

Neo-liberal education policy approaching the Finnish shoreline?

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Abstract

In this article our aim is to examine the changing position of education as a definer, producer and result of social exclusion by analysing and comparing Finnish educational policy changes with more general European trends. The effects and consequences of these changes are not yet very clear, but at least in Finland there seem to be astonishingly strong trends of diversification of the whole old honourable Nordic social-democratic comprehensive school.

Educational exclusion is most often seen as the problem of inequality of educational opportunities and partly as a consequence of this inequality of social opportunities. Some groups have worse resources and material opportunities than others on the educational market. This has been the main argument and rationale behind carrying out comprehensive school reforms in many welfare states after World War Two. But on the other hand educational exclusion also deals very deeply with different cultural ways of life, cultural values and languages, power relations and the diversification of knowledge. Discursive rules construct the subjects and subjectivities that differentiate various groups. We need to research the principles of reason and conduct that classify, differentiate and divide the subjectivities of actors and agents through practices of normalisation.

The latest thirty years of Finnish state education discourse can be divided into two narratives. Although we have lived through a 30-year period of comprehensive school and there were similar “comprehensive” features proceeding the whole period, there is quite a clear turning point in late of 1980’s. The first narrative represents praise for abolishing the inequality of educational opportunity and introducing the comprehensive school in

order to strengthen the Finnish welfare state. The second represents the narrative of passing the culmination of the welfare state, the narrative of decentralisation, deregulation, marketisation, and the rise of evaluation and choice.

Keywords: Social and Educational Exclusion, Comprehensive School, Education Policy, Decentralisation, Deregulation, School Choice, Evaluation, Discourses, Comparative Research

Introduction

Quite many authors around the world hold the opinion that we are witnessing the transition to an entirely new historical era, which has been referred to by various names (e.g. Bauman 1996; Beck 1992, 1997; Giddens 1995; Castells 1997). In this “global network society” education and social exclusion are also making new connections and searching for new routes and forms.

Quite radical changes in educational policy and governance have occurred all around post-industrialised world in recent years. Our article is examining this new governance of education and the new mechanisms of educational and social exclusion. Our aim is to examine the changing position of education as a definer, producer and result of social exclusion by analysing and comparing Finnish educational policy changes with more general European trends. The effects and consequences of these changes are not yet very clear, but at least in Finland there seem to be astonishingly strong trends of diversification of the whole old honourable Nordic social-democratic comprehensive school.

When comparing educational policy in different European countries, each educational system and type of governance should be contextualised in wider socio-cultural frames. As there are different models of welfare states, are there also “Nordic”, “corporated”, “neo-liberal” and “peripheral” welfare routes or models in the field of educational policies and governance? And if so, are these models now in the process of becoming integrated into a kind of “EU educational policy model”?

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This article is connected to a comparative research project funded by the European Union which began in late 1990's, "Educational Governance and Social Inclusion and Exclusion" (Egsie). The research project is based on the central argument that the recent changes in education systems in Europe will have a great impact on social exclusion and integration. The project tries to clarify relations between educational governance and social integration and exclusion in different national contexts.

The Egsie-project is comparing educational policy in nine countries; Australia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The selection of countries covers differences in cultures and traditions of educational policies and modern welfare and education strategies. It also covers the four welfare state models mentioned earlier. The educational policies which are practised in different national contexts, the diversification of the educational system, the segregation, selection and exclusion and inclusion processes differ from each other due to the different welfare histories and modern models of these countries. (Lindblad & Popkewitz 2001.)

In this article first we will have a broad look at governance changes in all EU-countries. Governance changes are related to different structures of compulsory secondary education and thus to school admission and selection. Secondly, we concentrate on educational changes and social exclusion in Finland by analysing two data. First data consists 18 carefully selected urgent and powerful Finnish educational policy texts and discourses (eg. committee reports, whitepapers) for thirty years concerning primary and secondary education (the appendix 1). The second data which we use, consists interviews made to 16 carefully selected most important educational

politicians, decision-makers and informants in Finland (the appendix 2). The duration of each interview was from one to two hours and they were carried out in 1999.

Governance changes and school choice in Europe

It seems that the most essential trend of education policy changes has been decentralisation and deregulation of governance in education in many countries. However, the degrees of decentralisations vary and get regional, local or 'market like' forms in different countries. Green & al. identify four models of education regulation and governance in EU Member States: first centralised systems with elements of devolution and choice, second regional devolution with some minor devolution and choice, third local control with national 'steering' and some school autonomy and fourth institutional autonomy in quasi-market systems of education. (Green & al. 1999, 79-111.)

