

“This Building is Ours!” Student Activism Against the University’s Neoliberal Policy

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Abstract

This article is an ethnography of a student protest against a Finnish university’s plans to give up 25 percent of its campus buildings until 2030. The Finnish universities faced financial deficits primarily due to education cuts implemented by Finland’s right-wing government between 2015 and 2019. To balance the budget, Tampere University proposed surrendering some of its buildings, including the Linna, the home of social sciences, and the main library. The students organized the We Will Not Give Up the Linna Building movement (WWGU) to oppose the university’s decision. This article is an ethnography of the movement’s resistance and outcomes and analyzes what the student activists learned and how they changed during the protest wave in 2021. Our analysis uncovered six key insights the student activists learned on democracy, social media in activism, activism’s temporality and persistence, the role of emotions in activism, and the university’s power structures. The study contributes to a general understanding of the student protest movement, the social transformations that student activists undergo, and how they learn to perceive democracy, develop political imagination, and understand power structures.

Keywords: *Ethnography, Finland, Higher education policy, social movement, student activism, student protest*

Introduction: the “Fantastic” University Reform

"We will not give up this building, nor any buildings!" "Science is born in the community, not in solitude!" "We need spaces to study. We need spaces to think!" "Campus development — pure bullshit!" "Campus development — discipline and punishment!" In the summer of 2021, students protested on the Tampere University campus against the newly merged university’s proposal to decrease offices and classrooms by 25%. This article highlights the student-led protests at Tampere University in 2021. The movement, led by a group of students known as the "We Will Not Give Up the Linna Building" (WWGU) movement, held three protests to defend the preservation of university buildings. The protests criticized the university's management and indirectly challenged the consequences of the 2009 University Act implemented in 2010.

In 2019, the University of Tampere and the Tampere University of Technology merged into Tampere University. Together with the Tampere University of Applied Sciences, they established the Tampere higher education community. The merger followed the 2009 Universities Act, which decoupled Finnish universities from the state (Universities Act, 2009). Simultaneously, the Ministry of Education and Culture increased the rate of universities' performance-based funding, leaving the Ministry an upper hand in steering higher education institutions. As Poutanen et al. (2020, p. 4) state, “running the universities was only allowed in proportion to economic and scientific performativity.”

The then Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen, a member of the National Coalition Party, praised the University Act as “fantastic,” considering it the best thing in the Finnish university’s history (Lappalainen, 2012). Many academics disagreed (Tomperi, 2009; Jakonen & Tilli, 2011; Volanen, 2012) and claimed that the Act embodied the neoliberal world order that began in the 1970s and intensified

in the 1980s (Bourdieu, 1998; Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005). In the beginning, neoliberalism referred to the theory of the political economy that emphasized political and institutional structures that supported private property rights, free markets and trade, and individual entrepreneurship and consumerism (Harvey, 2005). Eventually, neoliberalism spread further to political and social spheres, including higher education. It generated academic analysis and critique (see, e.g., Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; Fleming, 2021; Giroux, 2004; Hall, 2021; Jones & Ball, 2023; Santos, 2017; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Wright & Shore, 2019) and counter-forces such as anti-globalization movements (Suoranta & Tomperi, 2002; Eschle, 2004; Graeber, 2009), anti-austerity and anti-debt campaigns (Keet, 2000; Zamponi & Fernández González, 2017), and student protests against academic capitalism, and privatization of higher education (Boren 2021 a, b; Cini & Guzmán-Concha, 2017; Della Porta et al., 2020; Cini et al., 2021; Spiegel, 2016).

With the University Act, neoliberal education policy fully reached the Finnish shoreline. The supporters of the University Act, including university management, the economic and political elite represented by their lobbying organization, the Confederation of Finnish Industries, and the Ministry of Education and Culture, believed that it would enhance the global financial and scientific competitiveness of Finnish universities (see Rinne, 2019). However, critics argued that the main objective of the Act was to reinforce neoliberal higher education and its top-down management and administrative structures (Poutanen et al., 2020; Poutanen et al., 2023). The neoliberal logic behind the Act implicated that every person and function of the university, from students to professors and credits and research to every square or cubic meter used for teaching and study, had a monetary value.

New state control also created competition, in which universities have tried to succeed in the light – or the shadow – of the criteria set by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Finland ranks among the top countries where university expenses are closely linked to performance indicators (Rinne, 2019; Poutanen, 2022). Thus, state control has relativized the idea of the increased autonomy of universities as promised by the law reform and hoped for by university management. Researchers and teachers experienced the conditions the 2009 University Act created as overwhelming and even alienating (see Rinne et al., 2012; Poutanen, 2023; Tapanila, 2022).

Resistance Against the Campus Development Strategy

On September 25, 2020, the Tampere University board approved the Campus Development Plan (CDP). It involved a 25% decrease in the university's facilities by the decade's end. In the CDP, the reductions were justified due to various factors, such as the shift towards digital teaching and research practices, the aim for carbon neutrality in light of climate change goals, and the need for economic efficiency in utilizing space. The critics speculated that the university's adoption of neoliberal educational policies and business logic played a role in addressing the strategy. In addition, they assumed that the university board was forced to reduce the facilities because of the budget deficit caused by the right-wing government's education cuts in 2015–2019. The CDP planning team worked on the plan throughout the spring of 2020, but it did not consider the effects of the campus lockdown in its calculations.

The CDP was published on the university's intranet in September 2020. Still, it was made public only until the end of the spring term in 2021 when the student magazine *Visiiri* reported the plan, much to the surprise of the university community (Visiiri, 2021a). Among other facilities, the CDP included the Linna Building, the home of social sciences, and the main library. A fraction of the

social science students and teachers were amazed because they considered the campus the central hub where teaching, learning, and collaboration occur to generate critical insights and innovations.

Perttu Ahoketo, the first author of this article, read the news in disbelief and linked it to the social science students' Telegram group. The announcement caused an avalanche of counter-comments from students who were forced to work remotely and suffered from the long-lasting COVID-19 restrictions for the past academic year (see Kott, 2021). Perttu began to organize resistance activities to channel frustration by founding an open Telegram group, "We will not give up the Linna Building."¹ During the first week, almost 200 university community members joined the group, of which a small but vocal group participated in the actual discussion and activities.

