

## Bloomsbury Education and Childhood Studies Article Template

<b>Section</b>	Primary education
<b>Article topic</b>	Government, policy, and the role of the state
<b>Country</b>	Finland
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### Keywords

- Finland, comprehensive school, government, policy, legislation, municipalities

### Glossary terms

**Municipalities:** Finnish municipalities have strong self-governance and the right to collect taxes, ensured by the constitution. Each municipality is responsible for the provision of basic public services, including primary and secondary education. This provision is led by the democratically elected municipal councils and municipal government. At the beginning of 2018, in mainland Finland and the autonomous region of Åland, there were 311 municipalities, of which 107 were cities. Their size varies between 92 (Sottunga) and 643,272 (Helsinki) residents, and more than half have less than 6,000 (Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities 2018).

**Regional State Administrative Agencies:** In 2018, Finland had six Regional State Administrative Agencies and a State Agency in the autonomous Åland region. The Regional State Administrative Agencies have a supervisory task in relation to education. In concrete terms, the agencies evaluate how basic rights are protected in their region. They also deal with complaints of alleged breaches of basic rights in the provision of education. As part of an ongoing (December 2018) and multifaceted social services and healthcare legislative process, it is planned to merge the Agencies, according to Government Bill 15/2017.

### Text of the article

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

There is general agreement concerning the importance of the changes in Finnish education policy and governance in the 1990s as part of global trends (e.g. Lampinen 2003; Ahonen 2003). At the most abstract level of the main policy debate, the fundamental change is between the social-democratic agrarian tradition of equality and the new market-liberalist version of equity. 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) The same debate is relevant globally, but Finland presents a rare example of a more dominant equality policy (Simola et al. 2013).

The radical change during the 1990s took the form of governance decentralization and deregulation (Simola et al. 2013), and the reformulation of the Basic Education Act during the 1990s (Varjo 2007).

The deregulatory change increased the autonomy of municipalities and intensified their role as the main providers of comprehensive education (*Laki peruskoululain muuttamisesta* 707/1992; *Kuntalaki* 365/1995). School inspections were gradually abolished (Varjo, Rinne, and Simola 2016) and financial control was delegated to the local level. However, the state remained in control of the total amount of lump-sum funding, which constitutes an important part of the municipal economy. School districts were abolished and the legislative restrictions for school choice were liberated, but in 1998 were tightened with a requirement to allocate pupils to a nearby school, travel to which was safe (Seppänen 2006: 66–71; Ahonen 2003: 180–192). Establishing new private schools became possible in 1991 on pedagogical grounds, and it was further eased on various ideological grounds (education philosophy, religion, or pedagogical method) (*Laki peruskoululain muuttamisesta* 169/1991; *Perusopetuslaki* 628/1998). All private providers require permission from the government, which has kept their total number marginal.

The inequalities stemming from implicit discourses or explicit policies are of research interest in the context of primary education: Examples include research on gender (Lahelma 2009), ethnic origin and religion (Riitaoja and Dervin 2014), special education (Pesonen et al. 2015), and sexuality (Lehtonen 2018). There is also a wide range of studies focusing on various current and long-term education policies such as digitalization (Saari and Sääntti 2018) and the OECD's influence on education policy (Naumanen and Rinne 2008; Uljens and Rajakaltio 2017). A topical debate in research is the segregation of the comprehensive school due to school choice based on classes with a special emphasis (e.g. music-intensive classes), which also serves as a means to conduct school choice based on other grounds, reflecting social background (Seppänen et al. 2015; Kosunen 2016; Varjo et al. 2015). This phenomenon is more common in post-primary education, starting at lower secondary level (see Kosunen, Bernelius, and Seppänen 2016).

## **Policies**

The constitution guarantees free basic education for all and an equal place for Finnish and Swedish in the public service, including education. After the discursive and political changes in the 1990s described above, the Basic Education Act was revised. This version is still in effect, albeit with many amendments over the years. The Basic Education Act (628/1998) sets out the goal to “support pupils’ growth into humanity and into ethically responsible membership of society and to provide them with knowledge and skills needed in life.” Sections regulate issues such as the obligation of the municipalities to provide basic education, the limits within which private education provision is possible, different aspects of education (e.g. duration, language, rights questions in religious education, the curriculum process, requirements for special educational needs support), the requirement of education providers to evaluate their education and to submit to external evaluation, the working times and duration of the school year, and pupils’ rights and duties. A government decree sets the frames of teaching hours for different subjects and the general aims of education (*Valtioneuvoston asetus perusopetuslaissa tarkoitettun opetuksen valtakunnallisista tavoitteista ja perusopetuksen tuntijaosta* 422/2012; 1435/2001), and Ministry decrees regulate more specific issues on teaching and working hours (e.g. how much teaching there is per year), pupil evaluation (e.g. grading scales) (*Perusopetusasetus* 852/1998), and the formal qualifications for teaching personnel (*Asetus opetustoimen henkilöstön kelpoisuusvaatimuksista* 1998/986). The principles for calculating the state share in basic education are based on population and local conditions, and articulated in law and statute (*Laki opetus- ja kulttuuritoimen rahoituksesta* 2009/1705; *Valtioneuvoston asetus opetus- ja kulttuuritoimen rahoituksesta* 1766/2009).