One central feature of the governance changes in compulsory education has been school choice. A choice of lower secondary school is connected to admission policies of schools and thus to selection. It has been hypothesised that as credential inflation has increased, all other things being equal, parents seek route to the most prestigious qualifications and thus the selection to secondary schools remains. In order to examine education policy changes and structures of exclusion across the countries school choice policies along with admission policies in different school systems are one of the vital issues. Green & al. (1999, 70-79, 115-121, 144) make a threefold typology of the relationship between admission policies and the structure of lower secondary education which are called admission models. Admission models are: zoned comprehensive, open enrolment in comprehensive and partially comprehensive systems and selection by ability. In zoned comprehensive model specialisation into academic or vocational tracks is delayed and pupils are allocated to schools on basis of residence on principal of mixed ability intake. So called 'open enrolment' covers various policies that favour families choice over school, but sustain some comprehensive features. The most selective systems all pupils are allocated to compulsory secondary schools on basis of examinations, previous school achievements and/or advice of primary school teacher.

Green & al. view models of education regulation and governance and models of admission policies separately. In their analysis the Member states of European Union are allocated to these models in 1975 or 1980 and in 1995 (Green & al. 1999). The models give fruitful tools to view them simultaneously and thus school choice can be linked more closely to changes in governance. In the following outline European countries are viewed in relation to both education governance and admission policies of lower secondary schools. In this review there are used also EURYDICE documents, OECD reports and literature. The figure 1 shows a combination of the models in education governance and models in admission to lower secondary schools in addition to change and stability during 20 years in EU countries. In the figure the policies of countries are seen in the end of 1970's when name of the country is marked with *italics* and in the end of 1990's when name of the country is marked with **bolds**. The arrows in the figure point the direction of change in relationship of education governance and admission to lower secondary schools.

Figure 1. The change in models of education governance in relation to admission models from the end of 1970's to the end of 1990's in Europe. (Green & al. 1999; Hirvenoja 1999)

| In Year 1975/1980 and 1999 | A. Zoned comprehensive | B. Open enrolment in comprehensive / partly comprehensive systems | C. Selection by ability |
|--|---|---|--|
| 1. Centralised (with elements of devolution and choice) | <i>Greece</i> ← <i>Sweden</i> <i>Finland</i> <i>Denmark</i> <i>France</i> → France | <i>Italy</i> ← <i>Portugal</i> ← | <i>Greece</i> <i>Italy</i> <i>Portugal</i> <i>Spain</i> <i>Luxembourg</i> ► Luxembourg <i>Austria</i> ► Austria <i>Belgium</i> ↓ |
| 2. Regional Devolution (with some minor devolution and choice) | | <i>Spain</i> ← | Belgium ↓ <i>Germany</i> ► Germany |
| 3. Local Control (with national 'steering' and some school autonomy) | <i>England & Wales</i> → | <i>Sweden</i> <i>Finland</i> <i>Denmark</i> | <i>Ireland</i> ► Ireland |
| 4. Institutional Autonomy in Quasi-Market | | England & Wales | <i>Netherlands</i> ► Netherlands |

The European Union Member states can be divided into four groups in relation to education policy changes and school choice (Hirvenoja 1999). A broad outline of education policy changes are viewed from the end of 1970's to the end of 1990's. The

Continental European countries and Ireland have been the most stable both in education governance and in selective admission policies (an exception of France) during the 20 years period (OECD 1994; 1996; Duru-Bellat 1996; EURYDICE 1997a; 1997b). As opposite to most continental European countries Southern European EU Member states have shifted away from earlier differentiation in compulsory schooling towards more comprehensive school system. Despite some recent pressures Southern European countries have been largely stable in centralised education governance with an exception of Spain that is by now classified as regional system. (Green & al. 1999, Novoa, Alves, & Canario, 1999; Pereyra, Sevilla and Castillo 1999, Ossenbach-Sauter 1996.)

