

PAULI SILJANDER

11. SCHOOL IN TRANSITION

The Case of Finland

INTRODUCTION

This article examines, from an exclusively national perspective, the changes that have occurred in the Finnish educational system and in manners of thought relating to Finnish schools. Finland's educational system has, in recent years, been the subject of exceptional international interest, following the country's PISA success. The specific characteristics of the Finnish school institution have been analysed and brought to the attention of an international readership widely and diversely, to the point that – from a close-hand or internal perspective – an observer might find it difficult to discover anything new to say (see for example Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg, 2006; Sahlberg, 2011, 2015; Välijärvi et al., 2007; Simola, 2005; Siljander, 2005). Most analyses have looked for an explanation to the 'unexpected' PISA miracle.

This text does not propose to discover explanatory factors for the success of the Finnish school system, nor to describe the origins of that success. Instead, it aims to delineate the relationship between politics, educational policy, and pedagogical thought in the context of the Finnish school. The principal question is, in other words, 'How are the lines and demands of educational policy and the socio-political linked to pedagogical thinking on schools, and to school reforms?' The question is of course a traditional one. The origins and development of the modern school are part of the birth of modern society. The two bodies – modern school and modern society – cannot be separated, except for the purposes of analysis. Or, as Jürgen Oelkers contends, 'social revolution' cannot be understood without 'pedagogical revolution' (Oelkers, 1983). From a historical perspective, they are nearly identical.

Of course, this general observation does not justify the conclusion that relations between the socio-political and pedagogical are unproblematic, self-evident, or transparent. In fact, at issue is a tension that classical school theories have already raised: namely, 'How can a school's pedagogical goals and the demands of a society – that is, societal determination – be reconciled?' This concerns, in large part, the autonomy of a school; in other words, to what extent a school institution can define its objectives and relations to the rest of society from its own pedagogical starting points. Autonomy can, of course, be merely 'relative' in nature, as representatives of classical *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*, among others, have stressed. On

the one hand, a school cannot become isolated; on the other, it cannot establish itself uncritically as an arena for the implementation of external ideological or economic demands, or as a medium for the ‘trends of the time.’

Most national school reforms are currently wrestling with the same issue. With globalisation, international trends and reform demands are appearing with particular strength. Despite cultural and national differences, global trends are shaping national school reforms, making them more uniform and similar (Kallo & Rinne, 2006; Sahlberg, 2015). As a consequence, the question ‘To what extent can the contents and goals of reform be controlled through pedagogical arguments?’ is increasingly timely.

The following chapter investigates the key turning points in the development of Finland’s school institution since 19th century over the past fifty years. First I describe the guidelines of educational policy and *Bildung* conception in the 1800s, and then the turning points and changes from 1960 to the present. My principle focus is on the interaction between politico-ideological conceptions, officially defined goals of educational policy, and pedagogical manners of thinking – as those ideas, goals, and manners of thinking appear as general development principles and official policy changes relating to the development of Finland’s education system. This text does not scrutinise the implementation of those principles and policy changes in the practices or day-to-day operations of a school.

BILDUNG: THE POWER OF A SMALL COUNTRY

One cannot understand the current situation of the Finnish school and its recent history without acknowledging Finland’s position between two cultural and societal systems, on the border between east and west. Finland has long historical and cultural ties to Sweden in the west and to Russia in the east. Those ties include (1) a joint border of over a thousand kilometres with Sweden and Russia; (2) before governmental independence in 1917, a status for over a century as the ‘autonomous grand duchy,’ under Russia’s political administration; and (3) before Russian control, a position for centuries as part of the territory of Sweden. The above history is particularly significant because the basis for and guidelines of Finnish *Bildung* politics were created in the 1800s, when Finland had to build a national and cultural identity between the opposing power positions of Sweden and Russia. Finland had been part of Sweden until the early 1800s, but power play between Napoleon and Alexander I meant that the country was detached from its connection (as a state) to Sweden and attached to Russia in 1809.

Besides the change in political and administrative power, this shift in governing nation meant a redefinition and repositioning of cultural relationships. Russia’s Tsar Alexander I promised Finland a comparatively autonomous position, offering the possibility to create independent, national *Bildung* policy (Vahtola, 2004, pp. 250–252). The effort to do so received its most significant ideological stimuli from Hegelian philosophy and traditions of thought, whose main representative,

J. V. Snellman (1805–1881), later received the title of ‘Finland’s national philosopher’. Thanks to Snellman, Hegelian philosophy gained a strong position in Finland’s academic milieu, decisively influencing Finnish national *Bildung* policy and the basic lines of pedagogical thought in the 1800s. The redefinition of Finland’s state position while a subordinate of Russia demanded the recognition and consideration of two fundamental issues.

Firstly, in order to remain an independent nation, Finland had to create – within the administrative bounds of Russian governance – as strong and self-governing a national *Bildung* as possible. Secondly, in addition to state separation, Finland had also to detach itself ideologically and culturally from Sweden, and to develop its *Bildung* policies towards the recognition and strengthening of its own language and culture. From this position, Snellman created the foundation for national *Bildung* thinking, in a powerful push to create a national consciousness and identity through language, literature, history, science, art, and a *general national Bildung*. The kernel of Snellman’s programme, which later became the hallmark catchphrase of Finnish *Bildung* thinking, was that a small nation must reclaim its right to exist through a high level of *Bildung*, not through material or ideological power.

Finland can do nothing through violence; the power of *Bildung* is its only salvation. (Snellman, 1931, p. 134)

This principle has been brought up repeatedly in Finnish discourse as the determining guideline of educational policy. In recent years, it has also become a common slogan in the mouths of politicians, in the form of the phrase ‘education, education, education’. The people of a small, sparsely populated nation can become recognised internationally – above all – through the aid of *Bildung* and education, as the ‘PISA’ discussion of recent decades has demonstrated. The central principle of the Snellmanian programme of educational policy was as follows: the more a population participates in *Bildung*, the more powerful *Bildung* becomes as a constructor of that nation’s identity. ‘The issue,’ declared Snellman, ‘is, simply, how the majority of a nation can become part of a progressive *Bildung*’ (ibid.).

