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The paradox of the education race: how to win the ranking game by sailing to headwind

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In this article, we experiment with the idea of combining path dependency, convergence and contingency in explaining Finnish distinctiveness in education policy and politics since the early 1990s. The focus of this paper is on quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) in comprehensive schooling. We elaborate on and contextualise the Finnish QAE model by analysing the particular and somewhat ambiguous ways in which global QAE practices have – or have not – been received and mediated in Finland.

Keywords: convergence; path dependency; contingency; Finland; quality assurance and evaluation

Introduction

Media visibility and the political use of global rankings have highlighted the topicality and relevance of comparative studies in education. This importance has not entailed the development of theoretical instruments in the field, however. Contemporary research is criticised, e.g. for a lack of a historical perspective and contextualisation (Kazamias 2009; Steiner-Khamsi 2009), for too optimistic a view about transfer (Cowen 2000), and for suffering ‘unbearable narrowness of the national view’ (Dale 2009a, 2009b; Kettunen 2008; Strange 1997). An eminent comparativist of education, Cowen (2009, 963), crystallised the situation when stating that comparisons are too often just like train spotting: ‘collecting train numbers: interesting only if you are already hooked on the hobby’. There is a risk that comparison will become only a tool for identifying differences and similarities, and hence will eventually become trivial. To sum up, comparative education is suffering from serious methodological deficits and under-theorisation, while at the same time having bigger political and media weight than ever (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003; Simola 2009; Simola and Rinne 2011; Simola, Varjo, and Rinne 2011a, 2011b).

It is evident that greater global interconnectedness and a nascent global educational community, mediated, translated and recontextualised within national and local education structures is creating a certain resemblance among educational policies across nations (e.g. Lingard 2000). The waves of global policy reforms (travelling policies) have a tendency to diffuse around the globe and reshape socially and politically different societies with dissimilar histories. It is clear that these transnational

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trends and tendencies do not simply shape the regional, national or local policies, but they rather collide and intertwine with ‘embedded policies’ to be found in ‘local’ spaces (national, provincial or local) where global policy agendas come up against existing practices and priorities (see, e.g. Ozga and Jones 2006).

This narrowness of the national view easily creates a blind spot in terms of how interactions and comparisons reconstruct the national or the local: how transnational interactions and crossings constitute the national parties of these relationships. Here we come to the crucial role of comparative practices as a mode of reflexivity that (re)shapes individual and collective agency (Grek et al. 2009). In pursuance of an understanding of such a complex phenomenon as the relationship between the global, the regional, the national and the local in education policy formation, it is vital to consider the theoretical conceptualizations from a both/and rather than an either/or point of view. A good and illuminating example here is the controversy among researchers of nationalism and the frequently observed confrontation between understanding nationalism as ‘the invention of traditions’ by the elite (e.g. Hobsbawm 1990) or as creating prerequisites and limits for ethnic identities (e.g. Smith 1995). From the perspective of comparative research, nationalism as an elite strategy and nationalism as a socio-cultural frame are both necessary. This requires analyzing comparative actions *both* as economic, political and cultural practices and international exhibitions of national competitiveness in the global educational market place.

Anyhow the educational comparisons as well as ranking lists introduced by the supranational organisations such as the OECD are here to stay and show by numbers and calculations the positions of the nation states in the world order of education. Accountability and managerialism in education have been likened to a juggernaut that is gathering momentum as a global force of standardization and uniformity in education. Its main engines are benchmarking and efficiency studies carried out by international organizations (IOs) and management consulting groups, issuing in international rankings in which the world’s school systems are held up and compared to a small band of top-performers. As OECD itself says: ‘For more than 40 years the OECD has been the world’s largest and most reliable source of comparable statistics, and economic and social data’ (Spring 2009, 56). Through international assessments such as PISA, the OECD creates global standards and standardized data, ranking scales, indicators and benchmarks (Lawn and Grek 2012, 10–1, 69–70, 83–4; Martens 2007, 49; Spring 2009, 62) and is emerging as a leading force in the neoliberal movement, enacting ideologies of technocratic rationality and causing countries with diverse traditions and cultures to assimilate their educational practices to seemingly unassailable standards of technocratic rationality, economic competitiveness and market growth.

Although being the winner of PISA, Finland is the country, whose educational practices are running in many areas counter to the vast main stream mantra of accountability. Rather than being the gloss scarp of the OECD, Finland is in this respect a kind of model case against it succeeding in spite of that in the international race for benchmarking by avoiding to play the same game by the same rules.

The main aim of this article is to understand how it has been possible for the Finnish Comprehensive School (*Peruskoulu*) to go against the mainstream in policy terms and – in spite or just because of it – become a ‘poster-boy’ in global educational spectacles such as PISA.¹ Since this small peripheral Nordic nation rocketed to fame in the PISA studies during the 2000s, it has veered to the hope to all the

educationalists still believing in two things. They believe, on the one hand, in the possibility of combining quality and equity at a reasonable financial cost. What is even more noteworthy, on the other hand, they believe that this is possible without school inspection, standardized curriculum and high-stakes student assessments, test-based accountability, and a race-to-the-top mentality in terms of educational change (Sahlberg 2011).