Where the Southern European countries, mainly Greece, Spain and Portugal, have introduced comprehensive school since the end of 1980's, the Scandinavian countries did that at the turn of the 1970's. One of the central ideas in Scandinavian comprehensive school system has been to allocate pupils to schools on a basis of residence (catchment area division). Thus in figure 1 the Scandinavian (EU-) countries are in the 'zoned comprehensive' model of admission in the end of 1970's. At that time educational provision was planned and exercised under detailed central administration. During the 1990's parents have been given opportunity to choose school from outside the catchment area along with shifts to local control in governance of basic schooling. Even after the latest policy changes towards parental choice, enrolment to comprehensive schools is not entirely 'open' in Finland because pupils are assigned to nearest school and parents need to make a request only in order to go to other school than the assigned one. Also choice over school is in practise choice between public schools in Finland; in other words private and independent school sector is modest and does not have a role in school choice in Finland. (See more in Hirvenoja 1999)

It seems that in the Scandinavia the 'open enrolment' to schools is more an additional policy of education whereas in England and Wales 'open enrolment' is a key feature of 'quasi-markets' in education governance. In education reform of England and Wales in 1988 'open enrolment' meant not only parents' right to express the preference of public school but also it allowed popular schools to attract pupils up to their physical capacity instead of imposing limits to popular schools in order that other schools can

remain open (Whitty, Power & Halpin 1998; Whitty & Edwards 1998). Also the institutional diversity among the schools is wide in 'quasi-markets' that is not the case in public comprehensive school systems. The most extreme 'quasi-markets' operate in the Netherlands that has traditionally had a selective and highly differentiated secondary school system with paramount freedom of school choice (Teelken 1998).

To conclude, the 'open enrolment' model (Green & al. 1999) as describing education policy varies a lot nationally and locally. The nature of school choice policies varies whether policy is accompanied by school funding mechanisms which depend, at least partly, on school enrolments, whether authorities regulate the degree to which schools can expand or contract, whether there is set selection criteria - and what kind of - by authorities when schools are oversubscribed and how wide specialisation is allowed at the expense of core curriculum (OECD 1994; Green & al. 1999). Thus policies can encourage diversification between schools or they can, at least try to, be more compatible to comprehensive and equivalence principals.

The turning point of Finnish educational policy

Deregulation, abolishing detailed sector steering, and building up the Evaluative State

The heavily centralised planning and steering system in education, which had been under construction in Finland for decades and reached its peak during the rise of the comprehensive school reform, was abandoned by a resolution of the government in 1988 to reform the entire management of the state. Behind this new policy there was a politically very influential decentralisation committee (CR 1986: 12). Its task was to plan a strategy for how the various functions and authority were to be shifted from the central government to the municipalities and administrative districts, and to clarify what changes were needed in the functions and status of central administration boards. At that time the prevailing strong planning system was also replaced by a new evaluation system (CR 1985: 41). The government's proposal in 1988 was to establish one statutory policy system in the field of education. The new plans were now aimed at combining all the school grade levels and types of schools under the same, very general planning system. The former sector-based planning systems, with their highly detailed and focused steering regulations were all abandoned. Among the many

defects of the former sector planning were its diversity, its unsuitable time-tables, the poor implementation of state planning, the bureaucracy of planning, the waste of time, the futility of detailed and inflexible regulations, etc. (CR 1989a: 1, 1-2, 21; Kivinen, Rinne, Jarvinen, Koivisto & Laakso 1995; Rinne, Kivirauma, Hirvenoja & Simola 2000.)

The new “development plan for education” approved by the government viewed the whole education system as an entity, and it was more concise than the former detailed sector plans. The aim was to make the planning process lighter and faster, even though the national development plan was still to be drawn up as a multilevel plan. The primary focus of the national development plan was to ensure the implementation of essential goals and lines of action, to improve conditions for the development of the prerequisites for action, and to put far more emphasis on evaluation of the results as well as leading by results. Evaluation was to be made continuous and was to take place at all levels of education. (CR 1989a: 1, 23-25; CR 1989b: 2, 3, 5-6.)

The decentralisation of education management was only partially argued for in this development plan, but it mainly followed from the general principles of change seen in the development and goals of the whole Finnish governance policy. The Committee on the Development of Education commented on decentralisation in its first report as follows:

“With the help of the education planning system, the general principals of development are being promoted by increasingly the shifting of authority from central management to provincial governments, educational institutions, schools, municipalities and universities“ (CR 1989a: 1, 25).

The same kinds of statements were repeated one after another at the beginning of the 1990's in the development plans for education (Ministry of Education 1991, 30). The goal was to decentralise the whole of state management and to improve managerialism using quite strong measures; this shift was not limited to the management of education.

