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## Discursive Narratives of Comprehensive Education Politics in Finland

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# Discursive narratives of comprehensive education politics in Finland

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## Abstract

In recent years Finnish comprehensive education has often been discussed in both, academic and public forums, in terms of its relatively high learning outcomes and perceived efficiency. Yet what has often been lacking in cross-country comparisons is a critical socio-historical analysis of contingent nation-specific events and features as well as an in-depth analysis of Finnish education politics as constantly changing dynamic system. We analyze and reconstruct the discursive narrative of Finnish comprehensive education within a socio-historical framework. The material consists of interviews with the establishment of Finnish education: politicians, leading policy-makers and stakeholders, and established scholars (n=9). Three periods were recognized and reconstructed in the analysis: 1) The pre-comprehensive school period, 2) a steady development culminating in the crisis of the 1990s, and 3) the PISA results, which in the narrative led to international success and national gridlock. The crucial changes relate to changes in audiences (performing game). Two key findings emerge from this discursive narrative analyses: the role of the PISA reports as a turning point for the basic education politics in Finland and how this turn led to a discussion of comprehensive school as a kind of success story.

## Keywords

education politics, narrative, discourse, comprehensive school, Finland, PISA

## Introduction

In a large questionnaire study conducted in the period 2008–2012, when Finns were asked to name the most important event or development in Finnish history that which was most often mentioned was ‘comprehensive schools and free-tuition education’ (Torsti, 2012). In recent years, Finnish comprehensive education has often been discussed in both academic and public forums in terms of

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its relatively high learning outcomes and perceived efficiency. This discussion has been based on cross-country surveys and reports, such as PISA (OECD, 2009), and is related to the relatively uniform quality of learning outcomes in the schools measured in these reports which have attracted international attention. In a way, Finland has become a reference society, an idealized and glorified model for educational policy-makers and media around the world (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Takayama et al., 2013; Waldow et al., 2014). With this article we seek to reconstruct the narrative of Finnish comprehensive education that is being generated in the current times by the powerful actors of education politics in Finland.

In transnational policy-borrowing processes, technical solutions such as learning content and school management principles are used as ‘input’ to explain ‘outputs’ such as PISA (e.g. Takayama, 2010). What has often been lacking in cross-country comparisons are the critical socio-historical analyses of contingent nation-specific events and features (Phillips, 2002; Simola, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2013), and an in-depth analysis of politics as a constantly changing and dynamic system. Only recently has Finnish research literature started to focus on these issues (e.g. Simola et al., 2017).

This study endeavours to fill this gap by analysing the discursive narrative of Finnish comprehensive education. The research task is to reconstruct the narrative of Finnish comprehensive schooling from the storylines derived from the interviews with the educational establishment and examine the story from a discourse analytical perspective. Our research questions are:

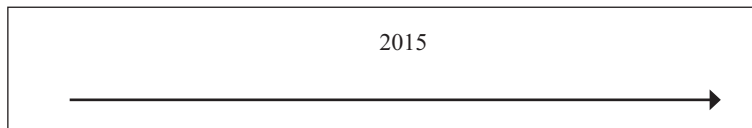
1. Through which discursive formations is the narrative of Finnish comprehensive education constructed throughout time?;
2. Which actors are pointed out as the ones defining and redefining the direction of comprehensive education politics?; and
3. What are the central events in the narrative with their contextual influences on national and international level?

The material consists of interviews with the establishment in Finnish education: politicians, leading policy-makers and stakeholders, and established scholars ( $n = 9$ ). In this study we are interested in how the narrative of Finnish comprehensive education is constructed and how this reflects the changing relations of key actors in education politics. The article contributes to the current discussion of the socio-historical formation and development of Finnish comprehensive education (e.g. Mølstad and Karseth, 2016; Simola et al., 2017) and education policy and politics in general (Adams, 2016) from a narrative angle.