Our theoretical explanation and contribution to overcoming difficulties for comparative education works with three concepts. Path dependency and convergence are among the conventional conceptualisations of transnational and national policy relations, while contingency is a more recent theorisation. Path dependency and convergence are often conceptualized as a simple dualism in comparative studies: the former is taken to refer to major national specificities and the latter refers to international tendencies. This false dichotomy is perhaps more apparent in these global and late-modern times (Joas 2008; Joas and Knöbl 2009). Kettunen (2008, 21) proposes that by integrating these two dimensions – path dependency and contingency on the one hand, and path dependency and convergence on the other – we may develop more reflexive and sophisticated comparative studies.

Indeed, despite increasing international interdependence, which seems to generate pressures toward convergence, the advanced industrial societies continue to exhibit differences in their institutional practises. As Andy Green (1999, 56) points out:

As regards education, there is very little evidence across the globe that nation states are losing control over their education systems or ceasing to press them into service for national economic and social ends, whatever the recent accretions of internationalism. In fact the opposite may be true. As governments lose control over various levers on their national economies and cede absolute sovereignty in foreign affairs and defence, they frequently turn to education and training as two areas where they do still maintain control.

Green (1999, 69) further points out that while there is evidence of policy convergence within Europe around a range of broad policy themes, including decentralization in regulation and governance and increasing use of quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) mechanisms, this does not appear to have led to convergence in structures and processes.

If convergence is disputed, path dependence is somewhat stronger as an analytical concept. According to Pierson (2000, 251), the idea of path dependency is generally used to support a small number of key claims, namely: that specific patterns of timing and sequence matter; that starting from similar conditions a wide range of social outcomes are possible; that large consequences may result from relatively ‘small’ or contingent events; that particular courses of action, once introduced, can be most difficult to reverse; that, consequently, political development is often punctuated by critical junctures that shape the basic contours of social life.

However there is no single definition of path dependence. Levi (1997, 28) highlights the difficulty of exiting from the chosen path:

Path dependence has to mean, if it has to mean anything, that once a country or a region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. There will be other choice points, but the entrenchments of certain institutional arrangements obstruct an easy reversal of the initial choice.

The concept of contingency carries a double meaning: on the one hand, it signifies *coincidence* or *conjunction*, and on the other, *free will* or *volition* (Joas 2008, 209). In the first dimension, the uncertainty of contingency emphasizes the fact that events are essentially haphazard and random: things often happen by accident. In the second dimension, the freedom of contingency may be understood as the ability to manage the contingent characteristics of reality. According to eminent Finnish political scientist Palonen (1993, 13), polity and policy refer to attempts to regulate contingency, but politicization opens new aspects to it and politicking can be understood as ‘the art of playing with the contingency’.

In this article, we first describe the supranational mainstream of education politics change. Then we draw the picture of the particular opposite Finnish Education Evaluation Model (FEEM) and trace the trajectory of this model. We are throwing also some light to the understanding, why this counter model was able to be established particularly in Finland. In that historical and social context, we also discuss about theoretical possibilities for understanding more profoundly the mixed and contradictory pressures and processes of international convergence and national path dependency in the field of education politics by harnessing it to the use of the concept of contingency.

The supranational mainstream of education politics in the audit society

Over the latest decades a new global neoliberal policy paradigm has emerged. There are several reasons behind this. One of the most crucial was the rejection of the ideas of the Keynesian welfare state. Governments have increasingly praised a minimalist role for the state in education, greater trust on market mechanisms and new public management (NPM) principles and have become unwilling to pay the costs for ever increasing educational expansion. This new globalization policy normalizes a ‘growth-first approach’, naturalizes the market logics and individual choices, privatisation, deregulation and competitive regimes of resource allocation as the only true social imaginary or There Is No Alternative-thinking (TINA) with its images, myths, parables, stories legends and narratives (Mundy 2007, 26; Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 3, 31–4, 37; Soguel and Jaccard 2008, 1).

The reasons behind the reassessment of governance might be listed as: economic recession and diminishing public expenditures, globalisation and new games without frontiers, disappointed achievements of national governments and distrust of them, an ideological shift towards the market and the rise of the NPM movement (de Boer, Enders, and Schimank 2008, 36–7).

According to Leuze, Martens, and Rusconi (2007, 3), the changes in education today can be attributed to two main trends: (1) the growing activity of IOs in education policy making and (2) the increasing marketization of the field of education. Education has been transferred into the field of international policy making beyond national borders and regionally or universally applicable models for education have been produced. Increasing marketization is turning education into a tradable commodity and adding private providers as well as competition for students.

