

# The Finnish Comprehensive School

## Conflicts, Compromises, and Institutional Robustness

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### Introduction

The aforementioned evaluations of industrial and societal development and their requirements for the school show that all young people, independently of the focus or level of their talents and other personality traits, must be educated as efficiently as possible to exploit the current and future potential for mental and material growth.

—Hallituksen esitys 44/1967, 5 [Government Bill  
on Comprehensive Education]

The comprehensive school system in Finland (*peruskoulu*) is widely recognized as a case of policy success. A comprehensive school is a nine-year school for all children, divided into six lower classes (ages 7–13) and three upper classes (ages 13–16). In the lower classes the children generally stay with the same teacher most of the time; in the upper classes they have subject-specific teachers. The great majority of schools are run locally. Primary responsibility for providing education lies with each of the more than 300 Finnish municipalities, which have considerable autonomy. There are also a few independent education providers, and even fewer state-provided (usually special education) comprehensives. The municipal autonomy ensured by the constitution and the decentralized education system mean that the state has little statutory power over schooling. The national core curriculum frames teaching, but there are no mandatory standardized tests for entire age cohorts or inspections to enforce curriculum implementation, and the municipalities and teachers have degrees of independence in interpreting the curriculum. Municipalities are responsible for monitoring the quality of the education they provide, while the state only provides non-binding guidelines. The strongest steering mechanism for the state's support of municipally provided education is financial. This is largely limited to the non-earmarked lump sum distributed to municipalities, as well as some project-based additional funding. The comprehensive school and its institutional set-up differs from education systems in many parts of the world, including in some Nordic counterparts (Dovemark et al. 2018). An interesting and Jaakko Kauko, *The Finnish Comprehensive School: Conflicts, Compromises, and Institutional Robustness*. In: *Great Policy Successes: Or, A Tale About Why It's Amazing That Governments Get So Little Credit for Their Many Everyday and Extraordinary Achievements as Told by Sympathetic Observers Who Seek to Create Space for a Less Relentlessly Negative View of Our Pivotal Public Institutions*. Edited by Mallory E. Compton and Paul 'T Hart, Oxford University Press (2019). © Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198843719.003.0007

important question, then, is to what extent the public policies establishing and supporting these education institutions can be seen as a success.

The quote introducing this chapter described the main ideological motive behind comprehensive school reform: an alliance between industrial development and harnessing all potential with the promotion of equal education opportunities. The political process leading to the complete reorganization of the formerly bipartite school system and the establishment of the comprehensive school and its implementation took more than three decades—and even longer if we track the origin of some of its constitutive ideas. The process was advanced by different government coalitions in an unstable parliamentary situation, included the squaring of differing political views, and led to several dead ends. Incremental advances eventually resulted in a critical juncture in which the comprehensive school was created in the late 1960s. Despite repeated criticism, its institutional frame survived and is now a recognized and almost unchallenged part of the Finnish education landscape. The aim of this chapter is to evaluate the degree and type of success observed in the case of comprehensive school policy in Finland.

### Assessing Comprehensive Education's Success

With respect to *programmatic success*, assessment of this case relates to how comprehensive education has contributed to its goal: harnessing the age cohorts' full potential. This can be reduced to two factors: economic growth aided by human resources; and the possibilities of upward social mobility education affords. In relation to the first, Kokkinen (2012) points out that Finland has been one of the few countries that have been able to catch up with its wealthier counterparts during the twentieth century, and that this growth has drawn on human (an educated workforce and technological innovation) and fixed capital. In relation to the second factor, programmatic success is seen in the achievement of upward social mobility for many. Kivinen et al. (2012) examine how the odds ratio for a child from an academic family in contrast to a non-academic family for participating in higher education has changed during the comprehensive school period and the massification of higher education. They interpret this as indicating better possibilities for non-academic families' children: for the 1946 age cohort the odds ratio was 19.1 favouring academic families' offspring; for children born in 1986 it was only 6.8. Pekkala Kerr and Rinne (2012: 322) also indicate that the education rate boosted the post-war generations. Comprehensive education policy has produced a well-educated and more prosperous Finnish population.