## The legislative development of Finnish comprehensive education

As in all Nordic countries, in Finland the idea of ‘one school for all’, where all children, regardless of social background, gender, ethnicity and place of residence, study in similar schools, has traditionally been a guiding principle in organizing education for nation building, social change and the various needs of modern society (Ahonen, 2003; Antikainen, 2010; Esping-Andersen, 1990; 1999; Kivinen, 1988; Telhaug et al., 2006). The establishment of comprehensive education in the 1970s in Finland is often considered as one of the cornerstones of the country’s basic education. Following Kivinen (1998), from a legislative perspective the systematization of Finnish comprehensive education can be summarized in five milestones:

- Proposals for a new Folk School and the Folk School Decree in 1866 (A12/1866);
- The Law for Compulsory Education in 1921 (A 101/1921);
- The Law and Decree for Elementary School in 1957 (A 247/1957);



**Figure 1.** The timeline presented in the interview.

- The Skeleton Law (A 467/1968) and Decree for Comprehensive Education in 1970 (A 443/1970); and,
- The Law (A 476/1983) and Decree for Comprehensive Education (A 718/1984).

However, the processes leading to these legislative changes were lengthy and multifaceted.

The legislative actions from the 1850s through the 1980s gradually increased the regulative role of the state (Ahonen, 2003). In contrast to the relatively uniform comprehensive school system established in the 1970s, many legislative changes in the mid-1980s and early 1990s started to rescind the state regulation of public education (Ahonen, 2003; Varjo, 2007). First, the changes in the statutory government transfer (in 1984) and the Committee on Government Decentralisation (in 1986) made it possible for municipalities to decide how much money to invest in education. Second, the Abolition of the School District Division (in 1991) (L 171/1991; L 682/1993) had an impact on the 1998 Law for Comprehensive Education (L 628/1998) by establishing and legitimizing the idea and practice of parental school choice in Finland. In addition, both the Task Force for Overall Reform of School Legislation (1993–1995) and the Committee for Overall Reform of School Legislation (1996–1998) ended up suggesting the implementation of more freedom for local actors as well as a reduction of national regulation (Varjo, 2007: 127–132). Finally, the National Curriculum Guidelines in the 1990s (POPS, 1994) gave local schools and teachers more freedom to decide on pedagogical methods, and even content (Ahonen, 2003; Varjo, 2007).

Although in the recent curricula (POPS, 2004; 2014) the content and goals of comprehensive education have again been expressed in more detail (e.g. Sivesind et al., 2016), the internationalization and decentralization of education have moved the political control from the state to more or less temporal networks of different educational stakeholders (Hansen, 2016). Instead of chasing the unity of the state a priori, the focus should be shifted to those social rules, known truths, techniques and networks of references through which the state is constituted in its socio-historical context (e.g. Andersen, 2011; Simola, 2004; Wodak, 2001). The analytical focus should thereby be on contextual and strategic use of the past in the current discursive formations.

## The study

The research task was to analyse how the narrative of Finnish comprehensive education is constructed, through which mediators, power relations and influences it is described, and what are the events that are given a central role in creating the narrative. The focus of the study remains on what kind of Finnish comprehensive education narrative is described in the discourse over time. The narrative is understood as a powerful discursive practice in policy-making into which knowledge is encoded in the form of a story and which is a form of basic understanding of phenomena (see Schank and Abelson, 1995). Our focus is on narrative mediators, power relations and social networks, and on the events that are given a central status (which we call a ‘thickening’ in the storyline) in the creation of the narrative. In addition, we look at what kind of audience the story targets each time and how these changes influence the politics concerning comprehensive education in the narrative.

The interviewees, invited to the interviews as ‘educational experts’, were asked to tell ‘the story of the Finnish comprehensive school (*peruskoulu*)’ as they saw it, and to reflect in particular on the

different actors involved in its formation. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. The outline was that of a stimulus interview, where a timeline (Figure 1) was shown to the interviewee in order to provide a stimulus and structure to the otherwise fairly open thematic interview.

In every instance, the interviewee decided the year with which to start, with one exception, which required a restriction; in that case the interviewer specified a point of departure in the 1970s. The starting point of the story varied from the French Revolution to the twentieth century. Several follow-up questions were asked once the interviewees had finished telling the story as they saw it.

