but as the Left became split and all the bourgeois parties resisted the comprehensive school up to the mid-1960s, the reform was delayed. In Finland the comprehensive reform was not achieved by social democrats like in Norway and Sweden, but through a common effort by social democrats and the agrarians. The Agrarian Union adopted a pro-comprehensive standpoint in 1965, due to the realisation that the young people in the vast countryside would greatly benefit from a common 9-year-long school that would open the doors to further education (Ahonen 2003).

The Finnish society experienced during the post-war decades a record-rapid change of the socioeconomic structure. While 46 % of people at the end of the war earned the living from agriculture, in 1960 the proportion was 35 % and 10 years later only 20 %. What was even more crucial was the rapid rise in the proportion of the service sector, being 46 % of all occupations in 1970. Proportionally, in 1970 as big a part of the population earned the living from services, that is commerce, transport and banking, as on agriculture in 1945. For the jobs in the service sector, the broad curriculum of the comprehensive school was in urgent demand.

The struggle for a comprehensive school was fought throughout the 1960s. A pivotal state committee report from 1959 proposed a 9-year-long free-of-charge school with a uniform curriculum. Only partial streaming into ability groups would be allowed. The committee report included several motions of disagreement. In the heated Parliamentary discussion in 1963, prompted by the law proposal composed on the recommendations of the committee, all nonsocialist parties resisted the reform.

The resistance concentrated on two main arguments. The first was socioeconomic. Members of the Agrarian Union and the small liberal party were concerned of the economic costs of the reform and, moreover, regarded the old 'folk school' with its patriotic and Lutheran ethos as the most appropriate school form for the rural majority of Finnish people. The second argument, supported by the political Right and Centre, was inherited from Snellman and accentuated the necessity of elite education. If all children would be taught together, the level of the Finnish education and culture would drop. This argument was supported strongly by the union of the grammar school teachers, who were doubtful about teaching whole age groups in common classes (Ahonen 2003, 126–7).

Equal opportunity to education was the main argument in defence of the proposed reform. It was in harmony with the ethos of the welfare state that was being built during the 1960s. Even if the main advocate of the welfare state in Finland, social scientist Pekka Kuusi, did not explicitly include the comprehensive school in the structures of welfare state, his argument of the necessity of welfare structures for economic growth supported the expansion of educational services (Kuusi 1961). His line of thought had resonance in the pro-comprehensive committee report of 1959, where a reserve of profitable human capital was assumed to exist in the geographical margin of the country. The 9-year-long comprehensive school would help to utilise the reserve. The socioeconomic argument affected the Agrarian Union, which in 1965 adopted the name 'Centre' and changed side in the school debate (Ahonen 2003, 116–21, 123).

The planned comprehensive school system was highly centralised. The distribution of teaching hours per school subject was the mandate of Parliament. The detailed curriculum was to be planned and prescribed by the Ministry of Education. The implementation was the duty of the National Board of Education, a massive office with separate sections for general education, including the comprehensive school and the gymnasium, vocational education, Swedish-speaking education and adult education. The Board would provide guidelines for teaching in single school subjects, and supervise social services provided by schools. Moreover, in every county there was a section for educational administration, with a duty to send inspectors to schools to control the implementation of the detailed national curriculum. In every local municipality a democratically elected school board supervised the schools according to the national norms and the orders of the central administration.

The former grammar schools, most of them previously privately owned even if publicly financed, were integrated into the comprehensive system. The private schools constituted a major cause of disagreement during the struggle for the comprehensive systems. As a compromise, the local authorities were allowed to decide whether grammar schools would maintain their private status. Only in five towns the old grammar schools were left in private ownership, submitting, however, their work to the national norms of free-of-charge education and uniform curriculum.

In the Parliament election of 1966, Finland turned politically left. The socialist parties won a majority in the Parliament. The victory and the support by the modernised

Centre Party decided the fate of the school reform. All parties, except a few individual members, eventually vote for the comprehensive school in 1968, making the school reform an issue of political consensus (Ahonen 2003, 148–9).

Comprehensive reform was meant to make educational achievement independent of a child's socioeconomic and geographical background as well as of her or his gender. In regard to the geographical factor of the equality of educational opportunity, the implementation of the school reform started in 1970 in the north of the country, where the access to education had been hindered by long distances and poverty. The reform reached the capital area in 1978. By that time a crucial amendment had been made to the rules in the name of equal opportunity. The streaming according to ability was renounced, especially as it was found disadvantageous to boys who were inclined to opt for lower streams and thus restrict their future opportunities.