The group's purpose is to oppose the university's plan to eliminate the Linna Building. Not only would the library and student and teachers' workspaces go, but it could also mean the end of the social sciences community. (WWGU Telegram message 18 June 2021.)

The student protest movement We Will Not Give Up the Linna Building (WWGU) was born as a do-it-yourself movement like many other grassroots social movements (see Hemphill & Leskowitz, 2012). From the start, it aimed at opposing the university management's plan to destroy campus life by reducing study and workspaces. During the summer and fall of 2021, the movement published opinion pieces, collected an address opposing campus space reductions, took a stand on the university's space policy on social media, and organized three protests: the We Will Not Give Up Linna Building demonstration, Occupation of the Linna Building, and University Democracy.

The movement involved students and staff in activities across disciplines and campuses.

Through its activities, the WWGU movement became part of student activism’s historical and global continuum (Altbach, 1989; Boren, 2001a, b; Eisenstadt, 1971; Cole & Heinecke, 2020). Student activism has a history as long as the universities (Parekh, 1971), although the 1960s is considered the beginning and heyday of student resistance. In that decade, students became political agents and allied with different social and political movements, such as peace, civil rights, and independence movements in various parts of the world (Lipset & Altbach, 1966). They also familiarized themselves with critical sociology, critical theory, and ideas of the revolutionary anticolonial thinkers of the South. (Blake & Masschelein, 2003; Suoranta & FitzSimmons, 2017b.)

Student activism accelerated in the 2000s (Boren, 2001) mainly because of social media use (Altbach & Luescher, 2020). Historically, in addition to the university, student protests have drawn attention to more general political and social issues nationally and internationally (Boren, 2021a, b; Reydam, 2011). In the first decades of the new millennium, students have opposed neoliberal higher education worldwide (Cole & Heinecke, 2020) and participated in political campaigns for social and economic justice (Boren, 2021a, b; Graeber, 2013; Brooks, 2017).

The social scientific and historical study of student activism emerged during the heydays of the 1960s and 1970s. This era saw a surge of student-led protests and social movements that challenged existing power structures and advocated for civil rights, anti-war causes, and social justice. Researchers delved into the motivations, strategies, and impact of student activism, laying the foundation for

a field of study that continues to explore the role of students in shaping societal change. (Altbach, 1997; Gitlin, 1993; Katsiaficas, 2018.)

In the following sections, we will outline our methods and explore the actions of the WWGU movement in three subsections (or Acts). After that, we will provide a theoretical analysis of the significant lessons gleaned by WWGU activists through their actions before concluding with reflections on the movement's accomplishments and overall significance for student activism.

In the field: methodology

We began analyzing the WWGU movement and its activities, assuming that students can think reflectively and take critical action. As historical and political beings, they possess life experiences that can inform their academic pursuits and empower them to fight against injustices. Students can stand up for equality, human rights, and their rights as learners. Our methodology stemmed from Anna Stetsenko's conception of the transformative activist stance. It states that people are active agents of history who change the world and simultaneously are changed in the process. Applying Marx's ideas, Stetsenko writes as follows:

"People exist while creating themselves in and through transformative practices of creating the world, at the nexus of these processes – suggesting that there is no neutral, separate world and no isolated, detached individuals. Instead, there is one process of people simultaneously co-creating themselves and the world, as a nexus of these two currents within communal, historical praxis (composed of social practices) realized through individually unique contributions by actors of this praxis."
(Stetsenko, 2020, p. 733).

Thus, the transformative activist stance holds that students of the WWGU movement were part of the process of co-creating themselves and the world in their resistance against the university's plans for space reductions. Activism and

resistance are also a search for a better future. Therefore, the transformative activist stance suggests that action is always future-oriented and consists of “political imagination of what can and should be, rather than just what is” (Stetsenko, 2020, p. 729). Inspired by Stetsenko's conception (of the transformative activist stance), we ask how WWGU activists co-created themselves, what they learned, and how they changed in protesting against the university’s decisions to reduce shared study and workspaces.

Considering these theoretical, political, and ethical assumptions, we build our analysis on participant observation and autoethnography (or, instead, ‘duoethnography’) (Sayer & Norris, 2013). Perttu Ahoketo, a social science student, was a leading organizer of the WWGU movement and had an emic view of the movement through his deep involvement. On the other hand, Juha Suoranta was more of a supporter and partner (see Kezar, 2010) of the movement who acted as an occasional speaker, commentator, and participant in the events and had studied activism and university policies since the 1990s (Suoranta & Tomperi, 2002; Suoranta, 2009; Suoranta & FitzSimmons, 2017a, b). While writing this article, we both were affiliated with the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tampere University, Juha as a teacher and Perttu as a student. Because of our different positions in the university’s hierarchy, we could combine our observations into a reflective double exposure to the university’s institutional power structures and practices (Schulz & Paisley, 2016).

Our method stemmed from at-home ethnography (Alvesson, 2009) that utilizes the researcher’s access to the field and follows the idea of “dig where you stand” (Lindqvist, 1979; Lindqvist, 2014). Our data comprised field notes, Telegram group conversations, e-mail chains, newspapers, and social media (mainly Facebook and Instagram). Our position as participants, though in different roles, allowed us to use the “authority of our experience” (Hooks,

1994, p. 81) in reflecting on the resistance against the Campus Development Plan (CDP) (see also Poutanen et al., 2021). We look at the resistance from the point of view of the WWGU movement and its protest activities. Thus, our article is an empirical take on social movement learning (Atta & Holst, 2023) that empowers students to contest and possibly “reshape the contours of power through collective action” (Tagoe, 2018, p. 550).

Specific turning points and learning experiences formed the context of our study. Perttu’s turning point was sitting on the second floor of the Linna building, reading a course book, when his concentration was interrupted by a commotion from the yard. He went outside and saw the old University of Tampere sign scattered on the ground. The maintenance workers tore the remaining parts of the character off the wall with crowbars and replaced it with a new sign. The event clarified to Perttu that the recently consolidated university is a corporation that cares mostly for its brand. Changing the symbols and colors of the university awoke an intuitive feeling that the critical university ethos was lost. Juha’s turning point experience was the struggle over the 2009 University Act in late 2000. The struggle culminated the entire 2000s debate on university autonomy, confirmed the government's demands regarding the institution's structural reform, and revealed the class conflict between employees and employers (see Tomperi, 2009; Jakonen & Tilli, 2011).