The interviewees ( $n = 9$ ) were members of the establishment in Finnish education, i.e. long-term politicians ( $n = 2$ ), policy-makers and administrative leaders ( $n = 3$ ), other central stakeholders ( $n = 2$ ), and scholars ( $n = 2$ ), all of whom have or had the role of specialist in governmental bodies dealing with comprehensive education in Finland. Both men ( $n = 5$ ) and women ( $n = 4$ ) were interviewed. The interviews were first conducted with long-term researchers, who were identified by a literature review on the topic. We chose the remaining informants based on a snowball sampling: we asked each interviewee for names of other people who should be interviewed on the topic of development of basic education politics and comprehensive education in Finland. The number of key informants saturated in the interviews, as the same actors were repeatedly mentioned at least on the level of their institution. Thus, as a pragmatic methodological decision, we decided to restrict the number of interviewees to these nine.

Although the number of interviews is relatively small, the central stakeholders from different branches of education politics were involved. In addition, a research tradition of elite interviews (Harvey, 2011) was acknowledged in gathering the data. The central actors in basic education politics in the Finnish context include a variety of individuals, public institutions, third sector organizations, unions and other kinds of stakeholders as well as enterprises from the private sector. In the interviews, the relationship is discussed between the government (especially the Ministry of Education and Culture), the Finnish parliament (with a few MPs in particular mentioned often), the National Board of Education, the unions, universities (with a few specific researchers given multiple mentions), private enterprises (such as companies that provide private tutoring) and international organizations (such as the OECD, the EU and the Nordic Council of Ministries). We interviewed central actors who were currently or had previously been in powerful positions in comprehensive education politics and policy-making. In addition, coverage of interviewees from different ends and the middle field of the political stratum was introduced. Only one invited interviewee declined the interview request.

The interview material was gathered in a relatively short time, one year (2015–2016), and is intended to deepen the understanding of how those who often have the power of telling the story of comprehensive schooling in public actually construct the narrative. The material was gathered prior to the (then) newly published PISA results in December 2016, where Finland's position had dropped. In order to increase the consistency and reduce the obvious variance of time and space of the conducted interviews in this study, the interviews were gathered during a relatively short period of time (one year) during which no major events or happenings (such as publication of rankings or major reforms) took place. The interviews were also conducted in similar places, i.e. only at the university or the interviewee's office, which as environments made the interview situations resemble each other. The interviewers were aware of the requirements of aiming to repeat the interviews as similar situations as best as possible, in order to increase the trustworthiness of the study.

The conceptual analysis of the material follows the guidelines of narrative discourse analysis. This analytical approach was chosen in order to better grasp the power in the discourses that are socially constructed in the stories. In the field of governance studies, storytelling is widely understood as a technique in which social identities, forms of rationality and political strategies can be transmitted without the attention or direct control of self-governing actors or organizations (Sørensen, 2006). Rhodes (2011: 289) identifies three characteristics of storytelling. The first, the *language game*, formulates the storyline and answers the questions of what has happened and why. The second function,

the *performing game*, refers to the idea that, in order to be influential, stories must be told differently for different audiences. Third, the story always implies a *management game*. Stories are seen as a way to connect the past experiences and future expectations. (Rhodes, 2011; see also Lyotard, [1984] 1979) In other words, stories are told to co-opt, hide and open up the contingency of social reality.

Following Schank and Abelson (1995), we consider stories as the basis of understanding, which is encoded in the account. Thus, the idea of asking for the ‘story of the Finnish comprehensive school’ has been an attempt to capture a certain form of understanding of this phenomenon. H Porter Abbott (2009; 2011) discusses the mutual relations of stories, discourses and narratives. His main idea is that the story is what is explicitly being asked in the interviews: the aim is to investigate the historical continuation of events and the social function of the narrative. The story can be analytically divided into *events*, such as *acts* (intentional) and *happenings* (unintentional). In practice, the distinction between intentional and unintentional can be hard to grasp, given its contingency, but in narrative analysis this distinction provides tools.

The analysis of intentionality within the frame of discursive analyses is of course challenging (see Van Dijk, 2006); however, the context within which certain events are described as intentional is vital, as well as the interpretation of the speakers’ position in relation to the content. The biggest challenge methodologically would be the assumption of intentionality in the speech, which would require making assumptions about the speakers’ mental models (see Van Dijk, 2006: 128). In this study we have made use of Van Dijk’s (2006) analytical solution of focusing only on the overall topics of discussion, and the descriptions of them historically being intentionally or unintentionally conducted, rather than concentrating on the syntactic structure or intonation of the speech. We need to emphasize that the analysis aims to reveal only the ways of describing the different moments on the storyline by the interviewees, who sometimes explicitly described some of the moments as happenings, which no-one had presumed according to their content. Thus, making judgements about whether some of the events were actually intentional or unintentional remains out of the scope and interest of this study, given these methodological presuppositions. However, it is worth noting that many of the interviewees were themselves involved in the processes mentioned in the story and were originally communicating about them further to the public, nationally and internationally.