The power of local school authorities was increased in 1985 when very strict regulations were replaced by the so-called system of “teaching hours frames”. In addition, the steering mechanisms of municipalities were also changed by several development projects of the government that started at the end of the 1980's. The

authority of the Ministry and the National Board of Education to steer municipalities was revoked. The law that came in to force in 1991 repealed many of the regulations that had steered municipalities and other organisers of education. (CR 1996: 4, 23-24.)

The authority of the municipalities as well as schools increased and the style of management changed due to the reformed allocation of state subsidies after 1993. The central administration no longer regulated the allocation of resources in detail. The purpose of the new system was to encourage organisers of education to find solutions that would serve flexible functional and economic purposes. In addition, the allocation of resources became more and more flexible between different administrative areas, so that the allocation of resources after 1993 was more dependent upon local values. (CR 1996: 4, 24.)

The former management of municipal education through central steering and regulation was to be replaced by rather massive operations of evaluation. The assessment of goals and essential lines of action, and evaluation and follow-up of outcomes were chosen as the priorities of national development plans in education (CR 1989a: 1, 24; CR 1989b: 2, 3-4; Ministry of Education 1991, 30-31). A plan to develop "evaluation practices and measures of efficiency for both national and local self-evaluation of schools" was drawn up (Ministry of Education 1991, 12, 31). At the end of the decade the government's resolution was stated more clearly:

"The National Board of Education, together with local and regional experts when needed, will evaluate all the forms of education and their most important sub-sectors by the end of the planning period" (Ministry of Education 1996, 8).

These guidelines were firmly established a little bit later by law. The basic role of evaluation was one of the main points in the reform of education legislation (Education Legislation 1999). The statutory evaluation system was seen as necessary when moving from norm steering to steering by outcomes. According to the report of the Committee on the Reform of Education Legislation: "Evaluation is an essential means to guarantee the quality of educational services and their national comparability". The purpose of evaluation is "to support the development of education and improve conditions for learning". On the basis of decisions made in the Ministry of Education, the National Board of Education decides how to execute evaluation. The organisers of education are obligated to evaluate all the education that

they organise. This self-evaluation includes both evaluation at the level of schools and at the level of the organiser of education, i.e. most commonly the municipal level. (CR 1996: 4, 55, 82-85, 106-107.) The committee several times made use of “soft policy” rhetoric, e.g. stating that the evaluation system was not meant to be a tool for steering by the state, but an essential part of developing educational services locally, regionally and nationally. (CR 1996, 4, 84).

Behind this massive decentralisation and deregulation there seems to be among all of those interviewed the collapse of the earlier almost unquestionable belief in centralised planning and untenable centralised governance (NBE 1; OAJ; City 3; RLA; City 2). The present head of National Board of Education explained it as follows:

Well, I think that the general situation in society was mature for it, that the welfare state had come to the end of its road in the sense that it was noticed that it is not possible to determine every possible thing by planning systems at the national level. In other words, this kind of belief in planning collapsed. ... and at the same time this subsidiarity got stronger in Finland. It was noticed that the local actors are able to handle their affairs better when they are allowed the freedom of move, and their ability to act is not fettered... One version of this subsidiarity is the breakdown of a unified culture. Finland has been an unusually monolithic country... it was confessed that there is no reason why a comprehensive school in Utsjoki [a town in scarcely populated Finnish Lapland] and one in Kulosaari [a suburb in Helsinki, the capital of Finland] have to function according to the same curriculum. (NBE 1)

There was an almost surprising unanimity and strong belief in the superiority of local decision-making compared to the older centralised model. Expertise rests in the municipalities and in the schools, and it can only be brought out by giving decision-making power to the local level, it was stated (NBE 2; MP; ME 2). The interviewees connected the dissolution of norms and realisation of the proximity principle to the economic depression. Without shifting decision making to the local level it would not have been possible to require the municipalities to cut down spending as much as was now (NBE 1; ME 2; City 1). At the same time the central administration was able to transfer difficult decisions to the municipal level.

Several of those interviewed wondered, though, whether the dismantling of norms and increase in local decision-making power had occurred too quickly (ME 1; HBE 2; CH). Some feared that in the future we will have to move back toward the old system

in which the central government at least partially allocates funds for specific purposes and thus ensures the equal availability of services to its citizens throughout the country (NBE 2; OAJ).