Act One: We Will Not Give Up the Linna Building Demonstration

In late June, the WWGU group discussed the future reduction of campus buildings. The group expressed concern that the university community was at risk, significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic had weakened their sense of belonging. As they spoke with some teachers, the WWGU activists gained insight into the complex world of higher education politics. They also discovered that Tampere University, known for its leftist or "red" orientation in

the 1970s, had experienced student protests in the 1970s and 2010s (Suoranta, 2009; Suoranta & FitzSimmons, 2017a). After learning about the history of protests at their university, the students felt more motivated to organize a protest. As Van Dyke (1998) has posited, an awareness of a history of activism is a probable factor in increasing the probability of student protests.

The group's purpose is to discuss and take action to oppose the university's efforts to abandon the Linna building. Surrendering the building would mean the end of its library, office space, and the social sciences community. Anyone can invite people interested in defending the Linna building to join the group (WWGU—Telegram, 18.6.2021).

Among the first tasks, the WWGU group had to devise a way to counteract university management’s decisions. Graeber (2013) points out that there is no set guide for activism, and the WWGU group, too, had to create its rules and practices and “learn to do it by doing it” (see Freire, 1982). The group agreed that the most crucial thing was to organize a rally, but the question of the rally’s time sparked a debate among the activists. The group was worried that July would be the worst month since students and teachers would be away from campus. On the other hand, they thought they should act immediately and organize a new demonstration in the fall. After discussion, the group decided to organize a rally in early July.

I supported the idea of a physical demonstration right from the beginning, so I invested a lot of time and effort in planning it and maintaining the Facebook page for WWGU. However, there was some disagreement among organizers regarding the best time for the demonstration. The main concern was that university students are usually on holiday in July, so there were worries that they would not show up. However, some organizers believed immediate action was necessary and suggested a new demonstration could be organized in the autumn. (Perttu Ahoketo’s observation diary.)

The WWGU movement began organizing groups based on participants' interests and skills. The original WWGU group coordinated the exchange of ideas, while other participants formed social media groups on Instagram and Facebook. Like other student protest movements, the WWGU movement also created a specific media group to share articles and press releases on pressing issues through social media (see, e.g., Castells, 2012; Kavada, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). The movement aimed to generate informal enthusiasm, bring student voices to the public debate, and prioritize them in mainstream news (see Hensby, 2017). Simultaneous online and offline communication blurred the distinction between insiders and outsiders and contributed to the movement's democratic practices (see Melucci, 1996). In addition, activists' commitment to democratic practices such as consensus decision-making (Graeber, 2013), where members could comment and veto any presented idea, led to a fluid and transparent interaction in the WWGU movement (see also Kavada, 2015).

Before the rally, at the end of June, the WWGU movement published an op-ed in a regional newspaper, *Aamulehti* (Kuusi et al., 2021). The authors expressed their concerns about the possible destructive effects of space cuts on teaching, research, and the academic community. They criticized the lack of transparency in the university's decision-making and promised to monitor management's decisions. Shortly after, the WWGU group published an address stating that plans for remote and hybrid models in teaching and studies must be done with care so that possible changes do not undermine mutual equality, well-being, or equal opportunities of the university community (Address, 2021). The op-ed and the address brought forth students' viewpoints, which were positively presented also in the news stories (Jäntti, 2021; Nieminen, 2021; Nyystilä, 2021; Suutari, 2021). *Aamulehti* published an extensive article on the planned campus space cuts (Nyystilä, 2021), and the Finnish Broadcasting Company

(Yle) announced it would be there for a live report, adding to the organizers’ excitement.

Near the university's Main Building, we hung a large banner that we made in the workshop between two trees. The banner had slogans like "Human potential limited" that mocked Tampere University's official motto ("Human potential unlimited"). Despite the holiday season, a few staff members and students responded positively to our invitation. Eventually, over 100 people arrived, and many engaged in critical discussions about the university's campus plans. I emphasized the grassroots perspectives of the students, while a social science professor provided context for Tampere University's position and the CDP in the national higher education policy. The overall mood of the rally was enthusiastic as the participants shouted slogans. Screaming and shouting from the audience became a permanent tradition in our movement. (Perttu Ahoketo’s field notes.)

People gathered on the open stage and shared their thoughts after the planned speeches ended. Many students from different fields bravely spoke their minds. The event became even more memorable when a former teacher from the University of Tampere took the microphone and lifted the mood by encouraging the audience to shout “wow,” referring to Tampere University’s new PR machinery to create a positive image for the new university (see Väliverronen et al., 2022). The students and teachers denounced the PR campaign as mere smoke and mirrors, contradicting the university’s fundamental idea (Raipola, 2019).

A common cause united participating students and teachers, and a sense of belonging emerged. The staff and students came together, emphasizing the solidarity of the university community in defending their campus as their workplace. As van Troost et al. (2013) noted, collective identities are formed through solidarity, strengthening bonds, and a shared sense of togetherness. The

power of unity was evident as protesters identified with one another, sharing the sentiment that "your problem is my problem, is our problem" (pp. 198–199).

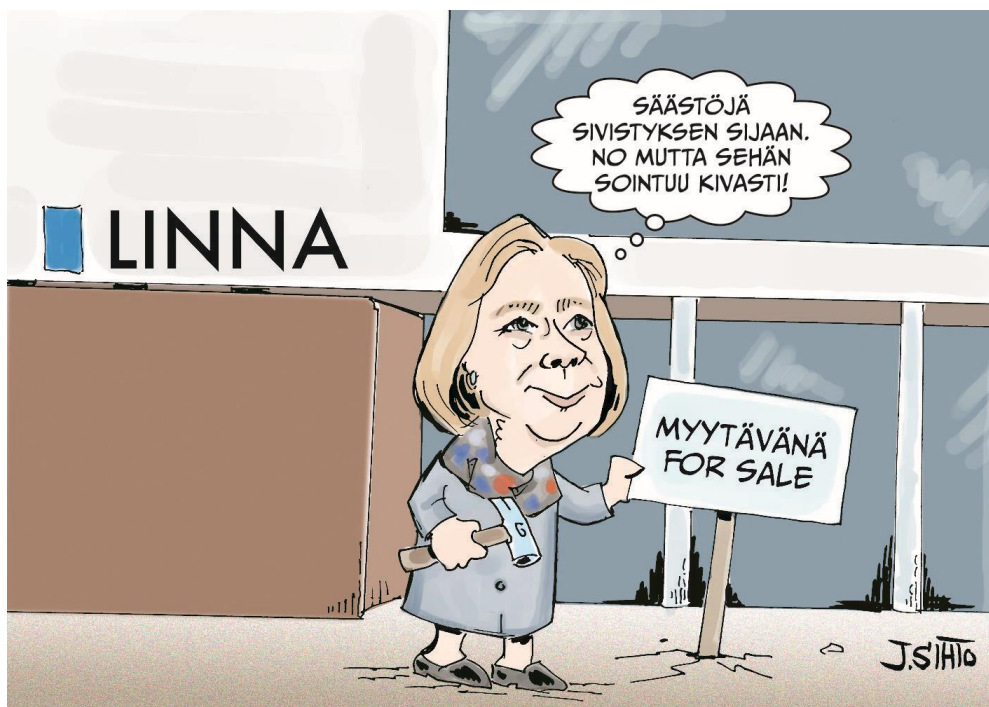
Act Two: Occupation of the Linna Building