Bevir and Rhodes (2012) suggest that recovering stories is an excellent method for fine-grained research. Stories are told in order to co-opt, hide and open up the contingency of social reality. As stated, we set out not only to look at the story and the events included in it, but also to concentrate on how the story was told (discourses in socio-historical space–time) and what are considered its implications in policy-making as a social practice. We focus on how the story is told as a historical continuation, what causalities and reasons for the events are constructed, and what external influences are perceived as contributing to the development of Finnish comprehensive education. As an analytical practice, we reconstructed an individual storyline, including all the events mentioned, for each interviewee and specified the common events, acts and happenings in the different stories. The changes in the audiences and given importance of the events and their influences were then analysed. These questions are becoming more and more important, especially in times of international learning assessments, indicators and educational exports, because the power of the narrative of Finnish comprehensive education seems to serve as a vital force in profit-making by exporting education from Finland (Seppänen et al., in press).

As an analytical unit, the settings should be detached from the general outline of the story. Here, too, the concepts of double temporality (see Bhabha, 1996; Farred, 2004) and double spatiality (or ‘doubled by spatial deixes’; Masemola, 2011) are acknowledged: there is a time about which the story is told and a time when the story is told. There is also a place about which the story is told and a place where it is told. Traditional analysis focuses on investigating what is told in a story, but the ways of telling the story should also be given full consideration (investigating the narrative: who and which institutions become part of the story, by which means, who is left out, whose influence is constructed as superficial and whose power as hidden, but strong, to mention but a few possibilities).



## Thickenings and periods in the narrative

The story of Finland's comprehensive schooling was constructed by the interviewees from a fairly unanimous viewpoint. For example, the differences in political positions did not produce significantly different events in the storyline, an outcome that could well be considered surprising. The starting points of the story, left undefined by the interviewees, varied in time. Some of the interviewees started their story in the Enlightenment;<sup>1</sup> some began in the 1970s when comprehensive schools were in fact established. As one might expect, the researchers interviewed tended to begin in the earlier years, whereas the politicians and other stakeholders concentrated mainly on the period after the Second World War.

The events (the unintentional happenings and the intentional acts) were also described with different terminology by different storytellers. In the analysis of the events discussed in all the interviews, nine different chronologically organized and consistent themes emerged. The timeframe ranged from the Enlightenment to 2015. Not all interviewees discussed all of these years, but these were the 'thickening' points in the story. We organized time periods around points at which something new and significant happened, either because of intentional political decision-making or by change, as described by the interviewees:

1. Ideas and ideologies of the Enlightenment, nationalism and *Bildung*<sup>2</sup>;
2. The beginning of social democracy as the basis of a political party in Finland;
3. The period from the Second World War in Finland until 1968: the growing influence of a left-centre political coalition;
4. Preparation and birth of the comprehensive school: provision of research support and political friction with the previous early stage selection in a dual system (Folk School/grammar school);
5. Ten years of egalitarian and uniform comprehensive school;
6. The slow slide towards the 1990s and economic depression: major cuts in public spending, discursive change and a political turn;
7. Developing the school in line with international trends in education: panic about the quality of the comprehensive school and political pressure from the Confederation of Finnish Industries; and
8. PISA report: 'turning the boat', fixing minor issues and trying to maintain the schools and the image despite declining results in Finnish students' performance.