The discursive change from citizenship to individualism

In arguments for the evaluation system the “discourse of choice” has become a typical part of Finnish education discourse in the 1990’s. The emphasis of education politics in the 1990’s has been to increase “free choice” at every level of education. In the development plans of education in the beginning of the 1990’s there were suggestions to increase choice between subjects and also in the number of subjects studied in comprehensive school. This emphasis on individuality may be seen, for example, in the use of the concept “an individual study plan” in the development plan of education. (Ministry of Education 1991). Comparing to 1960- and 1970’s the difference is clear. When the old comprehensive school educated citizens, who share some traditional collective values of the modern society, the post-modern individual develops his/her capabilities for himself/herself through individualized schooling.

Families’ “right to choose” was extended to include the possibility of choice between schools in the new reform of education legislation. Municipalities are still obliged to allocate children to schools “on the grounds of as safe and short a distance as possible“, but pupils can apply to any school other than the allocated one (CR 1996, 62-63, 169). Since the introduction of the comprehensive school there has never before been any mention of school choice in the discourse of Finnish state education.

One expression of this political change according to many of the interviewees is the emphasis on the value of the individual, as opposed to the former idea of collective equality. The value of the individual as a social actor has increased and this can also be seen in educational policy. Highly educated citizens will no longer stand for governance from above, but instead want to make educational decisions themselves, it was felt (NBE 2; City 1; NBE 1).

The rise of the level of general education was also seen as one of the factors that advanced decentralisation and promoted the demands for individuality (ME 2, NBE 1, City 3).

...people's education level has risen so that educated people cannot be manipulated that easily, I mean by this that educated people can't tolerate guardianship as much as maybe uneducated people who may think of it as a security system. And educated person doesn't accept, just like that, this kind of homogenous system, but requires individuality... (NBE 1)

The changes that occurred in educational policy in the 1990's were thus connected quite strongly with changes in the international environment. Quite many actors in educational policy thought that increasing international competition called for increased investment in the education of the gifted. A "free the spearheads" mode of speech has become established in the Finnish school administration, according to which comprehensive school has done its job, in other words raised the educational level of the nation, and now it is time to "invest in the best" (ME 1; NBE 2).

According to informants global competition and the demands for economical success require that education produce better quality learning and top skills. Every nation, to be successful in the global economic competition, has to raise its best forces, even though this may violate the old policy of equity.

...maybe then this globalization is another matter, so it was noticed that Finland's economic competitiveness is priority number one and Finland cannot manage well with that kind of mass in a world that is becoming more international, but we also have to give opportunities to the most talented to go forwards according to their aptitudes. So, that ... we also support them. (NBE 2)

Social segregation and proceeding inequality

Along with the increase in choice, there were new kinds of discourse concerning preventive action for youth at risk of exclusion. In the beginning of the 1990's mention was made of developing "guidance and training methods to prevent exclusion from education and working life" (Ministry of Education 1991, 8). At the end of decade it was stated that

"special attention will be paid to preventive actions geared to students who encounter difficulties in school and those at risk of exclusion" (Ministry of Education 1996, 6).

There was also some mention, for the first time, of the need "to eliminate school harassment" and "to enhance school satisfaction" in state education discourse

(Ministry of Education 1996, 6). Connected to this there was a proposal concerning “the pupil’s right to a safe learning environment” (CR 1996, 169).

Most interviewees saw the changes as quite positive or at least as neutral or inevitable. They saw almost no alternatives to the practised educational policy mainly because they saw as a part of global, inevitable change. However some of the respondents mentioned social segregation as a frightening part of the unexpected outcomes of changes in education politics. It was thought that the diversification of schools will increase in the future both regionally and socially (SAK; STAKES). The representative of Finnish trade unions predicted that the regional availability of education will suffer, and elite schools will begin to appear (SAK).