As planned in the summer, at the beginning of the fall semester, the WWGU activists began to put more pressure on the university management to reverse the university's Campus Development Plan (CDP). Fresh ideas and rebellion sprouted in the group, and a decision was made to occupy the Linna Building. One group member reminded activists of the student movements abroad, e.g., in Greece in 2008 and England in 2010, where student and youth associations organized protests to oppose financial cuts from education (Sotiris, 2010; Myers, 2017).

At the same time, Ylioppilaslehti *Visiiri* revealed the extent of the budget deficit at the university and the resulting spending cuts. The amount of money involved was equivalent to the value of four buildings the size of the Linna building or an entire campus on the opposite side of the city (Visiiri, 2021b). The Tampere University board was supposed to decide on the issue at its November 12, 2021, meeting.

After a lively discussion, the WWGU group decided to occupy the Linna building on November 5, 2021, one week before the university board meeting, so that the intended message – We will not give up the Linna building – would reach the management. Compared to their previous summer demonstration, the occupation required more effort: the activists were prepared and equipped with the knowledge gained from their past successes. The student activists utilized various digital and non-digital communication techniques, including designing flyers and posters for the protest and promoting the event on Instagram. Other students distributed flyers and posters around the main campus.

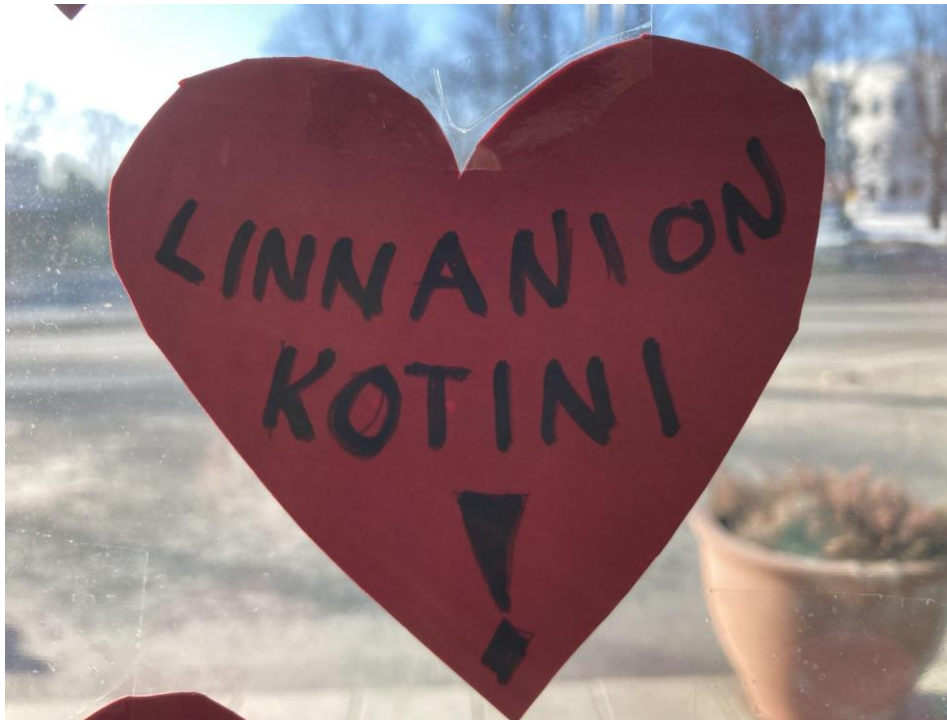
Yle and the local newspaper *Tamperelainen* reported the occupation of the Linna building Jäärni, 2021a; Ruissalo, 2021). *Aamulehti* published a caricature by Juha Sihto, which spread on social media (see picture 1). It depicted Tampere University’s President humming, “Education for sale.” The number of people interested in the events’ Facebook page exceeded a thousand. The WWGU main organizer’s e-mail, phone, and telegram groups were filled with calls and messages.



Picture 1: “Savings instead of education. Well, that has a nice ring to it!” Caricature by Juha Sihto in *Aamulehti* 5 November 2021.

The program for the occupation included students’ and teachers’ speeches, open mic, the handing over of an address containing more than 1,600 names to the university President, musical performances, and musical theater. Furthermore, the individuals were requested to pen their salutations and wishes for the Linna building (see picture 2), which were then affixed to the window alongside the main entrance. A group of philosophy students served coffee and social science students organized a craft workshop where the participants could write their

messages on cardboard hearts taped to the windows next to the main entrance of the Linna building (see picture 2). In addition, one of the WWGU activists cooked soup for the participants.



Picture 2 A cardboard heart ‘The castle [Linna] is my home.’

A few hundred people were already at the site when the program started in the afternoon. A film crew from Yle and a reporter from *Aamulehti* toured the Linna building, interviewing the participants as students and staff members poured into the building. The WWGU activists had decided their interview turns in advance to guarantee that all voices and demands were heard. In the end, more than four hundred people crowded the Linna building’s lobby. Though uninvited, the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and the University President also arrived.