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. The curriculum obligates the providers to include their central aims as part of the education they provide. However, the providers of education and schools develop their own curricula.

The government program has become an increasingly important steering document since the 1990s (Tiili 2008). It is becoming the main instrument in steering education policy: The parallel plans for education are no longer drafted – the last was for the period 2012–2016 (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012). In addition to overall planning, the government program may also initiate special projects to address some specific issues in education (e.g. “Key projects” in the Strategic Programme (2015) of PM Juha Sipilä’s government).

### **Governance**

The governance of Finnish primary education as part of the comprehensive schools is three-tiered. At the national level, the parliament, the government, and the Ministry of Education and Culture are responsible for legislation and general planning. In legislative changes at the national level, a consultation process involving relevant stakeholders is standard practice. Legal and financial decisions are the main instruments for steering education provision at municipal level.

The Regional State Administrative Agencies have supervisory tasks in relation to education and in monitoring how basic rights are realized in their region. Their main function is thus as an instance for appeal in these questions. Currently, a Government Bill (15/2017), as part of a large and ongoing health and social services reform, proposes to merge the Regional State Administrative Agencies, with the transfer of municipalities’ responsibilities for health and social services to them. The result will be an emphasis on the role of education governance at the municipal level, and thus its emergence as a question in municipal elections.

Local-level governance is run by the 313 municipalities, which are responsible for the provision of basic services in their area, including education. Democratically elected municipal councils mandate municipal governments, which can assign an education board to lead local education provision. The local organization of governance varies depending on the size of the municipality. Largest cities, for example, have municipal agencies to govern education. The municipalities are responsible for the quality and quality monitoring of education, the drafting of a local curriculum based on the national core curriculum, and the allocation of funding from state and municipal sources.

Private education providers (registered associations or foundations) have the same governance responsibilities as other providers. They have no right to collect tuition fees, and all education and related services (such as school meals and books) must be free.

### **Links with other organizations**

In general discourse, the Trade Union of Teachers is considered one of the strongest unions. According to the union, the teachers’ organization rate is around 90% (OAJ 2018); the general organization rate in Finland is 73% (Findikaattori 2018).

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).

For the moment, there is little research on the role of private business in primary education and no published results. However, the question is timely – for example, in digital learning start-ups (Seppänen 2018).

### **Autonomy**

Comprehensive schools enjoy a large degree of autonomy. The national core curriculum is a framework, specified first in the **municipality** and then at the school level. The teacher makes the final interpretation. Teachers' work is not greatly regulated: There are no nationally standardized tests in comprehensive education and there is no inspection. Schools decide on learning materials (Simola et al. 2017; Säntti et al. 2017; Varjo et al. 2017).

### **Globalization**

In general terms, Finland has 'buffered' the international trends which strive for individual rights rather than collective equality (Simola et al. 2017); Finland has been described as a counter-example of what Sahlberg has called the Global Education Reform Movement promoting high-stakes testing, competition, control, and standards in education (Sahlberg 2011; Simola et al. 2013).

The effect of success in the PISA tests on the development of the comprehensive school is disputed. Contrary to Sahlberg's (2011) argument, Seppänen et al. (in print) suggest that comprehensive education policy during the new millennium has been noticeably active.

### **Further reading and online resources**

- Translation of the Basic Education Act:  
<https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/1998/en19980628>
- Finnish National Agency for Education page "Education policy":  
[https://www.oph.fi/english/education\\_system\\_education\\_policy](https://www.oph.fi/english/education_system_education_policy)
- Statistics Finland education statistics: [http://www.stat.fi/til/aiheet\\_en.html#kou](http://www.stat.fi/til/aiheet_en.html#kou)
- The National Core Curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education):  
[https://www.oph.fi/english/curricula\\_and\\_qualifications/basic\\_education](https://www.oph.fi/english/curricula_and_qualifications/basic_education)
- Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (2018). Pre-primary and basic education:  
<https://karvi.fi/en/pre-primary-and-basic-education/>

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