"Well, mainly this kind of, you know, er, er, differentiation of schools according to level and district. So, so, well in this country the city government is going to be, you know, a very significant decision maker in education politics in the future in a very different, different way than previously. The economic circumstances of a municipality are going to be reflected in education and then the decrease of pupils on the register will lead to the fact that, probably you know, regional attainability will suffer. This will lead to profile building, er, er, that has, has of course also a lot of good sides, but if it --- one consequence might be that, that it gives rise to this kind of elite school inside the comprehensive school, comprehensive school system, there are some signs of this." (SAK)

The risk of segregation and exclusion were matters of concern but not seen as reality in the capital city of Helsinki by the representative local education authorities:

"It hasn't been proved till now that, at least not yet in our studies, that accumulation, exclusion, for example, has occurred, but we have to be fairly careful with it. Thus far it has worked well, but, yes, there are certain risks of course if we think about the future, we have to be, so to say, on the alert here, monitor how the situation develops." (City 1)

However, the famous Finnish public education free of charge in Finland was not considered to be endangered. In a way it was unanimously considered as a civil right which cannot be abandoned. But the higher one goes in the educational system the greater the proportion parents are expected to pay (NBE 2), and business life is also taking a more active part in the educational market (TT), it was stated. With the

increasing emphasis placed on individual choices and local colour, it was thought that the importance of evaluation would grow significantly (MP).

Towards the hidden education policy

Strengthening of the local level and weakening of the central administration were overwhelmingly seen as the greatest changes. There was no disagreement among those interviewed on this point. While earlier there was only one game being played on the field of educational policy, there are now over 400 different games in progress, stated the leader of teacher trade union (OAJ). Another point that came out quite strongly was a kind of de-politicalisation of educational policy, which showed up as an unshakeable consensus regarding the reforms of the 1990's (SAK; TT). The former director of the National Board of Education called this rather tellingly "hidden education policy", in which after going through a number of small changes we are suddenly faced with a completely new educational policy. It is of substantial importance to notice that this change of direction was never made explicitly; it is simply the result of several small reforms concerning funding, the basis of curriculum planning, defining school districts, etc. (Ex-NBE).

The role of the teachers' trade union seems to have changed very radically during the period under discussion. While it was considered to have a central role in educational policy on the national level in the past (NBE 2), its activities and significance have recently focused more and more on protecting teachers' interests on the local level (NBE 2; City 3).

When the comprehensive school system was being created Finland was influenced by the Swedish system (CH; Ex-NBE). The main influences leading to recent changes in educational policy, on the other hand, were believed to have come from international organisations (e.g. the OECD, the EU) (ME 2; City 2), as well as from the Thatcherism era in England with the strengthening of market forces (City 1). Those in the central administration stressed the idea that Finland is at present a country which is taken as an example, and which has international clout (ME 1).

The worst threats of producing inequality are connected with regional inequality, in the opinion of the interviewees. Rural areas will wither away, and migration and

school transfers will lead to further inequality on the social map of large urban centres creating good and bad areas (NBE 2; TT; CH). The new educational policy was even referred to by one interviewee as “a triumph for urban Finland” (CH).

Above all, the fact that responsibility has been shifted to an increasing degree to families and students themselves has made the inequality brought about by the new educational policy possible. The risk of creating inequality is, in a way, the price we must pay for this reform. Many think that the price is actually quite small compared to the benefits that the new educational policy will bring (ME 1; City 2). It was stressed that there can never be schools for the rich as long as tuition fees are not charged (ME 2).

Those families will succeed in school who have the skills needed to play the school game and a vision of what they want. When the choice now rests with the family, and later with the students themselves, one informant ironically said that the career plans of a child could now be made starting from day care. The same informant pointed out that families from the upper social classes are the most active users of this right to choose (City 1; NBE 1; City 4).

In line with above changes the role of the headmaster has also clearly changed from that of confidant of the teachers to that of an executive representing the employer (NBE 1; NBE 2; City 1). The headmaster was in fact compared to a managing director or orchestra director, who should have the general characteristics of a good leader. We should get rid of the public servant who “pushes papers” and waits for orders from above, and have instead a dynamic, motivating personnel manager. It was not even thought that a teacher’s education should be required (City 3). Indeed, in line with the managerial model, headmasters were seen as crucial runners-in of the new “hidden” educational policy.

Finnish narratives before and after the turning of the tide - climbing up on to the cloud of rational choice

The latest thirty years of Finnish state education discourse can be divided into two narratives. Although we have lived through a 30-year period of comprehensive school and there were similar “comprehensive” features proceeding the whole period, there is

quite a clear turning point in late of 1980's. The first narrative represents praise for abolishing the inequality of educational opportunity and introducing the comprehensive school in order to strengthen the Finnish welfare state. The second represents the narrative of passing the culmination of the welfare state, the narrative of decentralisation, deregulation, marketisation, and the rise of evaluation and choice. (Rinne, Kivirauma, Hirvenoja, & Simola 2000.)