Evaluating the model's second dimension—the *success of the process* leading to the adoption of comprehensive education—is more complex. The policy underwent a period of long and thorough deliberation, in which a range of options were considered. Much of this work was conducted in committees. At the time

of deliberation, support for the ideas of ‘scientific’ planning meant that the committee system was especially powerful in Finland. Committees worked as a forum for the deliberation of different interests and research. However, the committee work was not straightforward: it was variously constituted and was not always unanimous. In addition to these broad-based ad hoc committees, the permanent parliamentary standing committees played an important role. A parliamentary resolution of 1963 which delegated preparatory work to standing committees was carried forward later by a government consisting of Left and Centre parties. This would be the single most important impetus. Throughout the debates, opinion divided along the Left–Right spectrum concerning private grammar schools, and this escalated during the implementation phase into what the Right termed ‘school wars’ (Okkonen 2017). The policy process could be seen as fair in the sense that the opinions of the opposition were considered and deliberated in the committee work and in parliamentary decision-making. However, disputes arose during the implementation phase concerning what had actually been agreed to in the policy.

Finally, the *political success* of the comprehensive school policy is also multifaceted. The situation was exceptional in Finland during the Cold War. The centre-right National Coalition Party was with very few exceptions consistently excluded from government, because at the time the main political parties saw their inclusion as difficult due to the sensitive foreign policy relations with the Soviet Union. Researchers largely agree that the long process leading to the birth of the comprehensive school resulted in a lasting compromise on which different parties and political interests could eventually agree (Ahonen 2012; Kettunen et al. 2012; Simola et al. 2017; see Okkonen 2017). The forging of this lasting compromise may also be due to the embedded features of the political system, which supported continuation, and the strength of the committee system in preparing decisions. Continuation was embedded in the formation of coalition governments, which nearly always entailed some parties in the previous administration continuing in the new government.

It is fair to say that as part of a universal welfare state, comprehensive schooling benefits the majority of the population and that it has been key in increasing both upward social mobility and economic growth. As Okkonen (2017) observes, the comprehensive school project was part of a larger ideological shift towards the Left that the Right considered a threat. The disappointed stakeholders, in addition to the right-wing opposition, were the private grammar school organizations, the grammar school teachers’ labour union, and conservative right-wing civic organizations. Industrial interests supported the criticism. The right-wing criticism emerged immediately after the comprehensive reform in the 1970s and resurfaced in the 1990s but was then replaced by the success-story narrative after the popularity of the international large-scale assessments (Simola et al. 2017). In the following two decades the Finnish education system has basked in international glory, being called one of the best in the world. This reputation is largely due to the successful performance of Finnish teenagers in the Programme for

International Student Achievement (PISA), run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Indeed, education performance is usually measured by results in large-scale assessments. This is not the case in the Finnish comprehensive education performance, because national assessments are sample-based, and school-specific results are not made public (see Simola et al. 2017). However, since the turn of the millennium, Finland has participated in many international assessments. Compared with OECD countries and some other regions,<sup>1</sup> Finland was first in PISA in reading (2001), mathematics (2003), and science (2006) and then dipped slightly in reading to second (2009), in science to fifth (2015), and more dramatically in mathematics to twelfth (2012) (OECD 2002, 2004, 2006, 2010, 2014, 2016). In the large-scale assessments operated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), Finland's performance has been good, but more modest when compared with PISA. Eighth graders have ranked fourteenth (1999) and eighth (2011) in mathematics and tenth in science (1999) in TIMSS. Fourth graders ranked eighth (2011) and seventeenth (2015) in mathematics and seventh (2015) in science (Mullis et al. 2000, 2012a, 2016; Martin et al. 2000, 2016).<sup>2</sup> However, Finland occupied third (2011) and fifth (2016) places (Mullis et al. 2012b, 2017) in PIRLS reading tests for fourth graders. These tests differ in that the OECD tests rely on its own definition of what constitutes necessary skills, whereas the IEA tests attempt to use the content of the national curriculum. Both tests indicate little variance between schools, which supports the notion that the education system has created equal starting points for pupils across the country. The international large-scale assessments have their deficiencies, not least in their disregard for the socio-historical context in which teaching takes place (Mulford 2002; Simola 2005), but we can certainly conclude that Finnish comprehensive school pupils consistently perform well in various international tests compared with their peers in other countries.

In sum, Finnish comprehensive school policy is a success: it has delivered programmatic goals and widely valued impacts; the basic set-up of schooling enjoys broad legitimacy among political actors and parents; and it has gained international recognition in performance. The case story affords a more complex view.