Events 3, 4, 5 and 7 were described as intentional acts, and the rest rather as happenings. After identifying these eight events, we re-analysed the stories by focusing on the time periods, which all start and end with a thickening in the storyline, where relevant events and happenings take place. These thickenings in the narrative are moments when the story experiences an unchangeable turn and a new discursive compilation starts. We have named the eras between the thickenings the 'time periods', which thus comprise several events and have their starting and ending points in thickenings in the story. Altogether, three periods were recognized and reconstructed in the analysis:

1. The first period, including themes 1–3, is called the *Pre-comprehensive school period (–1970)*, during which the events and actors' intentions were for nine years of compulsory schooling for all children nationwide;
2. The second period comprises events 4–7 and is called *From steady development to the first crisis of comprehensive schooling (1970–2000)*; and

3. The last period, called *PISA as an international performance game* (event 8), begins at the turn of the millennium and focusses mainly on public and behind-the-scenes discussion of the PISA evaluations. What enabled the analysis of this *language game* further was the concentration on the *performing game*: the change of audience in each period in the story, resulting in the construction of a different narrative.

We present below the central events, actors and politicizations of the content of each analytically reconstructed thickening. We analyse the potential of changing the direction of education politics, leading to reconstruction of the story of comprehensive education politics in the analysed material.

### *The pre-comprehensive school period: equality in education for a national audience in a Nordic setting*

The first thickening in the storyline concerned the somewhat long line of emergence of a comprehensive school system, which comprised the period after the Second World War in Finland until 1968 (*puitelaki* or the Framework Law): it was crucial in terms of the discussions of the comprehensive school. Ideas and ideologies of the Enlightenment and nationalism were described as the starting points of the whole development, resulting in the political debate about elementary schools (*kansakoulu*) and finally the construction of a comprehensive school (*peruskoulu*).

In the 1930s the political climate was all in all tight, so that this discussion [on combining the dual school system into a uniform system] was difficult and started off again after the [Second World] war, when the left-wing gets out of jail and comes from the other side of the [Russian] border. And then it took another few committees before they reached the stage that the 1968 law was given. And that story can be told in so many ways. [Pasi] Sahlberg has told it in his own way with the name Finnish Lessons, which is a hero story of a kind, and then there ... is this Miracle named book, which tells of a very straightforward development, but I consider this to be far more complex, and often things happen due to world-political happenings. (Researcher 2)

Then we come to the Second World War: There is this myth that Finns grew into a very solid community. ... but after the war there was this spirit that these citizens who had fought on the front line for the fatherland, they need, and they deserve, a long, common basic education. (Researcher 1)

The common basic education (*yleinen pohjasivistys*) refers here to the German concept of *Bildung*. The interviewee uses the concept here to indicate the turning point, how previously exclusive *Bildung* starts to belong to everyone regardless of their future educational path. This idea of *Bildung* 'for all' was considered to be a cornerstone for the development which later led to the birth of comprehensive school system.

The elementary school actually broke the ice, and there was an ideologically strong conception that this [elementary school] is the basis of the national ascent. And then came the law of comprehensive education, which made it stable, the whole thing, which helped then of course in spreading the comprehensive school to the whole country. And that's what our PISA results are based on. (Administrative Leader 2)

The beginning of the twentieth century, according to the story, was a time when *Bildung*, nationalism and the beginning of social democracy in the form of a political party influenced the development of elementary schooling. Socio-democratic ways of constructing elementary schools were originally borrowed from Sweden, as a result of study trips made by a few politicians, and developed in Finland into an even larger egalitarian system of education than the original. In this narrative, the Finnish school was constructed as a national project with a national audience, with



influences borrowed mainly from Sweden with regard to educational governance and from Germany regarding a didactic tradition.

The story of the parliamentary process in the events leading to comprehensive schooling was discussed mainly by the researchers interviewed. They questioned vigorously the narrative of pure consensus in constructing the comprehensive school: a great deal of contingency, forms of unintentional happenings and multifaceted political games were also involved. A central element in the narrated events was that academics were introduced into the narrative, and the evidence base in constructing comprehensive schooling was emphasized.