In the beginning of the comprehensive school period the great success story included the attempt to raise the level of education of every citizen to that demanded by the structural changes in society in order to contribute to the economy. But an equally important argument was to offer equal educational opportunities to all children regardless of their place of residence, or the wealth or status of their families, mother tongue or gender. In the wildest Nordic or "social-democratic" dreams it was almost believed that the whole age cohort, when integrated in the comprehensive school for nine years, would not only be allowed to enter secondary educational as equals, but also to learn the same core-syllabus and the same know-how and end their compulsory comprehensive school equipped with almost the same level of qualifications. Another myth was that it would be possible to accomplish the goals of comprehensive school through central management and detailed steering of education.

In the end of 1980's and in the 1990's the omnipotence of central governance came to an end. It was replaced by another myth, the myth of managerialism, individualism and competitive market orientation: belief in decentralising authority to local management and schools to ensure better efficiency and the production of services that take into account individual citizens' real needs. (CR 1996: 4, 23). The aim was to increase not the quantity but the quality of education by "increasing flexibility and choice" (Ministry of Education 1991, 11). The documents of education policy in the 1990's repeated time and again the belief in progress, in the "development of education". Another topic myth of the last decade of the 20th century was the myth of evaluation as a tool to develop the quality of education (Ministry of Education 1996, 8; CR 1996, 55, 82-85, 106-107). While previously it was believed that the goals of education could be achieved by strict norm steering, in the 1990's it was believed that they can be achieved only by setting national core-goals, by evaluating the achievements in the form of the results afterwards and by forcing educational

institutions to compete with one another for the best results. In its rhetoric, the Finnish Planning state had become the Evaluative state, which tries to practice educational policy through governing by results.

During earlier decades investments made in the human capital were aimed at all the members of the nation, so that through equalizing educational opportunities national potential of talents could be gathered and liberated on the entire front under the lead of the government and thus nourish the innovativeness of the nation regardless of social, regional, ethnic or gender background of the students. Now the situation seems to have changed. The leading grip of the government, in some countries even monopoly in the field of education is not self-evident anymore. Neither do educational equality nor the idea of the education as long and coherent as possible exist as they used to do in the earlier decades. They have been placed by a certain “magic of the market” in which education is marketed and made into a product and in which the demand may direct the supply in liberated markets: the competitive choices of clients and sponsors work up the activities of educational markets without the strong intervention of the paternalistic state. (Lauder & Hughes 1999, 4-20.)

The key to understand the trend in educational policy which still emphasises the meaning of growing up the new, human capital can be sought in the breakthrough of the so-called theory of rational choice. Individual actors and the individual and parental choice in education are seen as a natural rationality of human activity. People make educational choices which are most reasonable for them in the framework in which the choices must be made. According to the theory of rational choice, children, young people and their families are seen as rational actors who

“choose among the different educational options available to them on the basis of evaluations of their costs and benefits and of the perceived probabilities of more or less successful outcomes” (Breen & Goldthorpe 1997, 275).

This kind of thinking can naturally be blamed of the fact that it looks at children and the families, as if they were free selectors in free markets thus easily neglecting completely the examination of the social determination of educational choices. The most probable winners of educational policy practised on the grounds of the ideas of rational choice will be business life as well as the descendants of middle classes and educated professions, the losers will be the segments of population who have socially,

economically and culturally weaker starting points. (Chubb & Moe 1990; Lauder & Hughes 1999; Whitty, Power & Halpin 1998).

The prizes of the new educational policy in the “Winner-Take-All-Society” which encourages competitiveness between individuals will most apparently accumulate more than ever to the tops. The playing of the educational game may start to remind sports and entertainment industry where the most important goal is the success of the top stars and key players. When stepping on this kind of educational field great numbers of individuals are fighting for the gleaming prizes but only few will reach them. The majority stays outside the prize placements. This results easily in enormous waste of money, resources and time while great masses of people go through longer educational tubes and harder competitions to labour markets and life in which no rainbow’s end is looming in the horizon, only risk-prone insecure labour markets and repetitive competitions. (Lauder & Hughes 1999, 24-25; cf. Frank & Cook 1995.)