Neoliberal policies have brought attempts to stimulate market forces by making schools behave more like businesses, through giving them greater autonomy and encouraging parents to behave more like customers, through relaxing admissions policies and diversifying types of schools. One of the strongest and most discussed matters has been publishing of league tables, because they expose the uneven

distribution of educational attainment and the worth of the schools in educational market (Power and Frandji 2010, 385–6).

When considering the new roles of nation states and supranational organisations, Dale (2009b, 122–7) argues that there have long prevailed three false methodological assumptions of ‘isms’ producing misunderstanding when discussing and comparing education. These are ‘nationalism’, ‘statism’ and ‘educationism’. Nationalism means that we still think that the nation states strongly work on their own and the regions follow the nations. Statism means the thinking that the state is the source and means of all governing activity, which is taken for granted, though it is essentially contingent. Educationism refers ‘to the tendency to regard education as a single category for purposes of analysis, with an assumed common scope, and a set of implicitly shared knowledges, practices and assumptions’. Education is often treated as ‘abstract, fixed, absolute, ahistorical and universal’ (see also Dale and Robertson 2007; Robertson and Dale 2008).

The role of supranational organisations such as the OECD has been most crucial in the formation of the new supranational educational politics and the new politics of ‘governance by comparison’ (Martens 2007, 40). But it is crucial, however, to recognize that ‘there is no zero-sum relationship between global and national or subnational forms of governance. IOs do not replace nation states, but create additional and informal structure of authority and sovereignty besides and beyond the state’ (Dale and Robertson 2007, 222). As Nóvoa and Yariv-Marshall (2003) write: ‘the global eye works together with the national eye today in both education policy and governance’ (quoted in Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 56).

There are also ambivalent effects for nation states and the role of supranational organisations has been controversial compared to the role of national governments. We might say that ‘Nation states, IOs and markets might be hostile siblings in the governance of education’ (Weymann et al. 2007, 238). Martens and Wolf describe this controversy elegantly using metaphors in their article ‘Boomerangs and Trojan Horses: The Unintended Consequences of Internationalising Education Policy Through the EU and the OECD’ (2009). In their example of the EU it was just the governments who wanted to ask for advice of international organisations for their educational politics and strengthen their national reformative position at home and to defuse the domestic opposition, but by no means weaken governmental influence at any level. But the boomerangs went astray from the throwers and weakened their power. In the example of the OECD and especially indicators and PISA, national governments wanted to make a comparison between nation states to strengthen their power, but as the unintended consequence the Trojan horse opened the gates and now these governments are in a totally new situation of regular comparative assessments of their performance in educational politics. In this respect, the new standard setting of the supranational organisations has challenged the traditional ideas of national meritocratic competition, and nation states are losing their power to define standards and to control the key features of their national education with all the nation state functions including the educational selection (Rinne and Ozga 2011, 68). Education has traditionally been regarded as the most national of activities. ‘It is the institution through which new members of the society are socialized into its ways and understandings, and learn the values and the rules of appropriateness of the society’ (Dale and Robertson 2007, 217). Now the times have changed. The OECD, before the ‘debating club’, the ‘toothless

tiger', the 'eminence grise' the 'global office' is rating and ranking nations and telling them the orthodox answers, how to classify, how to measure and how to produce 'best practices'.

We have stepped into the 'audit society', 'steering at a distance' society, where the audit culture is closely linked to the NPM and accountabilities and summative assessment and evaluation (Power 1999, 2003). This fundamental change has been analysed through the metaphors of 'quality revolution', the 'evaluation industry', and the 'audit explosion' (Lawn and Grek 2012, 85). We have become the citizens of the 'evaluative state', but all the more of the evaluative 'suprastate' (cf. Maroy 2008; Neave 1998). We have become 'governed by numbers' (Grek 2009; Rose 1999) or 'self-capitalizing individuals' (Rose 1999) or 'self-responsibilizing individuals' (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 98–9, 119, 138). A kind of 'metrological mood' has become the mechanism through which education systems are measured and made accountable (Lawn and Grek 2012, 119; cf. Power 2004, 766). 'Less government and more governance' has become the widely shared cred. (de Boer, Enders, and Schimank 2008, 35; cf. Frederickson 1999, 705). We may make the starting point of 'governmentality' (Foucault 1991) and end up with a new imperative in neoliberal governance – 'agile bodies' – the person as an enterprise (Gillies 2011). We have seen the 'governance turn' as a shift in strategy that 'is highly dependent on the appearance of deregulation, but that is equally marked by strong central steering through various policy technologies' and 'sophisticated instruments of steering of policy – standardisation quality benchmarking and data harmonisation' (Ozga 2009, 150, 158). 'Governing needs data and is legitimated by them' (Lawn and Grek 2012, 85). 'Through all of its work the OECD is part of and helped constitute the new form of global governance in education, as well as within nations' (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 133).