### **Setting the Scene: The Main Actors and the Political Landscape**

The early years of education in Finland can be described as a process of the secularization and institutionalization of education. Finland belonged to the Swedish Empire between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries. Education

during this period was church-led, and teachers served as lower ranking clergy. With the eighteenth century, Enlightenment humanism and philanthropy began to gain ground. Between 1809 and 1917 Finland was an archduchy of Russia. Under Russian rule the state took more control over education and contributed to both the institutionalization and secularization of education (Joutsivuo 2010). As the state needed a larger workforce during Finland's late industrialization from the latter half of the nineteenth century, responsibility for education provision was eventually transferred from the church to the state and municipalities (Leino-Kaukiainen and Heikkinen 2011). Between 1860 and 1870 the school system was reorganized into elementary schools (*kansakoulu*, literally 'folk schools'), and grammar schools (*oppikoulu*, literally 'learning schools').

In the first three decades following independence from Russia in 1917, the country faced a series of internal and international conflicts. Although it succeeded in preserving its independence in this period, it was on the losing side of the Second World War and was subjected to war reparations and land cessions to the Soviet Union. The economy was predominantly agricultural, and Finland's urbanization and industrialization was late. This was also reflected in the late decision to make education compulsory in 1921 (Laki oppivelvollisuudesta 101/1921). It was not until the 1940s that elementary schools began to reach the country's more remote areas (Simola 2002).

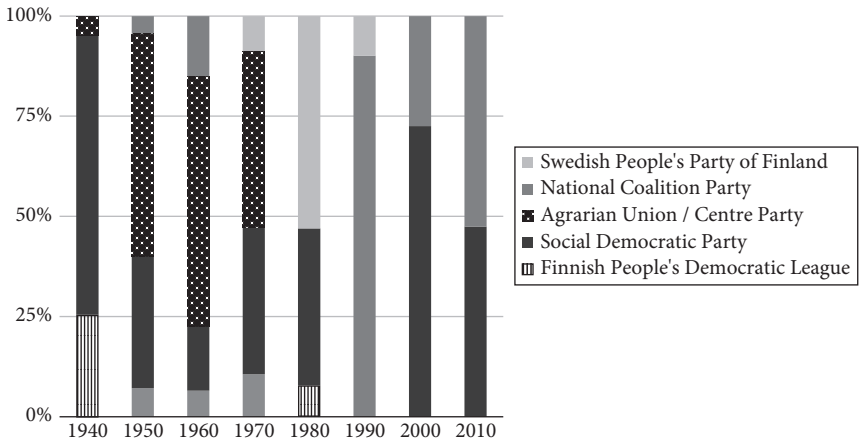
In the post-war period societal conditions were conducive to supporting change. The coming of age of the baby-boomer generation in the 1950s produced an urgent need for widespread education, and the rapid transformation into a more industrialized and service-based economy at the end of the 1960s also stimulated demand for a more educated workforce (Kettunen et al. 2012). This need is explicitly stated in the first sentences of a government bill (Hallituksen esitys 44/1967), which eventually became law on comprehensive schools in 1968, but there were many twists and turns in the political process to get to this point.

Throughout the half century of its existence the radical original reform concept of the common school has endured in the institutional structure of the comprehensive school, and it has been able to resist the most radical global trends towards a more marketized approach to schooling (Simola et al. 2017). There are various ways of periodizing the phases of the Finnish comprehensive school (e.g. Lampinen 1998: 30–79; Puhakka 2006: 9; Ahonen 2012: 153; Kettunen et al. 2012: 37–41). For the most part, the first ideas were introduced immediately after the Second World War. Political decisions were taken and further planning took place in the 1960s, and the reform was undertaken in the 1970s. An important contextual change happened during the 1980s and 1990s, generally as a result of a swing to the Right, when the degree of municipal autonomy was radically increased and there was also a gradual weakening of state control in

education. A result of the changes in the political climate was a moderate liberalization of school choice in the 1990s. These periods are roughly followed in the following the rest of this chapter.

Positions of key stakeholders varied during the critical years between the late 1950s and the late 1960s, when the comprehensive school was designed. A key feature was the changing balance of parties in parliament. Because governments in this era were weaker than they are today, parliamentary initiatives played an important role. From a constitutional perspective, parliament's instability was the result of the semi-presidential system, and the President's power was strengthened because there was only one incumbent between 1956 and 1982, Urho Kekkonen (Agrarian Union, *Maalaisliitto*). The continuity and political colour of not only the Minister of Education but also the key civil servants in directing the National Board of Education were contributing factors. Directors were the heads of the main committees that designed the principles of education and could create continuity between unstable governments. Trade unions and industry-funded interest groups were involved in the project's opinion forming and criticism.