Children with special needs benefited from the fairly generous remedial education services of the comprehensive school. The policy of inclusion was recognised in the school laws, but in reality the handicapped and behaviourally deviant children were most often educated in special education classes that were separated from the main stream.

The positive social effects of the comprehensive reform became obvious when the first generations from comprehensive schools entered adulthood. A difference in educational standards between them and their parents was striking. By the 1990s, nearly 80 % of the age group had achieved a post-basic school diploma, while in 1960 the proportion had been only 12 %. While the old basic school had been for many students a dead end, the comprehensive school opened the door to further education.

The comprehensive reform did not resonate in the development of the upper secondary education. A prestigious education committee proposed in its report in 1973 an integrated secondary education, where vocational and academic studies would be organised according to the domains of knowledge instead of the traditional division into academic and non-academic careers. The integrated model was borrowed from the Swedish 'youth school'. However, the same interest groups that had been reluctant to embrace the comprehensive school now entrenched themselves in the defence of the academic gymnasium (Ahonen 2003, 177–9; Meriläinen 2011). It took 20 years before the fortress of gymnasium crumbled as much as to allow curricular transits between gymnasia and vocational schools.

The equalising effect of the comprehensive reform became obvious in the light of the rising standard of the postprimary-school educational achievement of the population. However, as sociologists have pointed out, the attendance in tertiary education remained persistently dependent on the socioeconomic background of a student (Kivinen and Rinne 1995; Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti 1996). In the 1980s, when 'welfarism' started to lose credibility in the Finnish society, such attendance indicators became used as argument against the comprehensive school.

5.4 Evidence for a Transition into 'Post-comprehensive' School

The changes, produced by the shrinking of the public administration since late 1980s and the relaxation of norms by legislation between 1990 and 1994, indicate that the Finnish school developments entered a post-comprehensive era. Changes in the structures of the school system were in clear contradiction to the principles of the school reform of the 1970s which established the comprehensive basic school.

5.4.1 Structural Developments

The first domain of evidence of a post-comprehensive turn is provided by a look at the *structure* of the school system, especially of the primary school. A striking change happened in the school network. The removal of the law-bound division of the municipalities into fixed school circuits caused a wave of closures of schools. By 2010, basic schools were being closed be a rate of 100 schools per year. Their number of the primary schools in 2011 was 2800 which is about half of the number of 1990. The closures were and are made on the basis of cost-effectiveness. It is more economical to transport children than provide neighbourhood schools for them. For economical reasons, a partial integration of Finnish- and Swedish-speaking schools was suggested in 2011, causing a debate of whether such a policy would violate the constitutional right of national minorities to receive education in mother tongue.

On the secondary level, the number of the gymnasia was by 2011 down to 430 from 463 in 1993, and the trend is further down. Another trend, the curricular integration of local gymnasia and vocational schools, may possibly save some individual gymnasia, but, as at the same time vocational schools are amalgamated with each other, the trend may lead to the emergence of big, concentrated secondary schools.

Apart from economical rationalisation, the opportunity to elevate the standards of school facilities and curricular opportunities is used as the argument for the concentration of educational services. The curricular flexibility of secondary education is growing, even if by 2010 only a minority of local authorities have organised the schools in terms of combined studies and shared facilities.

Another characteristic even if less impressive structural change is the emergence of a small private sector within the primary education. After the pivotal codex of new school laws in 1999 eased the establishment of private schools, the Ministry of Education has been cautious in delivering the necessary licences. Nevertheless, there are a few tens of new private schools, the most of them religious Christian schools. A few schools working in terms of an alternative pedagogy had their existence guaranteed by law already at the comprehensive reform and still flourish with the financial subsidy by the State. In pre-school education, private commercial enterprises are common, especially in the municipalities where pre-school education is subjected to social services instead of a school board.

Outsourcing educational services is one of the post-1990s trends. Actual teaching is not allowed to be outsourced, but schools may well utilise private enterprises to provide building, cleaning and catering services. In that sense many schools have ceased to be self-sufficient institutions with a nonteaching school-based personnel.

