

Bloomsbury Education and Childhood Studies Article Template

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Country	Finland
Author 1	Jaakko Kauko
Author 1 affiliation	Jaakko Kauko is a professor at Tampere University, Finland
Author 2	Antti Saari
Author 2 affiliation	Antti Saari is a university researcher at Tampere University, Finland
Author 3	Tuomas Tervasmäki
Author 3 affiliation	Tuomas Tervasmäki is a doctoral researcher at Tampere University, Finland
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Glossary terms

Municipalities: Finnish municipalities have constitutional self-governance and the right to collect taxes. Each municipality is responsible for the provision of basic public services, including primary and secondary education. Democratically elected municipal councils and municipal government lead this provision. At the beginning of 2019 there were 311 municipalities in mainland Finland and the autonomous region of Åland, of which 107 were cities. They range between 91 (Sottunga) and 648,042 (Helsinki) residents, and more than half have less than 6,000 (Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities 2019).

Regional State Administrative Agencies: Finland has six Regional State Administrative Agencies and a State Agency in Åland. The Regional State Administrative Agencies have a supervisory task in relation to education. Concretely, they evaluate how basic rights are protected in their region. They also deal with complaints concerning breaches of basic rights in education provision.

Lower secondary school: The Finnish comprehensive school comprises nine grades. The lower secondary school (Finnish: *yläkoulu*) constitutes grades 7-9. As such, it is part of compulsory schooling, which begins in the year the pupil turns six and ends when the pupil turns seventeen. 99.7% of Finnish children acquire the lower secondary school diploma.

General upper secondary school: (Finnish: *lukio*) This is a post-compulsory general education institution, lasting from two to four years. There is an upper secondary matriculation examination for higher education.

Vocational school: The vocational school (Finnish: *ammattikoulu*) is part of upper secondary post-compulsory education. It offers occupational training and qualifications, i.e. vocational education and training (VET). A vocational school certificate confers eligibility for higher education.

School choice: In Finland, the parents have a possibility to apply their children to be located in a different school than their nearby school. The ground for such change is 'emphasised class', where some schools offer classes emphasizing different subjects, such as music, with a selection based on aptitude tests. Municipalities differ in how this option is available and promoted.

Text of the article

Research on government, policy, and the role of the state

There was a general shift in education policy and governance in the 1990s as part of global trends to which Finland had become more receptive (e.g. Lampinen 2003; Ahonen 2003; Varjo 2007). An important factor was the decentralization and deregulation of governance, which gave municipalities more autonomy in education. The historical shift in the 1990s change manifested differently depending on the type of secondary education: the three final years of the nine-year comprehensive school (lower secondary); the three years in general upper secondary; or vocational school.

At lower secondary level, and in education generally, the fundamental change was a new layer of market-liberalist equity thinking over the social democratic agrarian tradition of equality. Whereas equality emphasizes the similarity of pupils or students and the right to receive an education, equity emphasizes "difference among pupils and everybody's right to receive schooling that fits his or her capacities, needs and individuality" (Simola et al. 2017: 33). Finland still presents a rare example of a more dominant equality policy (Simola et al. 2013).

Lower secondary school choice policies have been extensively studied in recent years. Within the national framework it has become clear that municipalities vary in these policies. The evidence suggests that these choices reflect social background more than aptitude, and that in some bigger cities choice is very popular (Seppänen et al. 2015; Kosunen 2016; Varjo et al. 2015). However, faith in the comprehensive school policy and system remains strong among parents (Seppänen et al. 2015).

Recent studies on lower and upper secondary schools have challenged the image of the Finnish school system as supporting social equality. For example, a recent study (Kupiainen & Hotulainen 2019) analyzes the differences in skills and learning outcomes between grade 9 lower secondary students in normal classes and students choosing a class specializing in certain subjects. The results indicate that the best results are found in classes with a special emphasis (e.g. music or science). Reforms of the upper secondary school since the 1980s have increased student choice by removing classes and enabling more freedom in subject choices and, more recently, by increasing choice in the subjects and timing of the matriculation examination. This has changed school culture and students' valuing of school subjects. It has also made possible the comparability of matriculation results (Kupiainen et al. 2018).

Vocational education was reformed in 2017. Its funding was simultaneously cut. No research on the reform is available yet. Previous research on the VET system has indicated that the implemented competence model focuses too much on a narrow set of abilities such as task-specific skills and neglects general academic knowledge (Pehkonen 2013; Isopahkala-Bouret 2013).

There is considerable research analyzing the power relations and hierarchies within secondary schools from different perspectives: the construction of otherness in special education needs (Mietola 2014); underlying expectations of social class in vocational education (Käyhkö 2007); racism in schools (Souto 2011); colonialism in textbooks (Mikander 2015); gendered interpretations of PISA results (Lahelma 2009) or in vocational teachers reflections (Lahelma et al. 2014); and how such hierarchies can be avoided and dismantled (Hannus 2018).

Policies

The government program, setting the central goals of each government, agreed when coalition governments are negotiated, became an important steering tool in the 1990s (Tiili 2008) and is now also the main instrument in steering education policy (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012). The National Core Curriculum is the main content-steering policy instrument. The planning of the National Core Curriculum is delegated to the National Agency of Education. Education providers and schools develop their own curricula.

The Basic Education Act (Perusopetuslaki 628/1998) regulates all basic education under which the lower secondary school is considered. It regulates who are the providers of education (municipality, state, and government allowing private providers based on ideology or pedagogy). The law stipulates frames for teaching (subjects, evaluation, number of hours), compulsory nature of education, rights of pupils, and other specific issues.