After the theater students’ performance, the Dean announced, much to the organizers’ surprise, that the University President wanted to receive the WWGU

address personally and speak to the participants. Despite widespread criticism of the President’s managerial leadership and the negative impact on campus life, the organizers ultimately permitted the speech. The WWGU activists believed that allowing the address would help their demands and influence the final decision positively.

Thus, after one of the students handed the address to the President, the President spoke to the confused audience. The speech was disorganized, without a clear message. The President said the financial cuts were necessary using typical managerial rhetoric, “Should we put money in walls or people?” Not surprisingly, the crowds’ shouts and boos drowned out the President’s speech: “Now is the last moment to hear the community and put that option on the table – you hear the community, and then we will discuss the issue again. Now the empty words can stop!” (Student comments from the live broadcast: Suutari, 2021).

During my speech, I stood alongside the University President and the Dean of the Faculty of Social Science, initially feeling nervous due to the intense criticism of management’s actions. However, as participants joined in chants of defiance, the tension eased. WWGU activists, familiar faces from past demonstrations, and numerous educators who had not previously spoken out were following me. The open stage saw emotional speeches, laughter, and tears, with many finding hope for the first time in years. Reflections on the values of a university of learning were profound, particularly in the context of neoliberal education policies. Many highlighted the importance of education as *bildung* and keeping up the critical spirit for the coming students and teachers. Despite the President’s lackluster response, the occupation of the Linna building marked a significant moment in my university career, crystallizing the essence of the university community and the importance of collective action. The widespread attention garnered by the occupation, including coverage by Aamulehti (Suutari, 2021) and Yleisradio (Nieminen, 2021), underscored the resonance of our message: that our voices cannot be ignored. (Perttu Ahoketo’s field notes.)

According to the WWGU activists, the event achieved its goal: it got the attention of the university community, the university management, and the media. The group thought one more demonstration should be arranged before the Tampere University board's final decision on the CDP. However, the idea seemed unrealistic since the last few months had been burdensome for student activists who also needed to study. Naturally, students' activism takes time away from their studies and possibly harms their academic performance (Linder et al., 2019).

The Tampere student union (TREY), which had remained silent, took action when it announced that it would start organizing a rally, an "Expression of opinion on Tampere University's space policy." The rally was decided to be held the demonstration the same morning as the Tampere University board meeting on November 12, 2021. The group also sent an invitation to the university board. On a chilly November morning, a hundred students and staff arrived at the site. Students and TREY employees gave speeches. The University President showed up with a board chairman, Mr. Ilkka Herlin, one of the wealthiest people in Finland and a member of the Forbes list. Herlin spoke into a megaphone and defended the board's actions, claiming that the board "hears all the voices of the community." The crowd of two hundred students and employees was amazed and loudly opposed Herlin's message.

After its meeting, the university board announced it would focus on preparing the CDP in its next meeting in late December. It highlighted the significance of involving the community in the process. (Tampere University board meeting bulletin November 12, 2021; Koskinen, 2021). The WWGU activists saw the postponement as a small victory in the struggle going on for the past six months.

On November 25, another protest was organized at Tampere University by the university’s teaching and staff organizations to support service personnel under threat of dismissal. The university's management planned to eliminate 215 staff years, i.e., almost 20 percent of the support staff. According to the official explanation, Tampere University's financial deficit was the main reason for dismissals. Despite the demonstration and appeals, the university carried out the layoffs almost in full (Jäärni, 2021b).

Act Three: University Democracy Rally

At the end of the autumn semester, the teachers’ representatives contacted Perttu Ahoketo, the founder of the WWGU movement. They suggested that WWGU organize one more rally before the university board’s last meeting in December 2021. The demonstration would be crucial because, at the meeting, the board would decide on the future of the campus buildings and the CDP. The teachers' proposal received a mixed reception in the WWGU movement: some favored it, and others said they were only available for a limited period. Protest fatigue and studies were taking their toll and had begun to eat away the activists’ fighting spirit.

“In theory, I’m exhausted, but in practice, I don’t see any other option but to grind, so I guess the energy has to come from somewhere.”

“F***ing right, you can't get a second chance to do this, even if you have a taste of blood in your mouth” (Comments from student activists in the New Plots - WWGU Telegram group 19.11.2021)

A slim majority eventually voted to favor the demonstration. They felt that this might be their last chance to influence the content of the CDP. Activists decided to name the rally University Democracy Rally to support the Consistory electoral list of the same name demanding the restoration of university democracy. The practical aim was to get the university’s board to postpone the

decision on space reductions to the following year. The postponement would allow the continuation of discussion and resistance.

The protest started just before the holiday season at the front of the Main Building on (13 December 2021). Many students and teachers from the previous rallies were present. In the end, there were about a hundred participants, about the same number as in the summer, six months earlier. The program included speeches familiar from other protests and a moment of silence among the participants for “the dialogue that never was.” The WWGU activists advertised the event on social media and informed the press, but the press lost interest. The activists discerned that the zeal of the summer demonstration and the takeover of the Linna building was hard to achieve in the university’s snowy courtyard. However, the event was a cathartic experience for the participants as the year 2021 of university struggles was ending. The activists felt that regardless of the result, they gave everything they had.

Without the contribution of student activists and teachers and students’ feedback to the university management’s survey, the CDP could have been implemented without objections. In its meeting a week after the final rally, the university board decided to continue the campus planning and “authorize the University President to initiate the preparation of the second phase of the CDP for the years 2026–2030 together with the faculties and the university community in the spring of 2022. In the preparation, special attention is paid to the university community's participation and the effectiveness of participation.” Additionally, the university board decided that three buildings across three campuses in the first phase of the CDP will be fully (Pinni A, Fiesta) or partially (Arvo 1) relinquished by 2025. (The Tampere University Board Minutes, December 20, 2021.)

Some five months later, in May 2022, the university board proceeded with preparing the second phase of the facility program for the years 2026–2030, which involved relinquishing two more buildings: the Virta building in the city center campus and partially the Konetalo building in the Hervanta campus by 2030. According to the decision, “modernization efforts” will occur on other campuses. According to the board, two phases of the CDP combined would save over 4 million euros in facility expenses by 2030. Still, the board noticed that “the preparation process, community input, and considerations of experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic and necessary development measures have reduced cost-saving objectives compared to previous plans.” (The Tampere University Board Minutes, May 16, 2022.)