5.4.2 Governance

The second aspect when judging whether Finland has moved into a post-comprehensive era is the *steering* of education. The post-1990s school system is characterised by the dismantling of the central administration. The reduction of the size of the central boards and offices governing different domains of life started in the mid-1980s. The argument behind was a neoliberal trust in autonomous actors and the dismay of state control. Actors, for example, teachers, were believed to maximise their potential when being in charge of and accountable for their work. The policy included a substitution of the 'governance by norms' through 'governance by outcomes'. The National Board of Education is since 1999 dedicated mainly to the evaluation of school work. The Board produces every 10 years a short 'framework curriculum', but the actual curriculum planning is the duty of local authorities and schools. The Board concentrates on the outcomes of school work. Through national measurements the Board controls the quality of schooling. Measurement is based on samples of schools, and the results indicate rather regional variation of achievement than differences between individual schools.

Steering on the basis of outcomes requires a solid mechanism of regular evaluation. The scope of evaluation became narrower than planned on the first stages of the reform of the 1990s. After originally defining the cost-effectiveness of a school in broad terms reaching from financial input–output indicators to client satisfaction among pupils and parents, the National Board of Education restricted the focus on learning results. The measurement of the learning achievement is conducted by the Board in co-operation with universities. There are also other parallel measurements conducted by university departments in their own initiative and by different bodies coordinated by the Finnish National Evaluation Council, which also contributes to the influential Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the OECD.

The measurement instruments for the national evaluation of learning achievement, conducted by the National Board of Education and intensified since 2008, are constructed by subject-specific expert groups elected by the Board from among teacher educators, experienced teachers and the representatives of the Board. The measurement is planned to happen every 3 years in mother tongue and mathematics and in most other subjects every 5 years and is targeted above all to the final year of the primary school (that is to the 16-year-olds). The Board aims at expand the testing in the key subjects to 9-year-olds and 12-year-olds.

The use of the results of the evaluation is left to schools to decide. Public ranking lists of schools are avoided, and the evaluation is supposed to rather serve than

control the teaching profession. Officially, the evaluation is meant to safeguard the equity of educational services (The Finnish Education Evaluation Council 2012). Measurement is focused on the efficiency of schooling, including the accessibility of education, the effect of teaching, above all the learning outcomes and the cost-effectiveness of the schooling (National Board of Education 1998). The results may be used to positive discrimination of weak schools in terms of providing them with extra financial resources for remedial teaching. A local authority can use the evaluation results to urge an improvement in a school's work.

The delegation of the steering of school work to local actors is complicated by the absence of a local school board in some municipalities. The disappearance of school boards was caused by local decision-makers using the freedom of local governance to integrate, for example, the social and educational services into one administrative unit. As a result, it is often the individual schools rather than the municipality that decide about the curriculum.

By the 2000s, the delegation of the subsidiary curriculum development to local actors had proved to risk the equity of educational services. The national framework curriculum left too much scope for local variation in educational services. Some local authorities may economise more than others in the provision of remedial support and curricular choices. Therefore, children in one town may receive worse education than those in another town. Moreover, the differences in contents and standards between towns harmed the migrant pupils of the modern mobile society. Therefore, when constructing the new national framework curriculum of 2004, the National Board of Education provided more detailed descriptions of the contents of the syllabi in different subjects. The control by norms made thus a comeback.

5.4.3 Children with Special Needs

The opportunities of children with special needs are a crucial indicator of the equity of educational services. Children with special needs require appropriate support in school in order not to be treated as second-class citizens. Moreover, their need of social belonging shall be recognised. The decision-makers have to balance between the contradictory demands of providing a child with special services and not separating him or her from the rest of the age group. Since 2011, a child has a legal right to an early remedial support if he needs one. The support can be general, intensified or specialised. The last mode, the specialised support, is constituted by the segregated special education classes, which, however, are not meant to be a permanent solution to an individual child. She or he has an opportunity to return to his normal class as soon as her or his needs are less special than before. In the course of the 2000s, the number of the old special education schools has decreased by a third, while the number of pupils provided with other kinds of special needs education has increased by 45 % (Nyyssölä and Jakku-Sihvonen 2009; Merimaa 2011).

The new law of special education is expected to help to cut the trend that had during 2000–2010 resulted in doubling of the proportion of children who were sent

to special education classes. In big towns, one child in ten had studied in a special class either part time or permanently. Early remedial support, preferably by a teacher assistant, is supposed to substitute the segregation and reinforce the principle of an inclusive school (Merimaa 2011).