The separate acts on vocational education in secondary and adult education were combined in 2017 under a single corpus (*Laki ammatillisesta koulutuksesta* 531/2017). At the same time there was a shift to a competence-based education model and to more workplace learning. This has culminated in a trend in workplace relevance and a competence model since the early 2000s (Isopahkala-Bouret 2013). Task-specific skills, individual learning paths, and on-the-job learning are emphasized. Vocational education is thus thought to respond to the changing needs of labor markets, individuals, and society generally (Prime Minister's Office 2018, 19, 22; Ministry of Education and Culture 2019). The reform has prompted discussion about the quality of vocational education, not least because it included cuts of €190 million in the VET budget. Some are concerned that ongoing reform reinforces the vocational-academic divide, endangering education equality and the possibility for individuals to continue to further education from secondary education (Nylund et. al 2018; Räisänen & Goman 2018, 92; Tervasmäki, Okkolin & Kauppinen 2018).

The law on general upper secondary education (*Lukiolaki* 718/2018) was revised in 2018. It seeks to meet students' individual needs, create broader study units, and increase cooperation with higher education. It also enables unlimited attempts in different subjects of the matriculation examination. It sustains the reforms from 1995, where students are offered a course catalogue based on which they organize their own schedules and gain a degree after between two and four years. Study and general upper secondary diplomas can be combined with those of vocational schools (Varjo 2007).

In the general upper secondary school reform the matriculation examination received more emphasis in entrance examinations for higher education, and from 2020 it should be the main assessment tool for entry into higher education. The reform values mathematics and natural science grades more highly than those from the humanities. This raises concerns that it will steer students'

subject choices towards specialization at the beginning of upper secondary school, with an associated decline in general knowledge levels (Tervasmäki & Tomperi 2018 169–171).

Governance

Nationally, the parliament, government, and Ministry of Education and Culture are responsible for legislation and the general planning of education. Regional State Administrative Agencies have supervisory roles in relation to education. Local governance is run by 313 municipalities, which are responsible for the provision of basic services in their area, including lower secondary schools. Upper secondary schools and organizers of vocational education are sanctioned by an authorization given by the Ministry of Education and Culture. A license to organize general or vocational upper secondary education can be issued to a municipality, joint municipal authority, registered association, or private foundation.

Like primary schools, lower secondary tuition is free, as are school meals and materials. Tuition and meals in all Finnish upper secondary schools are also free. However, students must pay for books and other study materials. In addition, publicly owned institutions constitute the majority of general upper secondary schools, whereas private schools are more common in vocational education and training (Vipunen 2019). The latter are state-funded and non-profit.

Links with other organizations

The Trade Union of Teachers is generally considered one of the strongest unions, with an organization rate of around 90% (OAJ 2018). Subject teachers in secondary schools also have their own unions. Vocational and general upper secondary students have their own national organizations which seek to serve students' interests. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (2018) conducts sample-based evaluations of learning outcomes, and thematic and system evaluation. These evaluations are used for development rather than ranking and competition (see Simola et al. 2017). The VATT Institute for Economic Research also conducts studies on e.g. the effectiveness of state investments in schooling.

For now, there has been little research on the role of private business – for example, in digital learning start-ups (Seppänen 2018) and upper secondary students' preparation courses for entrance exams (Kosunen, Haltia & Jokila 2015). The current Minister of Education has called for technology companies to cooperate in developing the learning environments and data infrastructures of Finnish primary and secondary schools (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015).

Autonomy

Compared with many other countries, Finnish teachers are held in high esteem as autonomous, scientifically trained professionals (Saari, Salmela & Vilkkilä 2014; Sahlberg, 2014). Teachers' work is not greatly regulated: There are no nationally standardized tests in comprehensive education and there is no inspection (Simola et al. 2017; Sääntti et al. 2017; Varjo et al. 2017). In upper secondary schools matriculation examinations are planned, administered, and evaluated by the government's Matriculation Examination Board (*Ylioppilastutkintolautakunta*).

Lower and upper secondary schools can plan their own curricula (in alignment with the national core curriculum), and teachers are encouraged to participate in planning the curriculum and choosing course materials and methods (Erss et al. 2016).

Globalization

Finland has been eager to listen to and implement the OECD's education policy recommendations (Rinne, Kallo & Hokka 2004). The EU's recommendations concerning the support of cross-border mobility and increasing the transparency and comparativeness of different qualification systems shape Finnish vocational education and training (Räsänen & Goman 2018, 11). The European qualifications framework and key EU competencies are generally adopted in the national system (CEDEFOP 2018, 19-20). International testing, such as PISA, PIAAC, and TIMSS, is in use, and there are some quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) instruments. Antipathy, however, is expressed toward national testing and ranking lists. Testing results and QAE methods are therefore used for developmental purposes instead of administrative control (Simola et. al. 2017; Varjo, Simola & Rinne 2013).

Further reading and online resources

- Finnish National Agency for Education: Basic Education. https://www.oph.fi/english/education_system/basic_education
- Finnish National Agency for Education: Upper secondary education and training. https://www.oph.fi/english/education_system/upper_secondary_education_and_training
- Finnish National Agency for Education: Finnish Education in a Nutshell. https://www.oph.fi/download/146428_Finnish_Education_in_a_Nutshell.pdf
- Ministry of Education and Culture: General education. <https://minedu.fi/en/general-education>
- Ministry of Education and Culture: Vocational education and training in Finland. <https://minedu.fi/en/vocational-education-and-training>

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