According to Snellman, a strong national determination towards *Bildung* may be a sufficient counterforce to external interests and pressures.¹ On the one hand, Snellman’s policy of educational thinking invoked the participation of the entire Finnish nation and, in particular, the needs towards *Bildung* of the Finnish-speaking populace. On the other, Snellman empathized dialectics between the national *Bildung* and general humanity: ‘*Bildung* that is not national cannot be right, general *human Bildung*’ (ibid.).

It is important to note that Snellman’s *Bildung* programme was, concurrently, a wide-reaching societal project in which the state had a central role and responsibility. From the basis of Hegelian philosophy, Snellman developed a *Bildung* theory according to which the state ultimately represents the general will and reason (*Vernunft*) of the people. Therefore, the responsibility for *Bildung* could not remain dependent on the varied, contradictory interests of civil society. Rather, *Bildung* was

to be implemented with the aid of an *educational institutions* maintained by the state. This national *Bildung* project demanded a rising level of general education; from that viewpoint, the development of the public school was a key societal issue.²

While heated debate over the concrete forms of educational system occurred in the late 1800s or early 1900s, the most durable part of the Snellmanian *Bildung* doctrine remained, directing the reforms of the Finnish school system until the 2000s, declaring that the power of a small nation is *Bildung*, and that the power of *Bildung* is in its generality, not in 'specialness' or elitism.

BILDUNG AND THE FINNISH WELFARE STATE

While the above *Bildung* programme was alive and strong in the late 1800s, the tangible effects of that programme on the development of the Finnish educational system were gradually diluted. Lampinen (1998) states that the years following Finland's governmental independence in 1917 were comparatively quiet in terms of the advancement of the country's educational systems. The act for compulsory public education was adopted in 1921, but the state's role as director of *Bildung* policy was, however, relatively passive.

Definitive change occurred during so-called 'post war reconstruction' after World War Two and in the 1960s in particular in relation to educational policy. Two general causes spurred this transition: on the one hand, a brisk change in the structure of society, and on the other, a strong rise in political ideologies demanding societal justice, equality, and democracy. In the 1960s, Finland was still broadly an agrarian society; over thirty-five percent of its population made a living through farming, or from professions linked to farming. In neighbouring Sweden, the equivalent figure was fourteen percent (Alestalo, 1985). In approximately ten years, a drastic change occurred.

An agricultural surplus led to the wide-reaching cessation of small farms, causing migration from the country to the city, and a search for work outside national boundaries. By the late 1960s, over 300,000 Finns had moved abroad, principally to neighbouring Sweden and Canada. For a small country whose entire population numbered around 4.5 million, this was an enormous loss. Securing the material and mental welfare of the populace became a matter of the fate of the nation. The governing principles of Finnish educational policy after the Second World War can be regarded as part of the project of building the welfare state, in which education was given a particularly important role.

Ideological Goals: Economic Growth and Societal Equality

In Finland and other Nordic countries, the idea of 'welfare' and the 'welfare state' received exceptionally broad content; it has, therefore, been usual to refer in particular to a 'Nordic model of the welfare state' (Kettunen, 2001b; Antikainen, 2006). The fundamental ideas of the Finnish version of the model were formed in

the early 1960s by Pekka Kuusi in his work *1960s Social Politics* (Kuusi, 1961), which tied together a declared necessity for economic growth, for social rights based on citizenship, and for welfare services secured by the state. Therefore, in the Finnish model of the welfare state, demands for economic growth, social equality, and democracy were linked ideologically.

In the political programmes of the welfare state, the fundamental services of a society – in particular, health, work, and material livelihood – were seen as universal social rights, to which every citizen should have access, regardless of birth and social background. Kettunen (2001a) contends that, in Finland, the welfare state project also involved a strong ideological charge. Neighbouring Sweden, with its social democratic ideologies of the welfare state defined its societal model in terms of a ‘third road’ between American capitalism and Union communism. In Finland, the structures of the welfare state were built more cautiously, avoiding a polarisation of ideologies and observing instead the necessities of economic growth. However, at the same time, Finland’s position between two ‘growth-oriented’ nations – Sweden and the Soviet Union – was emphasised.

If we are to continue our own life between Sweden and the Soviet Union, two growth-oriented and growth-capable nations, we are doomed to grow. (Kuusi, 1961, p. 34)

The situation was very familiar to the Finns. Finland’s position as a small country between the east and the west became part of a debate on the principles of the ideological politics of the welfare state. The connections to Swedish society and to the Swedish cultural inheritance – whose concrete embodiment was also the 1960s migration described above – were strong. On the other hand, in the atmosphere of the cold war, relations with the large easterly neighbour were to be guarded carefully.

In these societal conditions, the importance of education was set in a new framework; or, more precisely, the Snellmanian idea of *Bildung* was revived, in the rhetoric of educational policy, as a precondition of the welfare and progress of the Finnish nation. However, *Bildung* as a concept disappeared from the discourse of the researchers and politicians of education, and was replaced with ‘education’. Education was seen as a citizen’s universal right and as part of the *social security of the welfare state*, security to which everyone was entitled, independent of birth, gender, location, social station, and economic situation. As occurred elsewhere in Europe, the 1960s political movement in Finland raised democracy, societal equality, and the demands of justice to the centre of political discussion, accelerating reforms related to the education system.

Of those education-related reforms, the first and most significant was the move to a Finnish comprehensive school, a move by which the earlier, parallel system of grammar schools and elementary schools became a unified, nine-year comprehensive school for all pupils. I do not consider it necessary in this article to describe the content and particulars of these reforms, which have been detailed widely and thoroughly in international discussions in recent years (see for example Aho et al.,

2006; Sahlberg, 2011; Simola, 2005). In summary, the structural change in Finnish society, which was more intensive in Finland than in other OECD countries – and invoked the idea of the ‘welfare state’ as a guarantor of the material and mental welfare of citizens – provided a basis for changing the entire educational system. Education became an important project of the welfare state.