5.4.4 Globalisation

National school politics can no more be conducted without a reference to global actors. Globalisation is especially obvious on the tertiary education but affects also the primary and secondary levels. Finland has participated in both the OECD-run PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) evaluation cycles in 2000, 2003, 2006 and 2009 and the extensive IEA (International Educational Achievement) measurements (e.g. ICCS about citizenship education 1999, TIMMS about science education 2011 and PRILS about literacy 2011). After each evaluation cycle, the OECD provides recommendations to national decision-makers. The critics in Finland have pointed out that the Finnish politicians and administrators have been even too obedient implementers of the recommendations (Rinne 2002; Rinne et al. 2004). Among the Finnish responses to OECD criticism, there has been the reducing of public expenditure in education in the 1990s and the transformation of the traditional early education into 'educare', i.e. into pre-school education. The institutionalisation of national evaluation in 2003 happened on the suggestion by the OECD, reinforcing the output driven modes of educational governance (The Finnish Education Evaluation Council).

In the Maastricht Treaty, education was included in the sphere of responsibilities of the European Union. In regard to primary and secondary education, the principle of subsidiarity was respected, but the Union has since Maastricht undertaken educational exchange and monitoring programmes that undeniably affect national policies. Like the OECD, also the EU is practising information management on national education systems. Comparative data tend to stimulate changes in national systems. For instance, there is a pressure from the internationally comparative indicators to lower the school-starting age down from seven and to point a special focus on the problems of the gifted children – both being aspects where the Finns have traditionally insisted on their own ways.

5.4.5 Equal Opportunity?

Equal opportunity as the guideline of school politics became threatened by the school politics of the 1990s, and, even if some steps back to welfarism have been taken, the primary school is no more the same as it was under the auspices of the welfare state. The losses have been proved by research, both into the history of the school politics (Ahonen 2001, 2003; Varjo 2007) and into the developments of

the socioeconomic structures of schools. Piia Seppänen has proved through her empirical study that the marketisation of primary schools since the mid-1990s has caused a polarisation of the socioeconomic background of the schools. Above all, the educational and professional status of the mother of a child determines whether the child goes to a 'better' school (Seppänen 2006, 285). According to Seppänen, in the big and middle-sized cities of Finland, 30–50 % of families had by 2000 adopted the habit of applying a place in a non-neighbourhood school. The 'better' school was most often situated in a socioeconomically stronger area than that of the applicant. As a result, primary schools had become divided into attractive, rejected and neutral schools. Nearly half, 40 %, of schools were rejected, while one third was among the attractive and the rest among the neutral (Seppänen 2006).

In the new market situation, prompted by free parental choice of school and the deregulation of finances, one in four children went to school which thanks to its attraction could choose its pupils and was therefore not a true 'School for All'. Entrance exams were prohibited by law, but through adopting a trademark through a curricular profile – extra lessons in music, sports, sciences etc. – a school could practise a selective recruitment policy. As the rejected schools lost students, their financial resources were reduced and their development potential weakened. They found themselves in the vicious circle of dropping attendance and dropping standards.

An ongoing research project *Skidi–Kids*, comprising the big (over 100,000 inhabitants) towns of Finland, the areas were differentiated into those where 70 % of the parents had a university degree and to those where only one in three had it (Rimpelä and Bernelius 2010; Skidi Kids 2010). The researchers then referred to the latest PISA measurements (OECD 2009a, b), which indicated that the differences of the socioeconomic background could be anticipated to be mirrored in a school's educational achievement.

According to the PISA indicators from 2009, Finland is still one of the most equal countries in regard to the educational achievement. Differences in achievement both within a school and between schools were smaller than in most OECD countries. Compared to other PISA-measured countries, the correlation between a student's family background and PISA record in Finland was not too strong but had grown since the previous PISA cycle. What was more significant was the widened gap between schools in socioeconomically strong and weak areas. Especially if compared to the indicators from 2000, the differences in educational achievement between schools had grown (OECD 2009b, 64). The influence of the socioeconomic polarisation on learning result would violate the principle of equal opportunity to education. Moreover, the availability of remedial teaching had suffered from schools shunning the reputation of a slow-learner school and using the resources rather on a more attractive profile. The educational opportunity of a weak student was at the mercy of the market effect.