Neoliberalism paradoxically re-asserts the state's role when attempting to reduce its financial responsibilities in the public sector – it centralizes and decentralizes the state at the same time. Of utmost importance for neoliberalism is 'the development of techniques of auditing, accounting and management that enable a market for public services to be established autonomous from central control' (cf. Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996, 14; Webb 2011, 736).

Neave (2009, 24) names 'Quality, Efficiency and Entrepreneurism' as 'Liberalism's Holy Trinity'. QAE together with the efficiency has become the core of the new supranational educational apostle (Lawn and Grek 2012, 97). Neave argues that already in 1980s, this new liberal formation of global educational politics was clearly to be seen at least in the field of Higher Education. Concerning Finland, we came on a late train, but in the field of Higher Education we have also clearly seen this new dawn of the enterprise university (Clark 1998) and academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). In the field of the comprehensive school, however, there is still the national road to go, although something has happened also in this respect in Finland.

In the new global audit or assessment building, we may categorize some interconnected central features of the new supranational mainstream of QAE practices and technologies of educational politics on primary and lower secondary school level based on earlier literature (Maroy 2008, 17–20; Ozga et al. 2011, 124–5; Power and Frandji 2010, 385–6; Rinne 2001; Rinne and Ozga 2011):

- (1) *Strong marketisation* which is understood to lead to excellence:
 - large sector of independent schools,
 - strive for individualisation and excellence.
- (2) *Choice and visibility* enhancing marketisation:
 - consumer and parental choice,
 - high local accountability including intelligent accountability,
 - large assessment enterprises.
- (3) Ranking and classification supporting visibility:
 - national testing systems,
 - league tables, ranking lists.
- (4) *Control* promoting visibility:
 - growing inspection and monitoring system,
 - strong quality assurance regulation,
 - control, sanctions and rewards on the basis of collected assessment data.

We argue in this article for a particular Finnish Model of QAE in Basic Education, which clearly seems to differ from the mainstream of international and global evaluation policies. This has its roots in two historical developments: the Finnish path-dependency in egalitarianism, which has been challenged by the converging market-liberalism, and the path-dependency of deregulation, which had its spur in converging international education policies.

Finnish path-dependent egalitarianism and the radical decentralisation

In terms of path dependency, it is hard to over-emphasise the fact that Finland was among the last countries in Europe to establish compulsory education. Six-year elementary education was made compulsory by law only in 1921. In addition, the expansion of the primary school was slow even after the law, and compulsory education was not fully implemented until just before World War II (Ramirez and Boli-Bennett 1982; Rinne 1984; Rinne and Salmi 1998, 27; Simola and Rinne 2011).

Because of the late formation of the educational system, educational gaps between older and younger generations are among the widest in Europe (Simola and Rinne 2011). All this is witness to the fact that the Finnish success story in education is very recent. As an indicator of the symbolic power of traditional social democratic-agrarian *equality* in Finnish educational discourse, there is no analogous concept of *equity*, even though it would be easy to find one (*oikeus*, *oikeudenmukaisuus*). The concept of equality is used in two contrasting ways. These two conceptions were connected in a major document published by the Finnish Educational Evaluation Council (FEEC 2004, 15):

The economic and social welfare of Finnish society is based on an egalitarian public system of schooling. Its mission is to guarantee for every citizen both educational opportunities of good quality regardless of his/her sex, dwelling place, age, mother

tongue and economic position and the right to tuition accordant with his/her capabilities and special needs and his/her self-development. (Emphasis added)

The 1987 Prime Minister Harri Holkeri's cabinet aimed to bring about a fundamental change in Finnish politics. For the first time since World War II, the conservative National Coalition Party held the post of Prime Minister and its two decades in opposition were over. As far as education was concerned, this marked the end of the deal between the Central and Social Democratic parties in the Ministry of Education (ME) and the National Board of Education (NBE), and the right wing was set to dominate State educational discourse for more than a decade. The posts of Ministers of Education also went to right-wing ministers. The changes in education were part of a general wave of decentralization and deregulation in Finland. The process started with the Free Municipality Experiment (Law 718/1988), which gave local authorities in experimental municipalities more freedom to make independent decisions.

The recession in 1991–1993 heralded the deepest peacetime crisis in Finland's economy until then. According to many indicators, the Finnish crisis was the sharpest and deepest among the industrialised countries facing economic problems during the 1990s and it was comparable only with the Great Recession of the 1930s and the late economic crisis in 2000s (Kiander and Virtanen 2002; Rinne et al. 2002; Simola et al. 2002).

The Recession of the 1990s not only speeded up the change. It also revitalized the Nordic egalitarian ethos so the comprehensive idea survived thanks to it. For example, Ahonen (2003) argues that the recession altered the political atmosphere in favour of market liberalism back to traditional Nordic welfare values, and thus, defence of the common comprehensive school. Another totally unexpected event was the Finnish success in PISA. This success, on the one hand, has stifled pressures for change in municipal and school autonomy and, on the other, buffered other market-liberal innovations.