The above is, however, only one side of the coin. The other side is that perhaps never before, and presumably never again, has a hierarchical relationship been so explicitly and officially defined between national policy, educational policy, and a school system. At the top of that hierarchy were politico-ideological goals for the development of society, goals to be implemented through educational policy and for which the education system as a whole, including individual educational institutions, was to act as an instrument. Education was defined – in other words – as a part of general societal politics; and the new task of the various sub-systems of education were to *implement* policy goals (see for example Komiteanmietintö, 1973). This ‘top-down’ logic was not seriously disputed. On an ideological level, the autonomy of the Finnish school was heavily limited. In practice, institutions of education were left with the freedom to implement these changes in a relatively independent manner.

From a pedagogical perspective, the relationship between the external and internal – between demands directed at schools from the outside and internal development needs – does not present a problem, as long as the motives and goals of both external and internal are congruent, and can accommodate each other without contradiction, i.e. when, in Snellman’s terms, they both serve human *Bildung*. It is not an exaggeration to state that the Finnish implementation of the welfare state reconciled the external and internal successfully, although political debate on the topic was intense. The next section examines how pedagogical principles defined the content of school reform and were linked to the above, more general political ideology.

Pedagogical Principles: Paradigm Shift I

Jürgen Oelkers (1994) has described the development of the history of educational theory as a battle – or, alternatively, the movement of a pendulum – between two paradigms opposite in their basic assumptions. One might call the first paradigm a ‘paradigm of external influence’ and the second ‘a paradigm of internal development’ or perhaps also a ‘paradigm of self-regulation’. The difference between the two paradigms concerns to what extent one views human growth processes such as learning as the effect of external pedagogical intervention, or as the *self-regulation* of individuals. Of course, no precise answer or ‘final truth’ can be offered in response. Instead, I contend that we may examine how these ways of thinking have become linked to the ideologies of educational policy and to solutions relating to the practical arrangement of teaching. In early 1900s Finland, a strong belief was expressed in individual differences and in the genetic determinability of learning, or, in other words, in the internal regulation of the processes of learning and growing. These thoughts were supported by differential psychology and its various

methods of testing (Kivelä & Siljander, 2013). Although pedagogical practices may have been teacher-led and authoritarian in nature, the basic ways of thinking about learning and the educability of pupils leaned on individual differences that could be demonstrated through psychological testing. Differential psychological thinking models influenced common pedagogical thought, although its concrete applications were not very systematic.

This situation changed after the Second World War. Representatives of the behaviourist theory of learning stressed the importance of external regulation and of models to demonstrate the effect of the learning environment and external arrangements on learning results. The learning-theoretical ideas of behaviourism were compatible, in particular, with the political ideologies driving social equality. In the 1960s and 1970s, educational policy reforms – and the related ‘radical’ interpretation of equality – raised for discussion the old debate about a person’s *educability*. Following that debate, policy-makers abandoned (at least *in principle*) psychological manners of explaining individual students’ differences in terms of hereditary abilities such as intelligence, talent profiles, and personality characteristics.

Educability, as a matter of preference, was not to be seen as an individual or genetic phenomenon; rather, it was to be seen as a structural, societal problem that might be solved by decision-making in educational policy and pedagogical practice (Häyrynen & Hautamäki, 1973; Antikainen, 1998, p. 94). The comprehensive school curriculum defined the chief policy line of this new thinking as follows.

There is no reason to overestimate the effect of differences between cognitive abilities. If a subject to be taught is devised in such a way that it becomes progressively more difficult for each student in suitable steps, and if individual differences are permitted within the time used for learning, learning results do not differ noticeably between groups of different levels. Therefore, it would be justified to differentiate teaching in comprehensive schools in such a way that study times of different duration...belong to the system as an acceptable part of it. (POPS, 1970, p. 136)

From the perspective of school pedagogy, the key questions were, ‘To what extent is it necessary or even possible to define a student’s individual psychological learning requirements or talents?’ and, ‘To what educational channels should students be guided?’ Perhaps the most far-reaching principle of the new pedagogy of the comprehensive school was the abandonment of genetic determinism. According to the new pedagogy, differences exist between students in their readiness for learning, but those differences cannot be assumed to be the result of genetic factors, nor can a student’s school career be defined by individual personality traits or by inherent learning abilities. This thinking received empirical support from the results of work by Benjamin Bloom’s research group. According to Bloom’s findings, one can affect learning results decisively through teaching arrangements, for instance by varying the time used for learning, materials, and support actions; even to the point

that the ‘weak students’ of traditional teaching can achieve the same results as very successful students (Bloom, 1971; Block, 1971).

In other words, the actions of a teacher and the structure and characteristics of a pedagogical interaction define, essentially, a student’s ability and capacity to learn. Educability (*‘Bildsamkeit’*) is a ‘principle of a pedagogical interaction’ rather than an ‘individual ability or capacity’ (Benner, 1996, p. 57). This meant that the pedagogical reform of Finnish schools shifted its focus from a student’s inherent qualities to the work of a teacher; that is, to the nature of external direction and to principles of pedagogical interaction. The core curriculum of the comprehensive school in 1970 states this as follows.

In the so-called ‘selective’ schools in particular, students’ poor learning results are often interpreted as a consequence of poor learning ability. By dropping students who come below a qualifying limit, one can of course separate students who manage their studies well from a larger body of applicants. At the same time, a teacher has nonetheless chosen for participation those students who learn best through the precise procedures he or she – as teacher – employs. In a comprehensive school without an application process, the situation is different. *A student’s weak results may be because the methods or attitude of a teacher are unsuitable’* (italics added). (POPS, 1970, 159)

The above model of thought transferred responsibility for learning results to teachers and to the governing bodies of schools. In the reforms to the comprehensive school, a specially resourced remedial teaching programme was developed for students and, in particular, for those with either temporary or permanent learning difficulties. *Overcoming learning difficulties* became a central pedagogical principle that has remained distinctively characteristic of school teaching arrangements. It is crucial to note that the political goals of the reform of the 1960s and 1970s and the pedagogical principles of school reform at that time were made to fit nearly seamlessly together.

THE CRISIS OF THE WELFARE STATE AND A POLICY CHANGE IN EDUCATIONAL POLITICS

The ideology and educational doctrine of the Finnish welfare state became the subject of discussion and debate in the late 1980s. A strong impetus was given to that discussion by the Finnish national economic crisis of the early 1990s, to which the dramatic political-economical upheavals in Europe – such as the fall of the Berlin wall, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the development of European integration – are linked. As in the 1950s and 1960s, a structural change to society was involved, a change described in the 1980s and 1990s as a move from an ‘industrial’ or ‘post-industrial’ society to an ‘information society’.