Lessons Learned

The student movement was an intervention into the preconceived and undemocratically administered university and, at least for a moment, changed the “rules of the game.” The WWGU activists experienced epiphanies, or turning points, in planning the resistance and direct action. They sensed the world in a new light, possibly leading to creative and renewed learning (Brookfield, 2005; Freire, 2005; Mezirow, 1990), the skills and knowledge contributing to their ongoing activism, and activist human capital (Van Dyke & Dixon, 2013) having durable biographical outcomes in participants’ life course (Passy & Monsch, 2019). For a short moment, the movement showed the activists that it is possible to imagine ‘another university’ or even the world. This new university would involve students in its operations, both in decision-making and in shaping the educational landscape. It would be a world that is free from the constraints of market forces and the constant pressure to perform.

The WWGU activism was a learning experience for the students involved. However, learning was a side-product of their activities, as the theory of social

movement learning suggests (see Atta & Holst, 2023). The theory also states that participants in social movements learn through collective action, and learning is a shared process (Welton, 1993; Underhill, 2019). Through collaboration, the WWGU movement participants acquired critical consciousness, which Freire regarded as the cornerstone of transforming the world (Freire, 2005; also Suoranta, 2021).

The WWGU activists learned how the university machine operates and makes decisions and how to act upon those decisions. They learned that a neoliberal university is not transparent and democratic but often undemocratically opaque and messy. During the months of organizing and struggle, they also learned crucial knowledge and skills: how to organize, communicate, and resist. In what follows, we analyze these lessons in more depth. For us, the research process was learning *with* as much as learning *about* the movement. We learned from the field and each other as we changed and shared our views on the events and the research literature.

Learning democracy. Student activism is a “guiding light of democracy” where students learn democracy and citizenship (Cole & Heinecke, 2020). The idea of “campus citizens” committed to practicing their democratic right to self-determination and critique stems from John Dewey’s notion of democracy as a radical way of life (Dewey, 1987). As Hamrick states, “Instead of downplaying their concerns or quietly leaving the campus, dissenting students engage their concern as democratic citizens who seek to participate in democratic self-determination” (Hamrick, 1998, p. 457). The WWGU movement created moments of democratic self-determination. In them, the participants could rise, as it were, above their circumstances and social constraints and use their reason without guidance from authorities. Students’ direct action was essential to university democracy and democratic education for all. The WWGU movement

joined the movement against neoliberal capitalism, whose primary target is the policy of impoverishment affecting other sectors of society (see Neary, 2020). The activists created spaces for critical thinking and collective meaning-making through direct action. These spaces offered enlightening moments of using self-determined reason and meaningful learning experiences for the participants. The WWGU was an open call to everyone, students and teachers, regardless of their status and hierarchies. The movement was inclusive and democratic in its decision-making and, therefore, a rehearsal of radical equality and sharing experiences and knowledge (see Hemphill & Leskowitz, 2012; Rancière, 1991; Suoranta, 2016).

The movement challenged and redefined the traditional notion of parliamentary democracy. The occupation expanded the understanding of democracy by demonstrating that it is a creative, living practice. In his 1939 text on creative democracy, Dewey emphasized that democracy is not just a rigid system or an automatic political mechanism. It is, in fact, “a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are provided” (Dewey 1988, p. 228).

The movement offered a suitable platform for the students to exercise their political imagination and show how democracy functions in action. In the truest sense of the word, the students displayed courage, as per Immanuel Kant’s 1789 motto of enlightenment, to use their understanding without relying on guidance from others or the shackles of rules and formulas. Thus, they followed Kant’s maxim: “*Enlightenment is the human being’s emergence from his [or her] self-incurred minority.*” (Kant 1996, italics in original.)

Social media in student activism. In its first years, Tampere University had problems with its media presence. It launched an unsuccessful brand campaign and did not need any more bad publicity. Thus, the WWGU group took advantage of the situation and used social media to activate and involve mainstream media. Social media can effectively distribute information on protests and mobilize protesters (Tukefci, 2017; Castells, 2012; Shaw, 2013; Joyce, 2010). While the physical campaign was at the heart of the WWGU movement, mobilizing students at short notice was only possible with the effective use of information and communication technologies, mainly social media. It significantly impacted the dynamics of the WWGU movement: its tools and platforms enable the rapid mobilization of large numbers of people quickly and with limited resources (see also Hensby, 2017; Kavada, 2015; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

The WWGU group learned to use various media in organizing the revolt: discussions on social media and face-to-face meetings, joint planning of activities, organization of takeover and protest events, and the events themselves. Social media can enable entrepreneurial activists to organize demonstrations without the resources and structures provided by traditional organizations such as associations or parties (Bimber & Flanagin & Stohl, 2012; Chadwick, 2017). Using social media can also lead to more spontaneous and personal forms of activism, which, according to Bennett & Segerberg (2012), allows for more effective targeting of messages.

The number of Facebook (599) and Instagram (889) followers indicated the WWGU movement's effectiveness and provided crucial emotional support to its core members. The downside was that 'online activism' increased participation without actual involvement, which Halupka (2018) describes as 'clicktivism.' One of the problems with social media in activism is that while it allows for

broader participation, it also opens the way for free riders as the boundaries between public and private become blurred (Bimber et al., 2005). WWGU activists observed a phenomenon described by Hensby (2017), wherein becoming an activist primarily happens through the connections and collective identities established in physical spaces rather than through online contacts. Still, as Kavada (2010, p. 115) points out, “The regularity of offline meetings further strengthens the stability of a movement.”

Student activism’s temporality and locality. Student rebellions are typically temporary, intermittent, and sporadic (Altbach, 1989). They occur within a specific timeframe and context, often lacking sustainability and continuum. Therefore, they may also leave without a legacy and influence on the next generation of students. After graduation, the building of the protest tradition usually ends. Nevertheless, student activism should learn from the past and keep the conversation going, whether off or online, to have a lasting impact and for the movement to continue. One way to build a tradition and a collective identity that endures from one cohort to another can be achieved through communication on social media platforms (Kavada, 2015).