The Act on Central Government Transfers to Local Government (Law 705/1992) and the Local Government Act (Law 365/1995) radically increased local autonomy and strengthened the judicial position of the municipalities. The new system granted funding according to annual calculations per pupil, lesson or other unit, and liberated the municipalities from the detailed 'ear-marked' funds through the allocation of lump-sums which could be freely used by the municipalities according to their priorities.

It is widely accepted among the political and economic elites that without shifting decision-making to the local level the municipalities could not have been required to cut spending as much as they did during the recession. Thus the new decentralized and deregulated mode of governance was moulded around the economic principles of savings and cutbacks. The Recession radicalized decentralization and deregulation:

The decentralisation level of the educational administration in Finland is one of the highest in Europe, according to the information of the OECD. (Temmes, Ahonen, and Ojala 2002, 129, 92)

After the deregulation, the first attempt to apply a strong evaluation system was the Curriculum Framework of 1994, which included a detailed *Structural Model of Evaluation* emphasising effectiveness, efficiency and economy, summed up in 33

issues to be evaluated. This was dropped from the final version, however (Simola 1995, 297). The Framework for Evaluating Educational Outcomes (NBE 1995) was published a year later. The change in regime of the 1990s is tangible in the NBE's framework – or at least in the rhetoric: the three E's are the cornerstones of the NPM doctrine (e.g. Lähdesmäki 2003, 65–9).

The fundamental role of evaluation was formalized in the Basic Education Act of 1999 (Law 628/1998). A statutory evaluation system was considered necessary in the move from norm steering to the control and evaluation of outcomes. The new purpose of evaluation was said to be 'to support the development of education and improve conditions of learning'. Guided by the ME, the NBE decided on the means by which to accomplish the evaluation procedures. The organizers (mainly the municipalities) are obliged to evaluate the education they provide and to submit to external evaluations of their operations. Moreover, as a common but vaguely articulated norm, the results should be public: 'The main results of evaluations shall be published' (Law 628/1998, §21).

In 1999 the NBE published 'The criteria for graduating evaluation in basic education' (NBE 1999). The introduction refers to the need for equality in evaluation that serves as a basis for placement in subsequent education. The same kinds of criteria were published for early and middle-stage evaluation in the 2004 Framework Curriculum (NBE 2004). In fact, this could be seen as the only direct mechanism of evaluation at classroom level.

Thus despite the amount of evaluation activity, whether 'QAE – apart from traditional pupil assessment [is] a fundamental part of everyday schoolwork in Finland' (Rinne et al. 2011), remains an open question. Reports from the local level have shown that practices vary, to say the least. The NBE conducted two surveys (Löfström et al. 2005; Rajanen 2000) of QAE implementation at the local level. According to the 2000 survey (Löfström et al. 2005, 19), only one-third of the providers of comprehensive education said they had *some* system of evaluation underpinning their work (Rajanen 2000, 31). Only a few of the respondents to the later (2005) survey used the models Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA) had been promoting for a decade, such as ISO, Quality Awards, Balanced Scorecard and EFQM, while a quarter of those using some model referred to the NBE's Efficiency Model of Educational Evaluation. The great majority (more than 70%) said they capitalized on 'their own application of different models', which could mean anything from a genuinely new model to no evaluation at all.

The Committee for Education and Culture of the Finnish Parliament concluded in 2002:

Evaluation has had very small effects at the level of municipalities and schools. Nation-level evaluations have been implemented to a creditable extent, but there is no follow-up on how these evaluations affect the actions of the evaluated and the development of the schools. ... [o]nly evaluation of the biggest providers of schooling seems to be systematic enough and based on a system provided by the present model of administration. Many municipalities are at the very beginning in the evaluation of education. (CEC 2002)

Finland is one of the few European countries in which there is no direct control from the national to the school level (Eurydice 2004). This created space for AFLRA in the field of education policy. According the AFLRA, municipalities are no longer mere education providers executing top-down, national level decisions,

but true political actors possessing an intent of their own – and, thus, a vast amount of *Spielraum* in this peculiar twofold system, where the nation-state *and* municipalities are the main actors in education policy (Kauko and Varjo 2008; Sarjala 2002). On the one hand the ME and the NBE consider QAE from the perspective of the education system and the associated legislation, and on the other the AFLRA and the Ministry of the Interior – often accompanied by the Ministry of Finance – see it in terms of municipal service production and legislation. Both have attempted to assume the leading role in determining the discourse of evaluation in the context of education (Simola et al. 2009).

It is thus obvious that the radical municipal autonomy, spurred and deepened contingently by the Recession of the 1990s, was one of the factors that have buffered the implementation and technical development of QAE in Finnish comprehensive schooling. If the role of radical municipal autonomy has been against convergent tendencies, other contingent factors have supported egalitarian path dependency. Those are the re-valorization of the comprehensive idea and the Finnish PISA Miracle itself.