The change in question was followed by a wide-reaching discussion on the basic ideology of the welfare state, on Finland’s ‘mental state and future,’ on the ideological

basis of *Bildung* policy, on the *Bildung* strategy of the information society, and on national identity (see for example Niiniluoto & Löppönen, 1994).

The teachings of neoliberalism became challengers to the equality ideology of the welfare state: free competition, a reduction in public spending, a dismantling of state monopolies, and a privatisation of public services. Neoliberal reform processes targeted the fundamental structures of society, including reforms of the monetary markets, monetary policy, the public sector, and the labor markets, as well as socio-political reform (Julkunen, 2001). These reforms must be seen, I contend, as an essential part of a turn in the direction of the welfare state, leading in the 1990s to – among other phenomena – the elimination of certain social benefits and a restriction of access to social security (Julkunen, 2001).

*An Ideological Turning Point in Educational Policy:
International Competitiveness*

The direction of educational politics was also redefined in this new context. The turning points of the early 1990s meant that the traditional east-west position had to be widened ‘towards Europe’ and the global education market. The widening of those markets, following the economic recession, created new challenges for education. The key concepts of the political rhetoric of education became ‘internationalisation’, ‘international competition’, and ‘globalisation’.

In this altered societal situation and ideological climate, the basic issue of *Bildung* politics changed shape. Where the welfare state project had asked, ‘How can one guarantee sufficient social security, equal welfare services, and the success of a nation ‘between two growth-oriented societies?’” (Kuusi, 1961), the question now became, ‘How can one guarantee a small country’s international competitiveness in a globalising environment?’ On a rhetorical level, Finland’s answer appears to have remained the same, *through a high level of education and Bildung*³. However, the principles specifying the content and regulation of education changed. From a perspective of international competitiveness, the challenge became “how can development into an ‘information-intensive society’ be implemented?”

In the early 1990s, Finland’s government prepared a national information-society strategy entitled *Suomi tietoyhteiskunnaksi – kansalliset linjaukset (Finland for an information society: national policies)* (Valtiovarainministeriö, 1995), which defined as its main goal the elevation of Finland to foremost in international information-society development.⁴ The plan led quickly to specific strategies and actions in administrative fields, including the administration of the Finnish Ministry of Education. Indeed, Finland’s information-society strategies have been continuously evaluated, reformed, clarified, and concretised (see for example Lilius, 1997; SITRA, 1998; Valtioneuvosto, 2006). In recent years, specific plans and recommendations have also been created to promote the use of modern information and communications technology in teaching. Nationwide programmes have inspired a huge number of local and regional information-society projects.

At the same time, the reform processes of the ideological climate of neo-liberalism – and the manners of implementing those processes – meant redefining the educational ideology of the welfare state. Finnish education policy has continually aimed for a high level of *Bildung* and to maintain the right of all citizens to an education. This basic departure point was not disputed in principle; however, in the turning point of the 1990s, the central precepts of the ‘state-led’, solidarity-centric educational thinking characteristic of the welfare state were questioned or given an interpretation that differed significantly from previous stances on the topic.

The state-governed, centralised regulation of educational politics began to be dismantled systematically in the early 1990s. Through changes to legislation, municipalities were freed from the economic direction of the state and given the right to use resources freely, which led in turn to growing differences between municipal education services (Ahonen, 2003, p. 158). The role of school as the pivotal institution of society was not questioned, but the shape of its ideological atmosphere and guidance mechanisms changed radically.

Measures were sought to free education from obstacles which limited competition and the freedom of the individual. Political battle was intense, however, between supporters of the *solidarity-centric* educational politics of the welfare state and supporters of neoliberal educational thinking (Ahonen, 2003, pp. 176–194). Nonetheless, the state’s role as producer of education services changed. Where the educational concept of the welfare state was rooted in a strong ideology of *Bildung* that placed central responsibility with the state, neoliberal educational thinking transferred responsibility to municipalities, and to the private sector.⁵ In the 1960s and 1970s, reforms had stressed the significance of educational policies as a firm part of state-regulated ‘societal politics,’ even to the extent that societal development goals and the objectives of educational policies were consistent (Komiteanmietintö, 1973). The ideology of the 1990s bade farewell to this doctrine, aiming to dismantle regulations restricting the actions of a free civil society. This meant the dissolving or relaxation of statutory controls on schooling, and a move in the direction of a so-called ‘results-based guidance’ at every level of the education system. This change was visible in – among other places – the creation of the bases of national core curriculum in 1994. The governing principle of the core curriculum 1994 of Finnish comprehensive schools was the dismantling of external management of the *content* of teaching. The curriculum would define general goals, but schools would define the content of subject matter autonomously. Sirkka Ahonen states (2003, p. 187) – and I concur – that the reforms in question, which aligned with the neoliberal ideology of New Public Management, reflected a mistrust on the public sector and an emphasis, in education, on the self-regulation of a ‘free actor’ (ibid.). In 1992, the Finnish National Board of Education ‘reformatted’ its educational-political vision as follows.

The Finnish educational system is mentally and structurally flexible, self-regulating, *emphasising individual skills* [italics added], decentralised in its operations, and both client-oriented and accountable. (OPH, 1992)

However, with the new millennium, the demands placed on education by neoliberal thought became decreased. A compromise was sought in legislation between the politicians of education who supported the educational principles of the welfare state and those who appropriated the teachings of neo-liberalism (Ahonen, 2012).

Pedagogical Principles: Paradigm Shift II

Voices stressing the importance of the freedom of educational markets adapted seamlessly to the new climate, deriving their reasoning from a pedagogical application of the ‘new idea of learning’. A turning point in learning-theoretical research in the late 1980s – namely, the shift from behaviourism to a cognitive-constructivist way of thinking – also impacted debate on school reform. The pedagogy of comprehensive schools was criticised for behaviourism and for ‘external regulation’ that passivized students. Of course, discussion in Finland followed international trends in learning research (see for example Glasersfeld, 1991; Glasersfeld, 1995; Rauste-von Wright & von Wright, 1994). As early as the late 1980s, development projects were launched under the guidance of the National Board of Education, with the goal of reforming schools to conform to the ‘new conception of knowledge’ and the ‘new idea of learning’ (Voutilainen et al., 1989; Lehtinen et al., 1989; Lehtinen et al., 1991).