The main drivers of change were the political parties, which could eventually compromise in piecing together differing interests. During the key years of education reform, the Finnish parliament (*Eduskunta*) was dominated by three parties: the Agrarian Union, which changed its name to the Centre Party (*Keskustapuolue*) in 1965; the Social Democratic Party (*Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue*); and the left-wing Finnish People's Democratic League (*Suomen Kansan Demokraattinen Liitto*). Most of the 200 seats in parliament were held by these parties or their predecessors or successors from independence in 1917 until 2007. Although they did not necessarily form coalitions or even share interests (not always even internally), this triad generally reflected the voters' preferences during this period. Every post-war majority or minority government (apart from those consisting entirely of civil servants) was led by one of these parties, although the Finnish People's Democratic League headed the government only once. The largest party of the Right was the National Coalition Party (*Kansallinen kokoomus*), which, having spent decades mostly in opposition, became stronger only during the 1990s. The centre-right Swedish People's Party of Finland (*Suomen Ruotsalainen Kansanpuolue*) was occasionally involved in government and held the Ministry of Education during the 1980s and 1990s. These shifts in the balance of power and their relationship with education policy are illustrated by the number of days Ministers of Education were in office. Figure 7.1 shows that the post was largely shared between the Centre and Left parties between the 1950s and 1970s, whereas since the 1980s it has been shared between the Left and Right parties, with the exception of the 1990s, when right-wing parties were dominant.



**Figure 7.1** Percentage of days in office of Ministers of Education in the post-war era (1944–2018) in Finnish governments

Source: Valtioneuvosto [Finnish Government] (2018).

### A Critical Juncture: The Creation of the Legislative Framework

The establishment of the comprehensive system was a rather long process in which committees were used extensively. These independent, broadly politically representative, and expert-based committees served as ad hoc organs in producing reports and drafting laws. Interestingly, decision-making in committees was often not unanimous, and many members wrote dissenting opinions on particular aspects of their reports. Such dissent reflected the larger political differences occurring during the decision-making process.

In 1946 the left-centre government headed by Mauno Pekkala, historically the only far-left Finnish People's Democratic League Prime Minister, assigned a committee to work on a general plan for reform of the education system and to determine the extent of compulsory education. The committee was led by the director of the National Board of Education, Yrjö Ruutu, who was then affiliated with the Finnish People's Democratic League. The Committee (1/1948) Report proposed the first comprehensive eight-year school model in Finland. However, the government soon collapsed due to internal conflicts between the Left parties before a bill was introduced. The impetus was lost: following the 1948 parliamentary elections, the proposed comprehensive system had lost sufficient support in parliament (Ahonen 2003: 127; Kettunen et al. 2012: 37).

Left parties continued to demand a comprehensive system in parliament, and the debate intensified with the establishment of a new committee by the coalition government of K.-A. Fagerholm (composed of the Social Democratic Party, Agrarian Union, and some minor parties). It was tasked to draft a reform programme for the

near future for schools (Kettunen et al. 2012: 37). The committee (1956–9) was led by Ruutu's successor, R. H. Oittinen (Social Democrat), who was to become one of the main figures in the comprehensive school project. The committee consisted of six civil servants, an academic, two politically active teachers, two members of parliament (from the Agrarian Union and the Finnish People's Democratic League), and a clerk (Ahonen 2003: 127). The Committee recognized several 'shortcomings and flaws' in the school system. It also envisioned that many contextual factors would support an exhaustive education reform, among them an increased birth rate and the need to increase the length of compulsory education to avoid youth unemployment (Committee 1959: 8–9). The report stated that the workforce needed more skills, which could be achieved through better education. In practice, this would entail a nine-year comprehensive system administered by the municipalities which should be free of direct and indirect costs to pupils (Committee 1959: 83–4, 177). The report's views were not shared by all the committee's members. In a dissenting opinion, half of the committee members disagreed with the abolition of private middle schools and expressed doubts concerning the possibility of the provision of free education. Sirkka Ahonen (2003: 130–1) argues that the strong opinions of the committee's chair, R. H. Oittinen, influenced the report's radical main message supporting a comprehensive system, despite the dissensions. He had opposed the bipartite system for a decade.