According to Luescher (2018), a minority of students typically lead activist movements, which can cause a gap in tradition-building when the leaders step down and no one continues it. As Perttu reflected in his field notes:

The weekend before the demonstration is full of turbulence, and I have a fever and other flu symptoms. My weakness is this: I take too much responsibility and act too much as the movement’s leader. We have not even discussed the possibility of someone else hosting the protests. I guess this is not due to the lack of passionate activists in the movement—quite the reverse. The reason is that I have allowed the movement to personify myself too much, and I have not shared responsibility; the agency has not extended to the other members enough. Therefore, there is no room for

sick leave. Fortunately, the coronavirus test was negative on the morning of the demonstration day. (Perttu Ahoketo's field notes.)

Therefore, student movements could prefer democratic leadership and decision-making, although they, too, can contain seeds of conflict, preventing solidarity (Augusto, 2021; Graeber, 2013). Notwithstanding, it is essential to learn from histories of struggle and to see that mass organizing can pay off. Social scientists should observe and record these events to benefit future generations; as van Reekum (2015) notes, writing and documenting protests add to the collective memory and prolong the struggle.

The WWGU movement used an occupied building as a symbol of resistance and identity, representing the collective spirit of the occupiers beyond its physical structure. However, the post-pandemic landscape has transformed the essence of the physical campus. To counter the university's budget deficit, the administration introduced the idea of a digital campus and hybrid pedagogy as a one-size-fits-all solution. The students feared the proposed idea could further strain the community, which was already affected by COVID-19 closures, and weaken and fragment the resistance.

The students' protests proved that the physical campus is more than a formal educational site; it is a site for political pedagogy. The occupied building served as a political agora, allowing the students to represent collective engagement with critical reflection and transformative learning. Claiming the campus building had a performative dimension that resonated across all stages of the movement: the students were seen and noticed as political agents in and outside the university. As students cultivated their relationship with the occupied Linna building, they engendered a profound sense of connection and empowerment. They demonstrated that student collectives can actively shape and redefine their

spaces, catalyzing meaningful social change and transformation. The resistance was temporal and local, but it left its mark on the participating actors and the surrounding university community even then.

Student activists’ persistence. WWGU activists came face to face with the tiring and frustrating nature of activism as the struggles eventually spread to encompass half of the academic year 2021. The enthusiasm of many activists waned along the way, and those who stayed had to form new groups to replace the old ones. Linder et al. (2019) argue that student activism and resistance can negatively impact activists’ academic performance. In several cases, students stated that they stopped participating in planning and organizing protests because they needed to continue their studies and start to live an ordinary life for change. As an activist said out loud in a speech at the University Democracy Rally: “It is a student’s job to study, not to stand in the snow holding posters all winter” (Perttu Ahoketo’s field notes). An option worth considering this issue is to include activism in social science curricula with themes such as anarchism, active citizenship, civic responsibility, and democracy to build an engaging curriculum and imagine the university as a collective good (see Hall & Smyth, 2016). It could also be part of a voluntary ‘Student Activism 101’ in the student associations’ tutoring programs, benefitting those interested and keeping the campus activism driving.

Activists often experience emotional distress (Conner et al., 2023). With other WWGU activists, Perttu Ahoketo also shared his experience of insomnia and constant headaches towards the end of 2021. This “activism burnout” condition can significantly impact individuals’ dedication to a cause (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2002; Conner et al., 2023; Pines, 1994). As David Graeber testifies, “it is very common to see a pattern of exaltation followed by burn-out. Those drawn into the world of horizontal organizing will often find

the experience amazing, liberating, and transformative; it will open their eyes to entirely new horizons of human possibility. Six months later, they may just as well quit in disgust.” (Graeber 2009, 332.)

At the end of the year and the dawn of the last rally in December, some active WWGU members rightly felt the need to focus on their studies. Defenders of the demonstration appealed to the fact that the rally would perhaps be the last chance to influence the Campus Development Plan (CDP). Organizing a one-day protest would not require much compared to taking over the Linna building. In the anonymous voting of the Telegram group, the majority of those who voted supported the demonstration. “In theory, I am really exhausted, but in practice, I do not see any other option but to meddle, so I guess I find the stamina somewhere.” “Hell yeah. You will not get another chance afterward, so let us rally even with the taste of blood in the mouth.” (Student activists’ comments Telegram group 19 November 2021.)

As a counterbalance to debilitating stress, activism created a sense of community and purpose. Moreover, “small victories” concretized the potential for influence (see Weick, 1984). While these did not remove the mental and social burden of prolonged struggles, the gained sense of community and agency helped the WWGU activists surmount obstacles. Still, as Conner et al. (2023) suggest, more attention must be paid to self-care and coordinated care among participants for any student activism movement to be sustainable.

Emotions in activism. Activism is always as much about shared feelings as action. As Jasper (2011, p. 286) puts it, “Emotions are present in every phase and every aspect of protest.” They range from the original feelings of injustice to anger and frustration. Thus, all the summer and early winter events increased a sense of belonging among the committed students and teachers who had

fought for a cause. The events also created a “structure of feeling,” a term coined by Williams to describe emotional experiences specific to a particular time and place. The concept encompasses the shared sensibilities influencing people’s perceptions of their surroundings. However, it is not a fixed or static phenomenon. Instead, it is “a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historical as well as personal” (Williams, 1977, p. 132) changing over time. Thus, many WWGU activists perhaps thought that the university was a monolithic whole but learned in the processes that it is a historically contested terrain – sometimes a minefield – containing different emotions, voices, and power positions.

Many of those involved found it hard to stand up against the powerful cognitive machine, a.k.a. the university, which resulted in challenging emotional experiences. Students feared the potential future consequences of activism, such as negative impacts on job opportunities. Meanwhile, teachers were concerned that resistance, despite freedom of speech, could lead to disciplinary measures or even dismissal during staff reductions. These emotions may indicate internalized oppression, where students and teachers unconsciously accept the neoliberal university’s instrumental and oppressive rationality, which goes against their best interests. Nevertheless, fears can be genuine in recruitment and tenure processes if—and when—the management sees activism as a demerit or a stigma (Davis, 2011).

The protest politics of the WWGU movement were, at times, steeped in emotion. Protests are incomprehensible without emotions since they “give ideas, ideologies, identities and even interests their motivating force” (Jasper, 1997, p. 127). When the university leadership did not listen to the voice of the university community in their efforts to reduce facilities, this caused great anger in the community. According to Theodore Kemper (1978), we experience anger as a

"real emotion" when confronted with power that severely limits our autonomy. Anger has been identified as a critical emotion for protesters (Leach et al., 2006; Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2007; 2013), as it causes people to adopt a more critical relationship with the authorities (van Troost et al., 2013). William A. Gamson (1992, p. 32) says it well: It "lights a fire in the belly and iron in the soul." While anger can be a potent catalyst for mobilizing a group, activists must overcome individual fears before fully engaging in collective action (see Flam, 2005; Jasper, 2011).