Pedagogical development projects related to school reforms combined ‘open learning environments,’ modern information technology, and the cognitive-constructivist idea of learning. *Self-regulated learning* became the key principle of the new learning concept. According to its adopted slogan, a learner is a ‘self-regulating, autonomous subject’ who actively constructs information from a position of his or her own goals for learning, and in an appropriate manner. One may describe this change in educational thinking as a move from a paradigm of *external* regulation to a paradigm of *internal* regulation. In the early 1990s, the central theoretical arguments of the paradigm of self-regulation came largely from the theorists of individual constructivism and, later, from various forms of socio-constructivism.

Changes in learning-theoretical thinking did not remain exclusively an internal discourse between researchers, but moved as pedagogical principles to the arena of official decision-making, and were legitimised through national guidelines on curriculum reform. In the national curriculum reform of 1994, a new ‘theoretical standpoint’ for comprehensive school was formulated. The ‘new conception of learning and knowledge’ became the basic starting point for the curriculum (OPS, 1994, pp. 9–10), emphasising a student’s active role in building his or her own structure of knowledge. The national core curriculum reform of 2004 also stressed the constructivist idea of learning as a basis for the planning of teaching and other school work (OPS, 2004).

Through the ‘Information Strategy for Education and Research’ programmes, which were implemented simultaneously with reforms to the curriculum, attempts were made to deploy modern information and communications technology for teaching to the various levels of the school system (OPM, 1995; OPM, 1999). The

basic policy of reforms has not changed in this respect in the 21st century. The new comprehensive school curriculum since 2016 stresses a need for changes to school teaching on the basis of cognitive and socio-cultural conceptions of learning to which are linked – in particular – a more efficient use of new information technology (OPS, 2014; see also OKM, 2010).

It should be noted that, in connection with the 1990s curriculum reforms, for the first time in the history of the Finnish school, the learning-theoretical commitments of reforms were documented officially and explicitly in the foundations of the national curriculum. As mentioned, strong principles of pedagogical theory were also a basis for the 1970 comprehensive school reform. However, those principles did not have an officially legitimised status as in the constructivism of the 1990s. This reflects a strong bond between pedagogical thinking and educational policy thinking; although, on the other hand, policy-makers stressed the autonomy and independent decision-making of schools. One may summarise the pedagogical content of this connection in the 1990s as follows.

A new interpretation of the idea of equality. An ideological turning point was particularly apparent in re-interpretations of the concept of equality in Finnish education. Whereas the educational doctrine of the welfare state was founded on the idea of equality in material, social, and *Bildung*-centric welfare – as well as on an opening of talent reserves to the domain of education – attempts were made in this altered societal situation to find ‘preconditions for international competitiveness’ from a liberal interpretation of the concept of equality. The earlier radical idea of an equality in the results of education was replaced with a freer equality: an equality of educational opportunities emphasising the rights of individuals. The Finnish National Board of Education defined equality as ‘the equal right of individuals to pursue their own efforts’ (OPH, 1992, p. 13).

The return of genetic determinism? The plans of the Finnish Ministry of Education explicitly linked the pedagogical development of education to the learning abilities or aptitudes of students:

Everyone has an equal right to receive an education according to his or her *abilities*. The equality of educational opportunities is the basis for Finnish welfare. Everyone should have an equal right to receive education according to his or her specific needs, and to develop himself or herself, regardless of wealth. The particular goal of developing an educational system is...the improvement of results and efficiency. (KESU, 2004, pp. 15, 19)

According to the above principle, a school is an arena for the implementation of individual learning processes; the stronger its capacity to direct students to educational channels according to their abilities, the more successful the school. In exercising this function, a school would realise an equality of opportunities and improve both effectiveness and efficiency.

The support and early recognition of ‘peak skills’. The rhetoric of 1990s educational policy raised for discussion the allocation of investments in schooling.

The most critical declarations viewed school services that are ‘common’ and ‘equal’ to all as a waste of resources that the state and nation could not afford. Therefore, they argued, resources should be directed towards identifying and supporting potential ‘top experts’ (Kettunen et al., 2012, pp. 47–50). Although these demands did not lead to dramatic change, the general ideological climate has gradually become favourable to the politics of the ‘top unit’. Ranking lists for educational institutions have become more common, while parents have been able to freely choose a school of their liking for their children.

The altered role of the teacher: a new grammar of pedagogy. The paradigm shift that emphasised the self-regulation of learning moved the focus of educational thinking from the teacher to the student and from teaching to learning. The concept of *teaching* began to disappear from pedagogical terminology, to be replaced with ‘facilitating learning’. The patois and pedagogical instructions of curriculum reforms followed the discourse and emphases of constructivist theories of learning (see OPS, 1994; OPS, 2004; OPS, 2014). This phenomenon may be described as a ‘new grammar’ or new language of pedagogy.

The above principles describe changes and emphases in educational policies and pedagogical thinking, which have been elevated to the level of so-called ‘official documentation’ governing school reforms. A wholly different issue is to what extent the *practices* of schools changed in reality. Schools have always been criticised for the slow speed of their reform, and for remaining entrenched in old and traditional practices. Inertia also has its own advantages: ideological changes defined on a political level have not always served the pedagogical aims of school development.