It is indicative of the instability of the period that Oittinen's committee outlived five governments, and the sixth, which received its report, resigned little more than a month later. This instability prompted parliament to act. Four MPs sponsored petitionary motions concerning comprehensive education (Eduskunta 2018). The Standing Committee for Education, led by the MP Anna-Liisa Tiekso (Finnish People's Democratic League), started to work on these petitionary motions, with the motion of the MP Olavi Lahtela (Agrarian Union) as a base text (Kettunen et al. 2012: 37). Following the Standing Committee's work and parliamentary debates, parliament approved a resolution by 122 votes to 68 on 22 November 1963, urging the government to act based on Oittinen's committee report of 1959 (Eduskunta 2018). While some elements were shared across parties, key to the resolution's approval was its support by the Agrarian Union, whose votes tipped the balance between the pro-comprehensive Left and the doubtful, grammar-school-defending Right (Eduskunta 2018). The Agrarian Union's support was motivated by urbanization and a desire to support rural areas. The National Coalition Party again calculated that it was easier to support the interests of grammar schools from within the process (Okkonen 2017: 93).

The next move was to come from a centre-right government. A coalition government led by Johannes Virolainen of the Centre Party (before 1965 the Agrarian Union), and in which the National Coalition Party held the Minister of Education's post, established a committee under Oittinen to draft the legislation for the creation of a comprehensive system. The Comprehensive School Committee



(1964–7) formulated the basis of the current system of nine-year schooling, with six lower grades (primary) and three upper (lower secondary) grades. Political representation was broader than in the previous committees (Ahonen 2003: 142). The committee's first report (Committee 1965) was used almost verbatim as the Government Bill (Hallituksen esitys 44/1967). It outlined the basic principles of the comprehensive school. These included principles of uniformity of content and teaching, compulsory nine-year schooling for all, the reforming of previous school types into one comprehensive school, allowing some optional subjects, a class teacher for the first six years and a subject teacher for the last three years, free schooling and social benefits, and the idea of non-private municipal education (Hallituksen esitys 44/1967: 6–7; Committee 1965: 11–13). There were other committees, but this committee was central in outlining the most important aspects of the comprehensive school policy framework.

The process was not without critique, however, and the parliamentary process was criticized in the debates for being opaque and confusing (Okkonen 2017: 120). Okkonen (2017: 82–4) maintains that the debate's starting point was difficult because the majority in parliament wanted municipal comprehensive schools, which were difficult to reconcile with the private (grammar) schools. This was resolved in the work of the Standing Committee, when it was agreed to utilize the private schools in the new system. However, it later became clear that the Left and Right interpreted this differently (Okkonen 2017: 93–114). The question of the private schools was to escalate during the implementation phase, but it was now settled for the legislative phase.

The Paasio (Social Democrat) government (1966–8), a coalition of the Finnish People's Democratic League, the Social Democratic Party, and the Centre Party, with Oittinen as the Minister of Education, presented the Government Bill (Hallituksen esitys 44/1967), which was overwhelmingly approved by parliament as the Act on the Foundation of the School System (Laki koulujärjestelmän perusteista 467/1968), creating the comprehensive school.

The final legislation was a compromise between competing interests, and different actors gained different things. The left-wing parties supported a state-run municipal system which could provide free education for working-class children. The centre, more specifically the Agrarian Union/Centre Party, could agree to this aim and was also able to couple the vibrancy of the different rural areas to the comprehensive system's aim of regional equality. Part of the compromise for the right-wing parties, and especially the teachers of the soon-to-be-abolished grammar schools, was a streaming system which retained some aspects of the former school structure. It divided the students into groups in mathematics and foreign languages, based on aptitude. Importantly, some groups did not entitle their members to continue into general upper secondary education, the main avenue to universities. The legitimation the comprehensive school gained during these years, despite the original right-wing doubts, is indicated by the fact

that only six MPs opposed the preceding law to abolish streaming in 1982. The system came to its end in 1984, when a new national core curriculum came into force (Ahonen 2012; Kettunen et al. 2012; Simola et al. 2015: 88; see Okkonen 2017: 122).

Labour unions also played a role in the policymaking process. Unions were divided along the old bipartite lines, where grammar school teachers and elementary school teachers had their own organizations. Both the grammar school teachers and their trade union opposed the idea of having one school for all students, because of their concern about the profession's declining status. After the comprehensive reform was complete, opposition became futile and the two trade unions sought to improve their relations and finally merged in 1974 into an entity which also included vocational teachers (Jauhiainen and Rinne 2012: 111–12).