University's power structures. An important lesson for the activists was understanding the university's power structures as part of the neoliberal regime and how they often operate behind closed doors. Activists realized that the university works as an essential part of transnational capitalism and its successor, global educational policies known as GERMⁱⁱ (global educational reform movement, Sahlberg, 2015), and how these policies regulate the university's actions. More importantly, understanding power structures helped the WWGU activists acknowledge that they could not reduce campus resistance only to identity politics and that a more intersectional approach was needed. Therefore, student activists had to cross these borders and build a united front. In other words, they needed to learn that they formed a class despite their differences. Indeed, there was no return to the Marxist-Leninist paradigm of privileging class above all factors. However, to be a powerful counterforce, the students needed to join forces as they engaged in the struggle (see Soldatenko & Margolis, 2019).

In the fall of 2021, when the university held hearings for staff and students, some critical teachers, students, and WWGU activists were skeptical about their purpose. They believed that these hearings were the management tactics to control the discussion and justify the decisions already made. They did not trust the management who, in Prashad's words, "wore corporate blue suits and

walked around with a posse of vice presidents, all dressed in corporate livery (...) hungrily cutting, cutting, cutting—and yet, spending, spending, spending on noncurricular hardware” (Prashad, 2014, p. 333). As van Reekum (2015, para 4) states, academic managers may be “unable to respond to discontent and criticism without managerial domineering. One explanation could be that management appeared to be protecting their privileges and trying to cover up financial misdeeds.” Perhaps the management recognized all too well that student activists were “significant knowledge makers whose counternarrative experience and testimony constitute a direct challenge to institutional hegemony” (Rogers et al., 2023, p. 164). Instead of hearing students’ voices, they want to maintain their power, usually referring to official decision-making protocols and institutional strategies – there is no alternative as a final answer.

Conclusion

In this study, we conducted social movement research by providing an ethnographic overview of a Finnish student activist group, its activities, and its dynamics. The study contributes to a general understanding of the social transformations that student activists undergo in their protest activities and how they learn to perceive democracy, develop political imagination, and understand power structures. Additionally, we observed the challenges that student activists face and mapped out the pain points, resilience of the movement, and associated emotions. By doing so, we hope to assist future student activists in facing adversity.

We described how a student movement, The We Will Not Give Up the Linna Building movement (WWGU), organized resistance and what its members learned during the struggle. The movement resisted Tampere University’s Campus Development Plan (CDP), involving a 25% decrease in the university’s facilities by 2030 following the Finnish government’s budget cuts from higher

education. The protest was partially successful, for the management had to revise the planning. We may assume that without the WWGU movement, the university's plans would have been approved and implemented without objections. Now, the student activists could partially prevent the implementation of the Campus Development Plan (CDP) as is and save the Linna building.

While acknowledging that involvement in the WWGU movement could be tiring and demanding, the activists' primary sentiment was empowerment and a sense of belonging within a community. In a lecture, "The University in a Democracy: Democratization of the University," at the Free University of Berlin in January 1967, Jürgen Habermas defined the university as a political institution against technologically driven, depoliticized definitions. He argued for students' legitimate right to participate in the debate and to self-defend the university side by side with teachers. (Habermas, 1987.)

The WWGU movement activists used their legitimate right to defend their premises and the independence of academic life on the Tampere University campus. The movement created a crisis by making the university's opaque decision transparent and creating awareness among students and teachers. It exposed the pervasive influence of neoliberal logic within the university's decision-making structures and practices. It revealed how deeply entrenched these tentacles of neoliberalism have become within Tampere University and other universities worldwide. The activist realized that to achieve necessary changes, they must unite their efforts, from identity politics to class struggle.

The WWGU movement's activity was a lesson in solidarity and cooperation for a small number of students and teachers. Together, they demonstrated that they are part and parcel of the university's critical community and global civil society equipped with democratic sentiment and forms of direct action. They related to

global “transgressive and oppositional practices that take place outside classrooms” (Suoranta & Tomperi, 2002, p. 37) to fight global capitalism.

The WWGU activists discovered that participation is an assertive means for enacting positive educational change and bolstering democratic principles. Their engagement reflected a profound belief in the power of collective action and gained their ‘activist capital.’ Moreover, it demonstrated a commitment to fostering a robust framework for a living democracy that may also serve the interests and values of the wider academic community. By participation, activists sought to influence decision-making processes, amplified marginalized voices, and ultimately contributed to the establishment of a more just and representative university for all. The students of the WWGU movement believed in the transformative power of activism, which is in line with the transformative activist stance by Stetsenko (2020). They saw themselves as co-creators of their future and that of the world. Using their political imagination, they proved activism to be a forward-looking endeavor that asks not only what is but what can and should be. Using Ian Parker’s words, for the participants, the WWGU was a critical “opportunity for discovering new ways of living, of bringing to the fore aspects of human creativity and hope that are usually suppressed” (Parker, 2007, p. 148).

By joining forces, the student activists challenged and momentarily reshaped the neoliberal university’s power dynamics, prioritizing profit-driven motives over the well-being and interests of students and society. They recognized that their struggles intersected and shared a common goal of dismantling the pervasive influence of capitalism on higher education. By adopting an inclusive and collaborative approach, activists effectively advocated for social justice, equity, and the democratization of knowledge. Together, the WWGU activists locally resisted the encroachment of global academic capitalism and actively promoted

the empowerment of students. This collective effort was a potent reminder that solidarity and collaboration are indispensable tools in challenging the hegemony of neoliberal educational policies within higher education institutions and forging a more just and emancipatory future.

Notes

ⁱ In Finnish, the endangered building's name, Linna, refers to the castle and the famous Finnish novelist Väinö Linna (1920–1992), one of the most important Finnish novelists of the 20th century.

ⁱⁱ The Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) emphasizes standardization, competition, and marketization, a focus on STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, maths), teacher and school accountability, and increased control and centralization of education, often diminishing the autonomy of teachers and schools (Sahlberg, 2015).

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