Notes

APPENDIX 1

Educational policy texts: The Committee Reports (CR), legislative and administrative texts

CR 1966: A 12 The Report of the Committee of School Reform /
Koulunuudistustoimikunta

CR 1970: A 4 The Report of the Curriculum Committee of the Comprehensive School
part I: / Peruskoulun opetussuunnitelmakomitean mietintö; I: Opetussuunnitelman
perusteet

CR 1970: A 16 The Report of the Special Education Committee, part I /
Erityisopetuksen suunnittelutoimikunnan osamietintö;, osa I

CR 1973: 52 The 1971 Report of the Education Committee / Vuoden 1971
koulutuskomitean mietintö;

CR 1975: 75 The 1973 Report of the Teacher Education Committee / Vuoden 1973 opettajan koulutuskomitean välimietintö;

CR 1975: 109 The Report of the Committee of the Differentiation of Teaching in the Comprehensive School. The Reform of the Secondary Schooling 1 / Peruskoulun opetuksen eriyttämistoimikunnan mietintö;. Keskiasteen koulunuudistus 1

CR 1981: 34 The Report of the School Legislation Committee / Koululainsäädännön valmistelutyö;ryhmän mietintö;

CR 1983: 60 The Report of Committee of the Education Planning / Koulutussuunnittelun neuvottelukunnan mietintö;

CR 1983: 62 The Report of the Committee of Continuing Education / Jatkuvan koulutuksen toimikunnan mietintö;

CR 1985: 41. The Report of the Committee of Evaluation of Education Planning / Suunnittelujärjestelmien arviointityö;ryhmän mietintö;

CR 1986: 12 The Report of the Committee of Desentralisation/Hallinnon hajauttaminen

CR 1989a: 26 The Report of the Committee for Development of Teacher Education Opettajankoulutuksen kehittämistoimikunnan mietintö;. Kehittyvä opettajankoulutus.

CR 1989b The Report of the Committee of Development of Education, part I and II / Koulutuksen kehittämissuunnitelmatyö;ryhmän muistio, osa I ja II

Ministry of Education 1991. Development Plan for Education and University Research for 1991-1996 / Koulutuksen ja korkeakouluissa harjoitettavan tutkimuksen kehittämissuunnitelma vuosille 1991-1996

Curriculum 1994. The Framework Curriculum for the Comprehensive School 1994. The National Board of Education / Peruskoulun opetussuunnitelman perusteet. Opetushallitus

Ministry of Education 1996. Education & Research 2000 : Development Plan for Education and University Research for 1995-2000 / Koulutus ja tutkimus: Koulutuksen ja korkeakouluissa harjoitettavan tutkimuksen kehittämissuunnitelma vuosille 1995-2000

CR 1996: 4 Committee Report of the Reform of Education Legislation / Koulutuksen lainsäädännön kokonaisuudistus

Education Legislation 1999 / Lakikokoelma 1999: Koulusäädökset. Edita.

APPENDIX 2

Informants and politicians of education in Finland

In the central level (7 interviews)

ME 1= The Head and Chief Secretary of Ministry of Education (1995 - still)
(representing conservative, The National Coalition Party)

ME 2= The Head of School Department in Ministry of Education
(representing The Left Wing Alliance)

NBE 1= The Head of National Board of Education (1995 - still) (representing agrarian, The Centre Party)

NBE 2= The Head of the General Education Division Of National Board of Education

Ex-NBE= The former Head of National Board of Education (1973-1991)
(representing The Social Democratic Party)

MP= Key-actor of education politics in Social Democratic Party, Member of the Parliament, Vice Chairman of the Parliament Board for Education and Culture

STAKES= Director General of National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES)

In the local level (6 interviews)

RLA= Representative of local authorities, i.e. The Head of the educational office of Finnish Local and Regional authorities

City 1= The Head of the Helsinki City Education Department

City 2= The Head of the Hämeenlinna City Education Department

City 3= The Head of the Vantaa City Education Department

City 4= The Head of the Eastern Finnish City Education Department

CH= Chairman of the Association of the Finnish Headmasters for 20 years,

Chairman of the Managing Board of National Board of Education, a headmaster of one of the strongest private gymnasiums in Helsinki.

Representatives of Finnish labour markets (3 interviews)

OAJ= The Head of the Trade Union of Teachers in Finland (OAJ)

and Vice Chairman of the Confederation of Unions for Academic Professionals in Finland

SAK= Secretary of Educational Policy in the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK)

TT= The Head of the Education Department in the Confederation of Finnish Industries and Employers (TT)

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