In the changes of the 1990s, the *educational equality* remained a key principle of Finnish educational policy. However, a clear shift occurred from an equality of educational results, or a radical interpretation, to an equality of equal opportunities, or a liberalist interpretation. The equality of opportunities has traditionally been linked to the development of the structures and implementation procedures of education, in such a way that every citizen has a right to an education, regardless of birth, wealth, and social background. According to the new interpretation, the selection of educational channels is to be directed by the individual ‘abilities and capacities’ of students to take part in education, and to make his or her own way in educational free markets. This interpretation received surprising support in the late 1990s from a few prestigious university researchers. Finland’s education system was criticised as ‘a taboo of the welfare state’ (Ahmavaara, 1998) that had led to a collapse in the country’s general level of knowledge, particularly in mathematics and the natural sciences. Critics argued that dismantling this taboo demanded the deployment of skills tests and psychological intelligence testing, in order that students might be directed to educational channels according to their ‘skill profiles’. Debate about an alleged drop in the national levels of knowledge was quietened with the appearance of the first PISA results at the turn of the 21st century. However, the other side of this reality is that, on a macro level, near-dramatic structural changes

were implemented in the late 1990s, leading in a few years to the cessation of several hundred comprehensive schools, not only in areas of the rural periphery, but in town centres. The same pace has continued in the 2000s and 2010s (see Ahonen, 2012, p. 165).

ECONOMIC RECESSION AND DEVELOPMENT IN RECENT YEARS

The banking crisis that began in 2008 in the United States – and the subsequent global economic crisis – created new conditions for educational policies. In Finland, political discussion has been governed of late by debate on state debt, the economic sustainability deficit, unemployment, and a need for structural changes to society as a consequence of those phenomena. The situation resembles the economic recession of the 1990s. Finland's economy suffered an unprecedentedly swift collapse in 2009. The gross domestic product (GDP) dropped as much as 8.2 percent, falling more than at any time after Finland's independence (1917). The collapse of the GDP led to a reduction in exports and, in particular, to a collapse in exports from the Finnish technology industry (Pyöriä, 2011). Economists differed in their appraisals of the depth and duration of the recession. Following the collapse of 2009, it appeared that the recession would be temporary, but after a short improvement in 2010, the recession became prolonged and has continued longer in Finland than in other OECD countries.

The above situation has not led immediately to a significant reform of educational policy. During the first decades of the 21st century, the official development principles of Finland's education system have largely been revisions of earlier principles, with the distinction that theses arising from the ideological world of the market orientation of neoliberalism have been diluted, cheapened, or not made explicitly public in official educational policy lines. Educational policy programmes published at a high administrative level emphasize the following inalienable principles: an equality of the educational opportunities, raising the education level of the populace, and the prevention of social exclusion (Hallitusohjelma, 2007; Hallitusohjelma, 2011; Hallitusohjelma, 2015; OPS, 2014).

It should also be noted that official interpretations of the idea of equality have abandoned references to the 'inherent ability differences' of individuals. Prime Minister Katainen's government policy programme of 2011 stresses the importance of education-based 'know-how' and creativity in securing competitiveness, but also the intrinsic value of *Bildung*.

The ability of Finnish work to compete on the basis of skill and creativity requires a working education system. The best comprehensive school in the world will be strengthened as a guarantor of the equality of opportunities. *Bildung is its own goal* (italics added). (Hallitusohjelma, 2011)

New to the educational stage or, more precisely, presenting a return to the past, is the recent elevation of *Bildung* to the position of 'a goal in itself,' an objective

whose value one cannot and need not measure by criteria independent of itself. Sirkka Ahonen (2015) states, however – and I concur – that steps taken backward in history are rare. The Finnish school rhetoric of 2010 no longer relies on a 1960s belief in societal equality but on a free ‘dynamic ethos of communality.’ That ethos is reinforced by the economic crises, against which a community can prepare itself by maintaining its cohesion (ibid.) Cohesion is served by *Bildung* goals with an intrinsic value relating to the entire population. Yet, on the other hand, tension is created by the continual emphasis – derived from an instrumental rationality – on efficiency and on international competitiveness. The emphasis on these two aspects demands that skills and schooling be seen in terms of requirements for economic success and competitiveness. The resulting tension is visible in policy lines through an ‘on one hand...on the other hand’ arrangement that attempts to sustain clearly *opposite* or *conflicting* goals, including communality and individuality, solidarity and competition, periphery and the centre, public and private, and social equality and the rights of the individual. The current centre of political focus appears to be the latter of each pairing.

The ‘new pedagogics’ or Mixed Principles: Paradigm Shift III

Although dramatic changes have not occurred in the ideological climate of educational policy in recent years, strong demands for reform have been directed at the *pedagogical* development of educational institutions. The government policy accord of 2015 states unambiguously that the pedagogy of comprehensive school will be reformed (Hallitusohjelma, 2015, p. 17).

The reform comprises three parts: a new pedagogy, new learning environments, and a digitalisation of teaching. The goal is to improve learning results, to respond to future skill needs, to reform pedagogy through experimentation, and to make learning inspirational throughout a person’s life. The goal is that Finland will develop into a laboratory of internationally interesting new pedagogy and *digital learning* (italics added). (Toimintasuunnitelma, 2015, p. 26)

The kernel of the new pedagogy is digitalisation, or, more precisely, a modernisation of school work-practices, learning environments, and teaching, through digital media applications. As compared to earlier policies, digitalisation offers nothing that is substantially new; rather, it is a continuation and updating of the previous strategies of information technology and applications for teaching. The background for the present strategic emphasis is composed of changes that have occurred in the operational environment of schools, such as the digitalisation of culture, and the effects of economic recession. The background for the new movement has also been shaped in particular by the recent results of national and international assessment studies, including PISA, of learning achievements. Those studies propose that the learning results of Finnish young students are falling (see for example OECD, 2014;

OKM, 2014, p. 10). Reforms have been accelerated by the observation that Finland has not remained at the top of the development of educational applications using modern technology (see for example OECD, 2015). In other words, the modernisation and digitalisation of learning environments is supposed to propel student results to a new high. However, in this context, it is striking that the digitalisation policy of the new pedagogy does not acknowledge the results of a recent study by OECD, which found that a widespread use of IT applications and numerous investments in teaching applications that make use of modern technology have not led to improved student results; rather, the opposite is true.

What, then, are the substantive policies of the new pedagogy? Of course, digitalisation does not provide a complete picture of that pedagogy. In his book *'Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?'* (2011) Sahlberg describes the pressure towards national reform created by trends in international education policy. Sahlberg calls this phenomenon the 'global school reform movement' and contends that its principles have become widely accepted, although more often as an unofficial ideological agenda than a formal or officially organised programme of pedagogy or educational policy: 'It has become accepted as 'a new educational orthodoxy' in many recent education reforms around the world' (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 99).