The professional status of teachers went through an interesting interlude during the comprehensive school reform. Teachers in Finland now enjoy a high professional status, but this is because they have been successful in bolstering their position by arguing that teaching is an academic and research-based profession (Säntti and Salminen 2015; Säntti and Kauko 2019). The most radical thesis suggests that the transfer of teacher training to the universities, with the requirement of a master's degree, was a contingent historical event. Hannu Simola and Risto Rinne (2010) point out that the work of the Committee (1972) for Degrees in Philosophy and Social Sciences expanded to include all academic degrees and that this contingent event was the key element resulting in master-level teacher training. However, the committee did conclude that 'teacher education was an appropriate example of academic education as it had a concrete professional basis' (Committee 1972, quoted in Säntti and Kauko, 2019).

## **Implementation Disputes**

After the policy framework was established, some adjustments were made to the comprehensive school system in the initial phase of implementation. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, adjustments were related more to how the general frames around the comprehensive school had started to change. However, the common feature here is that all reforms since the creation of the comprehensive school have occurred either within or outside the set frame, without changing it. This means that in the last fifty years there has been no initiative to change the fundamental principles of the original policy establishing the comprehensive school system (Kauko et al. 2015; Simola et al. 2017).

The comprehensive school reform was implemented between 1972 and 1977, beginning first in the northern and north-eastern areas of Finland and continuing towards the south. The state supported municipalities in constructing new schools. While this resulted in the closure of some smaller rural schools, the

state supported regional diversity by emphasizing the importance to children of the local school (Ahonen 2012: 153).

The private school question, considered settled during the legislative process, was re-politicized in the first stages of implementation. Okkonen (2017) argues that the Right was anxious about a loss of political hegemony and reopened the question of municipal education, which had already been agreed during the legislative process. When the city of Kemi and the Ylitornio municipality decided to exclude private schools from the comprehensive system, conflict between Left and Right culminated in opposing constitutional interpretations. The Right, with the support of the organization of private grammar schools (*Yksityisoppikoulujen liitto*), claimed that comprehensive reform was an unconstitutional ruse to abolish private schools. The Chancellor of Justice agreed that unless there were grave reasons, private schools should not be integrated into the municipal systems (Okkonen 2017: 172–3). This dispute resulted in a legislative amendment in 1974, which clearly left it to the municipalities to decide whether to accept private schools into the comprehensive school systems (Ahonen 2012: 153). This resulted in the end of private schools in the traditional sense, and they were largely incorporated into the comprehensive system.

There was thus a growing concern on the Right about leftist tendencies and personnel in the Ministry of Education, the National Board of Education, and the universities. The Free Education Support Foundation (*Vapaan koulutuksen tukisäätiö*) was established in 1973 to oppose the Left's policies, combining political, cultural, and economic powers sympathetic to the cause. The Foundation functioned especially as a channel for industrial interests (Suutarinen 2008; Okkonen 2017: 176). The Right's criticism was fuelled by a heated discussion before the 1975 elections about the state-funded municipal curriculum experiment in Pirkkala (Okkonen 2017). The experiment produced teaching material with a Soviet bias which had not passed national textbook reviews. This created fear of a left-wing conspiracy on the Right (Leskinen 2016; see Seuri 2016), and it circled the wagons (Okkonen 2017: 280). Comprehensive schools only felt the effects of this rightwards push in the following decades, when the political situation changed, and the National Coalition Party found its way into government: key civil servants were now influenced by New Public Management ideas.

### **Deregulating Equality: The Discourse and Policy Change of the 1990s**

The political landscape started to change during the 1980s and 1990s. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the strengthening of parliament during the presidency of Mauno Koivisto (1982–94, Social Democratic Party) created a new stability in the government's work and opened more possibilities for right-wing parties. Criticism

of right-leaning interest groups intensified during the 1980s. The education committee of the Confederation of Finnish Industries published a series of pamphlets supporting science and mathematics education, freedom of choice in subjects, and entrepreneurialism (Varjo 2007: 93–4). These were echoed in a speech by Prime Minister Harri Holkeri (National Coalition Party) in 1987, in which he promoted the right of every child to receive an education that supported their talents in favour of one system designed for everyone. This represented an historic shift in discourse after the creation of the comprehensive system (Simola et al. 2010). The Holkeri government programme outlined the broad legislative reform, but its implementation only started under the government which followed, when the Ministry of Education started a working group, led by Permanent Secretary Jaakko Numminen who later described the work at this stage as technical, to evaluate the legal corpus and offer suggestions for its simplification (Varjo 2007: 121). A committee led by Permanent Secretary Vilho Hirvi (National Coalition Party) continued the work. It prepared more detailed suggestions for legislative change (Varjo 2007: 127–32). The working groups and committees set deregulatory and more individually oriented policies that changed some of the features of the comprehensive school. These changes were connected with increased municipal autonomy, the role of private schools, and the question of school choice.