There are four doctrines in this FEEM, which are essential to understand in Finnish practices in their context and history. Those special characteristics or policy outlines are national doctrines that are commonly accepted and shared:

- (1) QAE data are intended first and foremost for administration and decision-making at national and municipal levels – and only secondly, if at all, for other interest groups, i.e. pupils and their parents.
- (2) The purpose of QAE in education is quite purely dedicated to develop education – not to control, sanction or allocate resources.
- (3) No to nationwide test apparatuses upon different school grades in QAE. Sample-based few assessments of learning are favoured over mandatory national testing of the whole age cohort.
- (4) No to the ranking lists. There is no basis or need to publish school-based ranking lists but to protect the evenness of the images of the schools.

All of these doctrines are against the supranational mainstream described above. The QAE measured do not aim to control; they do not produce visibility in terms of ranking, classification and enabling choice. The opposition for such trends lies in path dependencies of the tradition of equality and deregulation. This all leads to a situation, where the marketization of schooling is much more difficult. We further elaborate these doctrines referring to Finnish policy texts, processes and interviews.

Data and Information for administration only

During and after the Depression of the 1990s, new education legislation was drafted in Finland in 1993–1996 in two consecutive Working Parties, the second of which defined the purpose of evaluation as to produce information primarily for the education authorities (ME 1996, 85). Families needing information in order to make their school choices are only referred to incidentally. Neither the Basic Education Act (Law 628/1998) nor the Decree on the Evaluation of Education (A 150/2003) make reference to families, parents or customers as having an interest in evaluation beyond the school achievements of their own children. There are no statements about the need for evaluation results in relation to school choice. The administration

is the target group for the production of information, an impression strengthened by a recent Ministry publication (ME 2007a, 12–3).

The stands taken in the most important legislation are symbolic of the opposition to promoting visibility to enable choice, due to the embedded egalitarianism. The choices differed for instance from the views of the OECD (1992), which supported the public availability of all information.

The use of QAE for developmental purpose only

The second doctrinal truth concerns the absence of sanctions in Finnish QAE. According to a Ministry Working Party in 1990, the aim of evaluation was to ‘set a solid foundation for intentional and open development of education’ (ME 1990, 30). Since the middle of the 1990s, official texts have repeatedly stated that evaluation is ‘for developing educational services and not an instrument of administrative control’ (e.g. ME 1995, 55, 1996, 85). The Basic Education Act of 1999 (Law 628/1998, 21 §) stated that ‘[t]he purpose of the evaluation of education is to ensure the realization of the purpose of this law and to support the development of education and improve the prerequisites of learning’. Since then, this definition of policy has been absorbed into education legislation with strong political support. The Committee for Education and Culture of the Parliament of Finland stated that: ‘The evaluation system is a vital component in the development of education, not a tool of administrative surveillance’ (CEC 3/1998).

This emphasis on development has meant that the interpretation of evaluation results and the allocation of resources – or any other kind of administrative reward or sanction – are divorced from one another (ME 1997). The Administration Committee of the Parliament of Finland concluded that the evaluation of basic services implemented by the Regional State Administrative Agencies is not an instrument of administrative control (AC 8/2000, 2).

Also, since its formation in 2003 the FEEC has highlighted the developmental character of evaluation:

Educational evaluation promotes the social effectiveness of education by providing policy-makers, developers, practitioners and interest groups in the field with reliable information, which clarifies the underlying values and supports the qualitative development of education. (2005, 17)

In our interviews, a central actor in Finnish QAE concluded that: ‘what was actually a sacred issue for us was that we are not creating any control system but the information we produce, it will be for developmental work’ (FabQ Interviewee 2, 2007).² On the one hand, this viewpoint beautifully crystallises the deep-rooted opposition to rankings, which is consistent with the egalitarian ideas. On the other hand, it is created in the narrow choice situation of the national level. Due to the deregulation, the best way to affect the local is through soft governance.

No national testing

There has been consensus among education politicians and state level officials that thematic, focused and sample based research is sufficient for controlling school performance. To run national testing was unanimously seen as too expensive, besides bringing negative side effects, well-known from the Anglo-American research literature. However the Confederation of Finnish Industries and Employers (CIE), in

pamphlets published throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, made new demands to make compulsory education into a real asset in international economic competition. In the *Productivity of Education* (CIE 1990) the measurement of learning outcomes, optimal resource allocation and consumer satisfaction were advocated. The CIE also supported final national examinations (Purhonen 2005, 63). In the first draft of the 1999 education legislation, the idea of national achievement tests in compulsory education appears:

It has been considered that there would be uniform nation-wide achievement tests conducted annually at various subjects. Based on the results of these exams, the level of teaching and the accomplishment of educational aims at municipalities and schools would be evaluated. (Numminen 1994, 105–6)

However, Finland did not follow the Anglo-Saxon accountability movement in education. The path dependencies prevailed as traditionally, the evaluation of student outcomes has been the task of each teacher and school. The only standardised high-stakes assessment is the matriculation examination at the end of upper-secondary school before students enrol in tertiary education. Prior to this, no external national tests or exams are required (Aho, Pitkänen, and Sahlberg 2006, 12). *A Framework for Evaluating Educational Outcomes in Finland* (NBE 1995, 36) confirmed this policy. NBE's Framework defines sample-based *national exams* as the Finnish equivalent to general *achievement tests*.