Principles and models of action appropriated from the world of business act as a frame of reference for the ideology of this 'new doctrine', the background organisations for which are supranational institutions, development offices, and businesses. A pedagogical motor for the new doctrine is a new paradigm of learning that has risen to a mainstream position in recent decades, through which the focus has moved from teaching to learning, as noted above. This, in turn, has led to (1) the specification and deployment of common standards of learning, (2) test-based quality control, and (3) growing competition between schools, feeding the politics of a free choice of school.

Axel Honneth (2012) describes this phenomena by calling George W Bush's 2001 'No Child Left Behind' (NCLB) act, and president Barack Obama's 'Race to the Top' programme, 'alarming US examples' of global reform-movement campaigns that promote the privatisation of public schools, the standardisation of curricula, and the introduction of standardised testing as a measure of the efficiency of teachers and schools, and as a basis for funding (Hanhela, 2015). According to Sahlberg's assessment, Finland has not yet appropriated the principles of the global reform movement, although pedagogical ideas developed elsewhere – often in the United States – have been applied to the development of the Finnish system (Sahlberg, 2015 pp. 195–219).

In the light of recent reform plans, Sahlberg's appraisal seems one-sided or over-optimistic. Indeed, the pedagogical effects of the reform movement have not reached comprehensive schools in such a way as to lead to significant changes in school practices. For instance, no standardised learning tests or wide-ranged tendering of schools has been implemented. Signs indicate, however, that the supranatural

educational policies and directions Sahlberg describes have defined the general development climate of pedagogy, and therefore also direct practical reform work. In the plans for pedagogical reforms to be implemented at different levels of schooling, regulations are created on a central stage – for instance – by the OECD and the EU.

The priorities currently guiding the pedagogical development work of educational institutions include (1) competence as a basis for the preparation of curricula; (2) what are described as ‘twenty-first century skills’ as a departure point for the planning of teaching; (3) reinforcement of ICT in teaching; (4) phenomenon-based-learning in defining the contents of curricula, instead of – or alongside – subject-centricity or science-centricity; and (5) quality assurance for teaching through systems for auditions and evaluations. Although these points do not belong directly to the agenda of the ‘global reform movement’ as described by Sahlberg, their pedagogical content is seamlessly applicable to the educational policy programme of that movement. On a general level, the issue is that pressure for uniformity is now driving national systems of education into a single formal frame, compelling those systems to uphold uniform pedagogical development principles that do not consider a country’s specific cultural or national requirements.

One may even speak – and perhaps a little ironically – of a paradigm shift with two distinct characteristics. These characteristics might be described as follows.

Firstly, the pedagogical guidelines for these reforms contain ideas combined from different source types, ideas that may contradict each other, at least on a rhetorical level. The dividing line of learning-theoretical discussion is no longer between external and internal regulation. Almost any pedagogical idea is now viewed as an acceptable motor for reform, as long as it is believed to have reform value, or in some way boosts the effectiveness of learning. Therefore, constructivist approaches that one might view as having been discarded by traditional or earlier behaviourist pedagogies are stressed as principles for directing reform, and as suitable points of departure for the development of modern learning environments (see for example OKM, 2010).

At the same time, attempts are being made to set ‘skills’ or the ‘results’ of learning as educational objectives, just as behaviourists did during the 1960s and 1970s by describing the aims of learning in terms of ‘end-point behaviour’. The goal descriptions of the paradigm of new learning also employ a ‘goal hierarchy’ as taxonomised by Benjamin Bloom, a hierarchy according to which curriculum work is to be directed. In other words, in plans for procedures for the implementation of teaching situations, and in designs for the structure of the learning process, ideas that stress a constructivist self-regulation of learning are being mixed with principles that adhere to a socio-technological instrumental rationality.

Secondly, subject matter or substance does not direct the reforms. One might call this phenomenon a ‘disappearance of substance’. The reform stipulations guide school pedagogical development work away from the content of teaching to formal, instrumental criteria such as ‘key competences’, ‘phenomena’, and ‘formal processes’, criteria whose link to the substance of teaching and to scientific content

has been broken. In other words, the focus of the pedagogical interest of development work in schools has retreated from content. This has raised the following relevant question, particularly among professionals responsible for everyday teaching work in Finnish schools: 'Is the weakening of Finland's PISA success and the downward spiral of Finnish educational results being treated with the wrong medicine?'

From the perspective of the advancement of work in schools, it is crucial to note that, unlike classical reform pedagogies, the above reform tendencies do not appear to derive primarily from pedagogical motives or from internal development demands based on the relative autonomy of a school. Rather, those tendencies derive more closely from external politico-ideological agendas. At issue is a classical question of school theory; namely, 'How does a school as a pedagogical institution reposition itself and its objectives under the pressure of political societal trends and demands that appear increasingly global in scale, and pervasive? From the viewpoint of the development goals of the Finnish educational system, the situation is particularly fascinating because the Finnish school – at least, the Finnish public comprehensive school – has largely succeeded in creating its own vision of *Bildung*, and its own manners of achieving that vision.

Sahlberg (2015) describes the fundamental ideology of the Finnish school as opposite to the above wave of reform in many crucial points. Although his assessment cannot be generalised as applying to every level of the Finnish education system, it aptly describes a general tension between supranational development trends and the development principles of the Finnish national school systems. At the same time, Sahlberg's appraisal shows that Finland's school system – which was created in the 1960s and 1970s upon a strong vision of *Bildung* – can be egalitarian and successful without appropriating the goals and demands of supranational trends. Recent reform trends raise concerns that the vision of *Bildung* so pivotal to the development of the Finnish school will now disappear. Current political and pedagogical discussion appeals rhetorically to the concept of *Bildung*, to *Bildung* ideals of the welfare state, to equal opportunities in education, to education's duty as a guarantor of the material and mental welfare of citizens, and even to the intrinsic value of *Bildung*. However, the principles currently directing reform work are a relatively unstructured, contradictory mixture of trends introduced by the global wave of reform; assumptions about future needs for skills, and pedagogical ideas compiled from different theoretical sources. One may expect that upon such a path, Finland's 'star' as a wonderland of education will grow dim.