A radical change came with the decentralization and deregulation of governance during the 1990s, influenced by New Public Management trends. These ideas also enabled the transfer of unpopular budgetary cuts to the local level in a period of economic crisis. Reforming the organizational structure and funding had the effect of significantly increasing the autonomy of municipalities as the main providers of comprehensive education (Laki peruskoululain muuttamisesta 707/1992; Kuntalaki 365/1995). The state lost many means of exerting control at local level: school inspections, for example, were gradually abolished during the 1980s and 1990s (Varjo et al. 2016); and financial control was lost as decisions were delegated locally. Municipalities gained more power piecemeal in freeing school choice locally (Seppänen 2006: 71). As a result, school districts were abolished, making choice possible, and the only legislative restriction was that families would have to contribute to travel costs for distances of more than five kilometres (Ahonen 2003: 180; Seppänen 2006: 66). In 1991 it became possible to establish new private schools with the permission of the government. Such schools could opt out of the curriculum if their teaching was based on an ‘internationally known pedagogical system’ (Laki peruskoululain muuttamisesta 169/1991).

The changes in relation to school choice and private schools were readjusted in the 1998 Basic Education Act (Perusopetuslaki 628/1998). The Government Bill (Hallituksen esitys 88/1997) proposed by the Paavo Lipponen (Social Democratic Party) Left–Right coalition government followed the working groups’ deregulatory ethos. However, drawing on expert hearings and parliamentary debates,

the Standing Committee on Education amended the proposal. Municipalities were now required to allocate pupils a place in a ‘nearby school’ with a safe journey, and there was a requirement for regional equality (Ahonen 2003: 191–2; Seppänen 2006: 71). The 1998 Act also made the establishment of new private schools easier on various ideological grounds (education philosophy, religion, or pedagogical method), but retained the requirement for special permission from the government.

Criticism from the Finnish Confederation of Industries continued at the beginning of the new millennium. At its peak, it highlighted the purported ineffectiveness and mediocrity of the comprehensive school, which were the subjects of a large conference. In December 2001, shortly after the conference, the first PISA results came in, and the criticism lost its force (Simola et al. 2017). Apart from curriculum development the major legislative reform of the 1990s and the PISA results gave no reason for further large-scale comprehensive school reform. Nevertheless, contrary to Pasi Sahlberg’s (2011) argument, Piia Seppänen et al. (2019) point out that comprehensive education policy during the new millennium has been quite active. Government programmes have discussed varying topics such as funding, regional equality, class size, special education, and the declining results and gaps between pupil groups. Attempts to capitalize internationally on the Finnish reputation with the help of education markets and exports has been a recent development—and possibly the most marked because of PISA (Schatz et al. 2015; Seppänen et al. 2019).

Within the national framework it has become clear that municipalities vary in their policies regarding school choice. Evidence suggests that these choices reflect more social background than aptitude, and that in some bigger cities choice is very popular (Seppänen et al. 2015; Varjo et al. 2015; Kosunen 2016) and yet faith in the comprehensive school policy and system is still strong among parents (Seppänen et al. 2015). The Swedish example of boosting inequality through the radical liberalization of school markets (e.g. Dovemark et al. 2018) has raised concerns in the Nordic research community that such reforms should be avoided in Finland and other countries (NordForsk 2018). Though challenges have arisen throughout the history of the policy, the Finnish comprehensive school system has demonstrated success (to varying degrees) in terms of programme goals, process legitimacy, and political support.

### **Summarizing Success in the Finnish Comprehensive School System**

The central programmatic goal of the comprehensive school policy—to enhance equality—has endured over time. In addition to equality, education policy has also been linked to economic prosperity. The balance between these two goals, and the

understanding of equality, has determined the structure of the comprehensive school system. At its most abstract, the main policy debate about education in Finland is on the relative emphases on education equality and education equity. The former is linked to the social democratic agrarian tradition of equality; the latter to the new market-liberalist version of equity that was boosted in the late 1980s. 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). This great debate is echoed in the various discussions of the regional balance of higher education (Kauko 2013), the discussion of school choice (Seppänen 2006), or the role of New Public Management in education (Uljens et al. 2016). The same debate is globally relevant, but in many respects—concerning quality assurance and evaluation policies, for example—Finland presents a rare case of a policy with a more dominant emphasis on equality (Simola et al. 2013). In this debate comprehensive schools have been the foundation of equality. The Finnish policy of providing comprehensive school education has successfully delivered universal welfare, drawing on producing beneficial social outcomes with the help of raising the population’s level of education.