The further two crucial aspects of equal opportunity are constituted by the independence of learning results on region and gender. The latest PISA results indicate that a differentiation is taking place between the South, the Middle part and the North of Finland. The performance of Middle Finland has gone proportionally down. Moreover, in Middle Finland the performance gap between boys and girls, in

favour of girls, is wider than elsewhere (OECD 2009b, 64). The explanation might be found in the deregulation of school finances which may leave a local school without resources to organise remedial teaching. The OECD indicators call for a policy discussion about the drawbacks of the freedom of choice accentuated in the post-1990s school politics.

Since the days of the comprehensive reform, when spending money on the primary schools was considered a worthy investment on future, the decision-makers have changed their priorities. Schools are expected to be cost-effective, even if both State and local authorities tend to cut the educational expenditure in times of scarcity. During the first decades of the 2000s, Finland fell from a generous spender on education to the middle rank. Expenditure on primary and secondary education fell from the 6–7 % of the 1970s to the 3–8 % in 2008 (OECD 2011, 224, 230). Relative expenditure varied between local authorities, which violated the principle of equal opportunity in education.

5.5 What Happens to the 'School for All' in the Market?

The availability of a trustworthy neighbourhood school was the goal of Finnish school politics since the late 1800s. In the school laws of 1999, 'neighbourhood school' was recognised as the subjective right of every child. It was a defence against the developments that already had shattered 'the equal opportunity to education'. The primary schools had become competitive instead of equal, selective instead of common and measured instead of trusted. In international comparison, they were still relatively equal, but the trend since the 1990s was towards the ethos of competition.

The changes in school politics happened step by step during the 1990s. Deregulation and decentralisation of the administration of primary and secondary education came as the first step and the introduction of competition within the primary school, accompanied by the liberation of the management of the public expenditure by local authorities, as the second step. When interviewed for research purposes, the civil servants who proposed the pivotal laws in many cases did not acknowledge the ideological umbrella of neoliberalism in their action (Virtanen 2002; Meriläinen 2011). Eventually, the chief of the Ministry of Education, Vilho Hirvi, in 1996 openly advocated a new understanding of the concept of equality. Equality should no more mean sharing a common school but providing an equal opportunity for everybody to receive individually tailored education that would be equivalent of individual aspirations and aptitudes. Equality was subordinated to the freedom of choice in order to boost the creative potential of free individual actors.

Finnish sociologists and sociologically oriented historians of education, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu, had since the 1980s paved the way to educational scepticism. They pointed out that the great efforts of the founders of the comprehensive reform had not produced equality in the sense that young people's educational achievement would be independent of family background, region and gender. Especially the family background persisted as a determinant of success in school, to the extent that a

young person's likelihood to access tertiary education rose ten times if he or she was born into an academic family. Equal opportunity was therefore 'a vain dream' (Rinne and Vuorio-Lehti 1996).

As a structural explanation, the transformation of society can be suggested to be a factor in weakening the significance of egalitarianism in educational thinking and politics. Finland was transformed between the 1970s and the 1990s from an industrial to a post-industrial society. The school form that suited the era of chimney factories and assembly lines did not suit the studios and think-tanks of the information society. The new middle classes were a diffuse lot of holders of a variety of occupations and a considerable income. Their aspirations and expectations in regard to their offspring varied from one family to another and consequently required flexible school provisions. To them, the uniform comprehensive school could well appear obsolete.

However, the change of a society is not linear. In Finland, a deep economic slump of the early 1990s reminded people of the contingency of life and the value of fair deal. The principle advocated by the American social philosopher John Rawls, according to which the opportunities of the weak constituted the best indicator of whether a society was just, gained new momentum (Rawls 1972). Education became again acknowledged as a social good instead of a private asset. The development of the school system was resumed as a political issue after having been for more than a decade left to bureaucrats. Like in the years of the struggle for the comprehensive reform, education was at the end of the 1990s lifted onto the top level in the national political agenda and submitted to democratic decision-making. The results were shown in a few reversals in the neoliberally tuned legislation, for instance, in the recognition of the subjective right of a child to her or his neighbourhood school.

Notwithstanding the odd signs of a will to defend welfarism in education, the change in the ethos of the Finnish education since the 1990s pointed away from egalitarianism, the core argument of a welfare state. The new ethos was reinforced by the new international affinities of the country, above all the membership of the European Union and the partnership in influential educational evaluation leagues like PISA. Since the early 2000s, the Finnish schools are internationally measured and compared as well as imposed demands of harmonisation with the international strategies of outcome-based look at education.

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