If I start with the discussion that gave birth to the comprehensive school. ... I ... heard a lot of calls [at the university] from the Ministry of Education. ... The main goal established in those discussions was to create more societal equality through education, and what was hammered home with all students ... was that this reform is highly political, and important educational experts had been gathered to support the reform. And there was a major part of the professors by then. Not all, though... however, equality was a goal, and it was mainly because of this left-central combination having a strong standing point in the society then. (Administrative Leader 1)

In the law of 1968, it was said that the practices and structures and so on in these schools needed to be developed in such a way that learning is not dependent on the [child's] socio-economic background, place of residence or gender. And this could be read as, 'Ahaa! It says here that everyone can learn everything'. And that was not stated in any of the political documents about the comprehensive school, but it was read in this way. (Researcher 1)

The narrative about this era included a counter-narrative to the hegemonic discourse of unanimous decision-making regarding construction of the comprehensive school, and it emphasized the political struggles and negotiations of power: what was evident was that it was impossible to resist the aim of promoting equality of education in that political climate.

In the 1960s–1970s there was a fundamental fight about who should have power in education. Does it belong to a totalitarian system, or could parents and regions and local communities have some kind of a solution [to give there]... our educational politics was then very left-central, and if you supported private schools and 100-year-old grammar schools, which have a right to stay in this community, then you were a terrible capitalist and bourgeois and whatever, and these were used in hitting back at these old grammar-school men. And if you made any criticism of the idea that everyone can learn everything and integration always produces excellent outcomes, then you were reactionary and behaviourist, and they were hammered pretty hard there too. (Researcher 2)

The emergence of the comprehensive school was thus supported in the narrative by research and still included traces of political disagreement with the previous dual system (the grammar school vs. the elementary school). However, the decision was then made official by a political qualified majority, because the actual act that took place in Finland was eventually unanimously agreed upon: an essential law was enacted in 1968.

From one side, it seemed that there was a double bind in the discussion of the emphasis on academics: discussing the cultural shift in research and a move from more behavioural theories towards more constructionist ones, as well as ideological questions concerning equality and power in which these two sides (at least) seemed to discuss the issue from different positions, with hardly any actual meeting point. However, in terms of the settings presented, this part of the story (when told some decades later) was offered as the basis for the success of the Finnish comprehensive school, because it was supported by research:

I personally think that the central idea of this success story is that it was not only a political reform, but [also] was strongly supported by the folks at universities. I would see this as a research-initiated or maybe research-supported reform, a reform supported by research. (Administrative Leader 1)

The narrative shift of the first period combines two different motives behind comprehensive schooling. First, a strong emphasis was placed on *Bildung* and enlightenment, which in the interviews were most strongly attached to and manifested in the construction of the elementary school system in the nineteenth century (A 12/1866) and in the Law for Compulsory Education in 1921 (A 101/1921). Second, emphasis was given to education as a national and even nationalist project, which was also personified by a few central actors in the history of comprehensive education.

### *From steady development to the first crisis of the comprehensive school*

The first ten years (1974–1984) of the second period were described as a time of a relatively egalitarian and uniform comprehensive schooling. *Bona fide* practice and political consensus were mentioned in the interviews, because the new comprehensive school was being developed and financed in good spirit:

There was a lot of experimental research, and the development of comprehensive school was supported by that work. It was very visible until the [19]90s. And it was very strong in the [19]80s, and the outcome of the reform, putting two school types together, was successful because we had such strong experimental actions and a constant increase in the level of teacher education. ... and also, taking an international glance, because we started a very strong in-service training for [school] staff. And in that respect, Finland is very different from other Nordic countries. (Administrative Leader 1)

From this period on, international references, especially to other Nordic countries, became stronger in the narrative. The view on Finnish educational politics and policies as a part of a larger international frame and deriving international influence, primarily Nordic, was more apparent in the verbal presentations. Comprehensive education was discussed in an international, comparative context.

The Nordic co-operation has been important and valuable to Finland, and Finland has been this nice and obedient and profited a lot from that experience from other countries. Sweden has, of course, been kind of a big brother and slightly arrogant and thought of Finland as being slightly strange, as we invested so much [in education], but then [came] the first PISA round, then a lot of this perception. ... And Finland has had very close relations to Denmark and Norway as well.... There was a lot of co-operation before, as the administration and professors spoke good Swedish. All administrators spoke good Swedish, which was a required skill, and these meetings were very regular. Nowadays they have faded into fairly formal ones. (Administrative Leader 1)

The slow slide towards economic depression started in Finland in the 1990s. Major cuts in public spending were introduced, which affected the funding of comprehensive schools to a significant extent. The biggest themes and events that arose in the discussion were the decentralization reforms, new laws introducing public school markets along with other neoliberal features, and cutting funds from teachers' in-service training. However, in looking back, this period seemed to redefine the original meaning of educational equality from a geographical angle: socio-economic differences were targeted in the reforms, but the economic depression, the (then) current political situation and decentralization policies as parts of that changed the situation of educational equality in the regions in the 1990s.