The process of policymaking and negotiation resulted in a grand compromise between the different parties and stakeholders. Despite the various criticisms of right-leaning interest groups, the compromise has held. It is now difficult to imagine a scenario in which the comprehensive school framework is loosened and another form of school introduced (as has happened in Sweden, for example). However, changes within the comprehensive school may prove decisive in the longer term. Historically, the comprehensive school has been a success in process terms: different voices were included and a solution was found in the decades of reform, and we can conclude from the prevailing silence that the outcome is viewed by most to be just and fair. Future threats to the main goals of sustaining equality and economic growth are related to the potential of the middle-class distinction, the continuing discussion in the wake of declining PISA results, and the demands of austerity politics.

Returning to the issues raised in this chapter’s introduction, it is clear that the Finnish comprehensive school has enjoyed political success, and it still enjoys a halo effect. Political and professional actors associated with the policy may take their share of the international glory awarded to Finnish education (see Rautalin 2013). Within Finland, stakeholders in the programme also enjoy political benefits. Education researchers would agree, for example, that the Finnish Trade Union of Education enjoys a strong position as part of the policymaking establishment and the trade union landscape. Among politicians there are very few who identify themselves as education policy experts (e.g. Kauko 2011). This could be interpreted as a feature of a state-centred and bureaucratically led system. It is

nevertheless clear that the comprehensive school has enjoyed the support of all the main political parties for decades.

Learning from the Finnish example is challenging because the education system is deeply rooted in socio-historical context (Salokangas and Kauko 2015), which may not be easily transferred or emulated. Despite this, efforts have been made to explain and learn from the success of Finnish comprehensive education. Many such efforts do not precisely operationalize what they mean when they speak of success, which risks projecting onto the Finnish case whatever is expected to be the key to success. In short, determining whether the purported success of Finnish education can be exported is complex. Simola et al. (2017: 123) list ‘explanations of the Finnish success and decline in basic-schooling politics’, which all derive from root causes such as war experience, late industrialization, contingent events such as municipal autonomy, or the varying pedagogical traditions that have evolved since the 1960s, to name but a few.

The Finnish comprehensive school policy is a story of political conflicts resulting in compromises and a robust institutional set-up. A workable hypothesis is that the Finnish comprehensive school is a modern institution attempting to survive late modern pressures. The political system of the 1960s and 1970s, along with the growing economy of the Golden Years (Hobsbawm 1994), was able to institutionalize an enduring political compromise that relied on a radical idea of equality independent of the child’s background. The political system generally supported continuation rather than radical change, and at some potentially critical junctures contingent events, such as municipal decentralization (1990s) and PISA results (early 2000s), supported the continuation of the institution. The former was important in locking in autonomy of the municipal system and the latter in resisting criticism that could have led to political changes (see Simola et al. 2017). Finally, a major factor contributing to success has also been the diversity of political representation in parliament, which is of course a representation of the will of the people.<sup>3</sup>

### **Additional version of this case**

The case study outlined in this chapter is accompanied by a corresponding case study from the Centre for Public Impact’s (CPI) Public Impact Observatory—an international repository of public policies assessed for their impact using CPI’s Public Impact Fundamentals framework. CPI’s framework provides a way for those who work in or with government to assess public policies, to understand why they were successful, so key lessons can be drawn out for future policy work. The case can be easily located in the CPI repository at [www.centreforpublicimpact.org/observatory](http://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/observatory).

## Notes

1. The number of countries and ‘economies’, smaller regions such as Hong Kong and Taipei, has grown from forty-three to sixty-five, having peaked at seventy-five (OECD 2016: 27).
2. The number of participating countries has varied between twenty-nine and fifty-eight, US states from zero to thirteen, ‘benchmarking participants’, meaning smaller regions, between two and six, and there have also been between zero and three off-grade participants (National Center for Education Statistics 2018).
3. I would like to thank Mira Kalalahti and Janne Varjo from the University of Helsinki for their valuable comments on a previous version of this chapter. The remaining errors are mine alone.

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