SUMMARY

The roots of Finnish education politics extend to the 1800s, to Hegelian-Snellmanian *Bildung* thinking that stresses the significance of *Bildung* as necessary to a 'small nation.' In the 1800s, J. V. Snellman, who received the title of 'Finland's national philosopher,' shaped this thinking into a slogan, 'Finland can do nothing through violence; the power of *Bildung* is its only salvation'. This slogan and variations of

it appear as the leading idea of educational development at many significant turning points and school reforms in Finland from the 1800s to the 2000s – although politico-economical and structural changes to Finnish society have also spurred educational policy thinking to new channels. Snellman declares that as *Bildung* becomes stronger, the more of a nation's populace participates in it. As a consequence, demands for societal equality, democracy, and justice were already built into the idea of *Bildung*, and were sharpened and rehabilitated after the Second World War, in the building projects of Finland's welfare state and in the school reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. Educational doctrine in those decades saw *Bildung* as a universal national right, a part of the social security of the welfare state to which every demographic group was entitled, regardless of birth, gender, location, social position, and economic situation. This viewpoint invoked a radical interpretation of educational equality and, in particular, of an equality of learning results, involving a pedagogical paradigm shift from 'the genetic determinability' of education to the social structures of education and to the adjustable conditions of pedagogical interactions.

In the 1990s, a significant ideological change occurred. A powerful impetus to this change was given by the economic recession of the 1990s; by the crises in Finland's state economy; and by dramatic politico-economic turning points in Europe, particularly the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the toppling of the Berlin wall, and the developing integration of Europe. Neo-liberalism and the lessons of market economics became challengers to the ideology of equality and the educational doctrine of the Finnish welfare state, bringing free competition, a reduction in public spending, a dismantling of state monopolies, and the privatisation of service production. This neoliberal turn produced reform processes directed at the fundamental structures of society, and did not leave education unchanged. The core question of educational politics became, 'How can one ensure the competitiveness of a small country in a globalising working environment?' On a rhetorical level, the Finnish answer to this question has remained the same: *through a high level of Bildung and education*.

The content and pedagogical principles involved have, however, changed. The goal of equality remained a crucial educational principle, but a clear change occurred in the interpretation of that goal, from an equality of educational results, or a radical interpretation, to an equality of opportunities among equals, or a liberal interpretation. The neoliberal turn in educational policy followed a pedagogical paradigm shift, a constructivist move from external regulation to *self-regulation*. The political agenda of neo-liberalism and the applications of constructivist learning theories appeared as siblings.

Nonetheless, debate on the pedagogical and on educational policy has, in recent years, drawn clear attention to the strains and contradictions of the above reform principles. On the one hand, *Bildung* is seen as of intrinsic value, a goal in itself. On the other, tensions have been created by increased competition and efficiency based on an *instrumental* rationality. These tensions are visible in the principles of official educational policy and in 'one or the other' thinking that attempts to enforce clearly

opposite or conflicting goals, such as communality and individuality, solidarity and competition, public and private, and social equality and the rights of the individual.

In accordance with classical *Bildung* theories, one may view such opposing or conflicting goals as antinomies belonging to the fundamental dialectics of *Bildung*. As modern educational policy, however, such goals may more closely reflect the confusion spawned by a wave of global reform than a pedagogically justifiable perspective that combines theoretical ideas from different sources into a unified vision of *Bildung* for the purposes of constructive change. The Finnish school, having achieved international reputation because of its PISA results, has now been brought to a watershed. How can Finland reconcile agendas of supranational educational policy with educational doctrine based on a national vision of *Bildung* that has been seen as excellent and successful in the arena of international competition? Many analysts argue that the ideological principles and consequences of global school reform trends are questionable (see for example Honneth, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011; Schöning in this book). Such conclusions notwithstanding, international pressure is now driving national educational systems into the same mould, regardless of cultural and national features. Can the result be anything other than accelerating competition for places on ranking lists, and a subsequent disappearance of rationality and sense?

NOTES

- ¹ In the context of the 1800s, the playing field for implementing a national *Bildung* programme was actually relatively narrow. Because the intelligentsia and civil service were for the most part Swedish-speaking, attempts to strengthen the station of the Finnish language and to raise the *Bildung* of Finland's citizens were born of a confrontation between Finland-minded Fennomans and Svecomans. Conversely, Russia exerted close control at the time of the reforms to ensure that no break would occur with its policies and regulatory power as Finland's governing nation.
- ² Sirkka Ahonen (2003, pp. 26–28) has drawn attention to Snellman's decision, during the educational-political scuffle of the 1800s to support a parallel system – that would remain unaltered until the 1960s – of elementary schools for all age groups and of grammar schools aiming for a higher level of lessons (ibid.) This was, of course, a significant educational policy issue, but Snellman's viewpoint does not entitle one to conclude that he promoted, in his political vision of *Bildung*, a cultural elitism divisive to the nation, as Ahonen suggests. On the contrary, Snellman's criticism against the elitism of the intelligentsia was sharp and polemic. 'Your parties are dancing on graves,' wrote Snellman in a letter to Fredrik Cygnaeus.
- ³ A well-known slogan of political rhetoric, 'Education, education, education' inspired the international speeches of several Finnish *Bildung* politicians.
- ⁴ Karvonen (2004) draws attention to the fact that, of the twenty members of a workgroup who prepared the EU publication in 1994 of an information-society report entitled 'Europe and the Global Information Society' (Bangemann, 1994), sixteen were representatives of the largest businesses in Europe and expressed a view of the information society that accorded predominantly with the interests of large industry. The work group urged the European Union to place its hope in the mechanisms of the market as an impetus 'that would bring us into the 'information age.'" According to this presentation, member states must demolish telecommunication monopolies and remove non-commercial political irritants and budgeted funding from the field. Seen against this background, the strategies of an information society as principles of educational politics include relatively conflicting and controversial policy lines.

- ⁵ One might also describe the changed role of the state as a move from a position of producer of education services to a regulator and evaluator of service offerings (Simola, 2015, p. 269). Just as standard controls were dismantled in the 1990s, a comparatively massive machine of evaluation was set up for the development needs and quality control of Finnish education.

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