No school ranking lists

Practically no education official or politician has supported the provision of ranking lists or making schools transparent in competition by comparing them in terms of performance indicators (CEC 3/1998). Paradoxically, antipathy to ranking may be supported by the Finnish bureaucratic tradition (see, for example Pekonen 2005; Tiihonen 2004), according to which administrative innovations are considered to support the system rather than to inform citizens.

The Finnish Education Evaluation Council highlighted the developmental features of evaluation and the anonymity of schools in its evaluation strategy:

In publicising evaluation results schools will not be ranked, nor will schools or teachers be labelled as of high or low standard on the basis of one-sided evidence. When reporting upon an analysis based on a nationwide sample, no data identifying individual schools will be given, but in cases concerning only a small group of schools, a national evaluation report may also include information on a single school. A prerequisite for so doing is that the evaluation takes place in co-operation with the school and is made for expressly developmental purposes. (FEEC 2005, 36)

Obviously there has been antipathy towards ranking, in both the central and local administration. The informal consensus at the municipal level not to study schools in a way that would enable the results to be used to produce rankings is a good example here (Simola et al. 2009).

In relation to school ranking, two separate appeals in 2000 and 2003 were made to regional administrative courts against municipal education authorities' decisions not to publish school-specific information. In both cases, the focus of the appeals was on school-specific school performance indicators that, it was argued, were essential for parents to make their school choice decisions. Both cases were located

in large Finnish cities (Turku and Vantaa) and behind the appealing party in both cases were big media corporations (Simola 2006). In the first case, the Turku Administrative Court took the side of municipal education authorities and refused to require them to hand over the evaluation results of individual schools for publication. In the second case, the Helsinki Administrative Court decided the opposite. It ordered Vantaa educational authorities to hand over the school-specific evaluation results to the appealing party. The municipality of Vantaa took the case to the Supreme Administrative Court and asked for the appeal to be dismissed. The Supreme Administrative Court ordered Vantaa to hand over the school-specific evaluation results to the appealing party (Simola 2006). However, only a couple of provincial newspapers have published school-specific evaluation results or taken any actions in that direction. The silence here is very meaningful and indicates something about the Finnish ethos concerning league tables and school-specific evaluation results in general.

The uncertain future of FEEM

All in all, since the early 1990s there has been a strong contradiction between *convergence* and *path dependence* in Finnish education policy. After decades of *Finlandisierung* there was an extremely strong push towards convergence: to be accepted as a Western advanced liberal society. At the same time, there was strong path dependence in social and educational decisions based on traditional social democratic and agrarian values of equality.

Finland's position between east and west framed most of its international cooperation until the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of 'Real Socialism' in Europe in the 1990s. Openness to the influence of the OECD and the west came late, and openness to neoliberal system redesign even later. The collective narrative of education as a national enterprise and comprehensive provision was weakened during the 1990s. According to the *Proposal of the NBE for a structural programme of education* (NBE 1992), the development of the Finnish comprehensive school was to be characterised by 'decentralised and consumer-based accountability', 'result-based public funding' and 'self-responsible individual learning'.

Finland became the OECD's 'model pupil' (Rinne 2007; Rinne et al. 2004), but through technical and incremental policy, rather than through making strong neoliberal declarations. A leading ex-politician characterized it as a 'tiptoeing education policy change' (Rinne et al. 2001). OECD's own account of Finland stated: 'Finland has a record of heeding the advice of past OECD education reviews. The review seems likely to continue that pattern, helping to shape the future of a dynamic education sector' (OECD 2003).

The titles of some publications (published only in Finnish) of the NBE and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reveal the positive and highly respectful attitude to OECD: *Learning from the Analysis of the OECD* (Laukkanen and Kyrö 2000); *OECD – Firm Base for Decision-Making* (1999); *OECD – Directions for Policy-making in the 21st Century* (2001); *OECD Resources for Decision Making in the Era of Globalisation* (2005). The exceptionally receptive stance of the Finnish education policy elite towards the OECD has been noted by various commentators. Interviewees in Niukko's (2006) study, for example, refer to mutual respect especially following the recent attention given to Finland after its national success in PISA (Grek et al. 2009, 17, 14).

Among other things, PISA taught Finnish education politicians and officials the 'market value' of international comparisons. Interview data make it apparent that OECD is seen as a transcendent carrier of reason (see also Niukko 2006, 112). It may be seen as creating a consensual community (Weber 1981), a discourse of truth (Foucault 1989), a style of reasoning (Hacking 1990). Interviewees described the importance and meaning of OECD meetings and texts as follows: 'OECD-doctrine' (Niukko 2006, 122 and 126), 'up-dated themes' (Ibid., 111), 'magic of numbers' (Ibid., 117), 'the only table where Finland can sit with the G8-countries' (Ibid., 130); 'a council of the sages' (Ibid., 131); 'guiding member states in the same direction', 'peer and moral pressure' (Ibid., 143); 'moral commitment', 'indirect effect' (Ibid., 144), 'the economic as the primary nature of education' (Ibid., 161–4); 'tuning sentiment and sympathy' (interview 10, April 2007), 'modernization' (Finnish policy actor 3).

There have also been some attempts to break the consensus on FEEM. The policy as administrative, developmental, non-testing and non-ranking has also been questioned and challenged. The economic recession of the early 1990s changed education policy, and a committee presented a Bill (ME 1996) emphasising the 'viewpoint of social solidarity'. The new Basic Education Act (Law 628/1998) confirmed parents' free choice throughout the country, but the municipalities retained the right to restrict parents' choice of school by stating that such a choice must not supersede the right of other children to attend the school designated by the municipal authorities. In the education commission of parliament, this right was formulated as the right to attend one's neighbourhood school (Ibid., 172–3, 175) and this has obvious limiting effects on choice. In some big cities, most of the smaller towns and all country municipalities there is no real school choice and thus no demand for school based QAE information (cf. Seppänen 2003, 2006).

In relation to the doctrine of QAE for development, the Regional State Administrative Agencies (e.g. ME 1996, 98) and the Ministry of Finance (e.g. ALFRA and MoF 1998, 13) were against the exclusively developmental emphasis, as was AFLRA, which argues that all evaluation implemented in municipal organizations contributes to municipal evaluation, which means that it is a tool of municipal management and control (Granö-Suomalainen and Lovio 2002, 7).

Recently, the future of national sample-based learning-result assessment has become uncertain, as the right-wing officer Timo Lankinen's statement just before he was appointed to the post of the Director General of the NBE makes clear:

The follow-up of learning results will be carried out as web-based examinations in all schools. These exams would assess what learning goals have been attained and give an overall diagnosis of the state of education. The aim is to give up the sample-based learning result assessments and produce evaluation information and feedback for the whole age cohort and all appropriate teachers. (ME 2007b, 194)

The new Green Paper on *Basic Education 2020 – The national general objectives and distribution of lesson hours*, chaired by Lankinen, emphasises criteria for assessment so strongly that the opposition and the Social Democrat Party state that the implementation of the Green Paper will bring performance ranking to Finland (ME 2010, 207).

In this light, the FEEM looks less solid than it used to be. According to one of our interviewees, the internationalisation of Finland and its people is obviously challenging the old ways:

But, if you listen to well-educated parents, you will notice that it is quite commonly understood that there are good schools and there are bad schools. And we have the right to know. And there should be means to find out that difference. It might not be that frequent yet, but it does exist much more than in 1990s. It might be crucial, because this kind of parents have a great deal of power in our society. And it concerns also globalisation, because they are well aware what is happening in other countries. Under these circumstances, they don't perceive the situation of their children at the context of Finnish education policy and its tradition. They consider: if it is allowed elsewhere, why not here in Finland. (FabQ Interviewee 11, 2007)

Thus, on one hand, the Finnish trajectory of evaluation of education manifests itself as a combination of an unarticulated consensus about the direction of advancement, and the endogenous origins of the reform, and a passive but persistent resistance to global models of education restructuring. The extent of path dependency is a different question: despite national definitions of policy, it is difficult to see the trajectory as a functional entity, coordinated and directed normatively.

The aim of this article was threefold. First we analyzed the supranational mainstream of education politics and global QAE policy in the audit society in order to locate Finland in the global context and to mirror it against that. Secondly and explicitly, we tried to make Finnish QAE policy more comprehensible by using the concepts of convergence, path dependency and contingency. These concepts and above all their combination did shed light on the Finnish case. An extremely strong contradiction emerged between the convergent pursuit of international acceptance as a consenting adult in the Western advanced liberal family and deep rooted path dependence on traditional social democratic and agrarian egalitarianism, that made Finnish QAE policy remarkably double-layered. This analysis does not, of course, completely explain the Finnish case, and we have outlined some other significant historical factors elsewhere (Rinne et al. 2002; Simola 1993, 2005; Simola and Rinne 2011; Simola et al. 2002). Thirdly, what might be even more important, however, is that our conceptual experiment may be seen as supporting a conceptualization and theorisation that might be useful in other cases, too.

Notes

1. This text owes to our earlier elaborations, e.g. Simola, Varjo and Rinne (2010) and Simola, Varjo, and Rinne (2011a, 2011b).
2. Other two were, according to the interviewee that '(...) we will never create ranking lists. We will not produce information that make possible to build ranking lists. (...) the next principle was independence (...) and one is this principle of publicity' (FabQ Interviewee 2, 2007).

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