The economic depression in its way boxed the system on its ears, and as simultaneously there was this big political change when after this whole period we got a general director on the National Board of Education from the Coalition Party [right-wing]... and simultaneously the Minister of Education [came] from the Coalition Party as well, a very strong de-regulation and modification of the comprehensive school started .... The spirit in which the [19]90s were drawn – it was unique and in its way weeded out the comprehensive school. ... [One administrative leader] had the strong intention to erase these norms from comprehensive school, and simultaneously the association of Finnish local and regional authorities got some staff, who very much wanted to foster the idea that ‘the municipality and local level know’. And then there was [a powerful Social Democrat] who had the same point of view, thus creating a whole new consensus between the Social Democrats and the Coalition Party.... [This] led to regional equality becoming a swear word. (Administrative Leader 1)

The situation [of regional inequality] has somehow gotten out of hand, and of course, if the starting point is the child’s or pupil’s right, then of course they should have similar possibilities, but it is then completely different, if you get 20 hours more than someone else every year in some subject, or you have better opportunities for choosing foreign languages that will enhance your career and advance your path of study. (Administrative Leader 2)

Following the major political turn in the politics of comprehensive education at this point in the story in the 1990s, there seems to have been a discursive change. New legislation was introduced, including reforms in decentralization, more options and competition in the form of emerging public education markets, which included, for example, the introduction to the Finnish comprehensive school system of parental school choice and pupil selection conducted by the schools. The premises regarding their origin, and especially the consequences of these reforms, as past and future points of reference, were described in vivid terms, because they were perceived as promoting a new kind of basis to comprehensive education politics:

Neither these politicians nor civil servants were aware that there was this neoliberal framework around these decisions which they were preparing and presenting.... I remember, I was part of a [committee] in [early 1990s], and that was an authoritative group... and I used the floor and applied the term neoliberalism ... and [they] asked, what is neoliberalism? In the US it had been a general term already in the [beginning of the 1980s]. Here we were still in such a state of innocence that we thought we were just making nice liberties and a nice little competition, of course. (Researcher 1)

The political turn of the 1990s can also be approached through the shifting relations of the Finnish political parties. According to the interviewees, the centre–left coalition had an important role not only in establishing comprehensive schools in the late 1960s, but also in protecting the ‘one school for all’ idea against marketization and privatization.

During these years and decades, I have hosted many kinds of guests, and ... they always wondered how we managed to maintain the comprehensive school as a beautiful flower of national education politics. I have always emphasized that ... either the Finnish Social Democratic Party or the Centre Party – or in the best case both – have been sitting in the cabinet. So, there has always been one or the other tackling these right-wing attempts to privatize education. (Politician 2)

As part of the wider societal change, the centre–left coalition in Finland began to lose its status quo in the 1980s. Shifting political coalitions also changed the politics of comprehensive education. According to the interviews, the 1990s appear to be a competitive tug-of-war, when ministers of education chose sides based not entirely on their political party or existing coalitions but, rather, on the basis of their own vision of a single educational issue. In tight situations, individual actors could play a significant role for policy-shaping and decision-making in different committees.

In the mid-[19]90s the National Coalition Party tried to re-introduce the entrance examinations into comprehensive school. On the school law committee were politicians from all different parties, and representatives of the Centre Party were divided. One hooked up with the left and the Green Party, who were not eager to change history ... while the other person from the centre decided to jump on the right-wing bandwagon. (Politician 2)

Shifts in political coalitions also had an impact on teacher education. Teachers' in-service training had been considered an important factor in the high quality of Finland's comprehensive schooling; it was only a decade later that it was so described in PISA success stories. Nevertheless, the changes in the 1990s were considered harsh in this respect:

And I dare say that today ... [making in-service training for teachers tuition-based and eliminating the in-service centre in the small municipality of Heinola] was completely conscious and intentional, so that let's stop this centralized state-governed education and let's levy a charge for it and make the municipalities pay.... And then these poor municipalities have absolutely no chance, because they have to pay a daily allowance, and the municipalities have a very little of these allowances. And that's how [this] foundation broke in the 1990s. (Administrative Leader 1)

[Abroad] in-service training is collaborative learning. What do we do? The same thing we have been doing for decades, with a few good exceptions. Previously, we went to Heinola for a course. ... But everything comes down to money.... and I'm not blaming our Ministry of Education or even the ministers of education, as these things come from above. It comes from... the Ministry of Finance, the big boys of the government decide. And I can say this even with the recorder on here. (Stakeholder 1)

Thus far, the audience for the comprehensive school (the performing game) had mainly been an internal one – a national audience – with, according to the storylines, some influences imported from the outside, including strong co-operation especially among the Nordic countries through various Nordic and international organizations. Developing the school according to international trends in education was the next, overlapping stage in the multiple reforms in the 1990s, and there we can see a change in the audience for Finnish comprehensive education (a change in the performing game). The narrative now reflected political pressure from the Confederation of Finnish Industries to reform the comprehensive school system from several directions. Special attention was given to discussing the quality of the comprehensive school and the need for a market-based structure of the system, as had been done earlier in Sweden, from where previous influences were derived.

I remember ... the battle that even if we wandered from this world [of uniform schooling] towards a world with more leeway, we didn't go very far. And I believe an essential thing is, I think, the choice we made in [19]94–95 or so. It is a fact that in the background there was this free school ideology from Sweden. And we did something else.... They decided to bring in private schools along with public comprehensive schools. They intentionally started creating this free school concept.... We in Finland then ... decided not to go in that direction, but rather to increase freedom within the public system. So that the emerging pressure could be unloaded there. (Politician 1)

... also there you see the battlefronts on a political scale that the right-wing bourgeois parties strongly support private schools. And then the rest of the field [gives more support] for this school for everyone, meaning a general municipal school, but there you see the development inside that that we have this development of so-called teaching with an emphasis [on streaming]. Quite a lot swam in, so a kind of hidden, or is it even that hidden? Grouping is the term used, where better and worse performing pupils are put in different groups. (Administrative Leader 2)

This point (Politician 1) was one of the first references to Sweden, albeit not intended as a suggestion to follow the Swedish model. Here, too, double temporality needs to be acknowledged: criticism of free schools in Sweden is currently harsh. Thus, rationalizing this as an intentional act (which it was, according to the story of many interviewees) rather than being an unintended happening would seem to be a wise move for internal and external audiences. In addition, it was possible here to discover friction in the storyline between the interviewees: some of them claimed that there was consensus behind not introducing a fully privatized school market; some of them described an internal conflict between the political right and the left. Some interviewees went into detail about how these changes were initiated:

Well, I would say that there you find links to economic life. Business would be rather on the side [of free school ideology], and then I would say that the field of political parties was unanimous on the decision that was made.... and the laws were accepted by a solid majority in the parliament. (Politician 1)

For example, in the [19]90s the comprehensive school was heavily criticized by the Confederation of Finnish Industries, and the whole system was set to be dismantled on a political basis. But the ideas of dismantling the system were knocked out when the first PISA results started appearing, and after that nobody has really questioned the idea of a comprehensive school. (Administrative Leader 3)

The second comprehensive school period was told in terms of a steady development towards a Law for Comprehensive Education (A 718/1984). However, in the narrative the strengthened liberal right and the deteriorating coalition between the left and the centre from the late 1980s began to break down the social and regional equality as the ideological base of the comprehensive school. The whole of the 1990s is described mainly as a decade of danger characterized by constantly changing political coalitions, economic depression and the rise of managerialism and new public management. However, the first major crisis of comprehensive schooling was soon to be ended due to glorious (i.e. outstandingly good) PISA results at the beginning of the new millennium.

### *PISA as an international performance game*

The narrative about the political discussions of the 1990s seemed to drive the comprehensive school nationally into a discursive situation in which reform was soon to be carried out. However, the PISA results which, based on the interviews, we consider analytically as an unintentional happening in this regard, changed the direction of events, because it changed the audience and the measurements of the perceived quality of Finnish comprehensive education.

The comprehensive school got quite a ride then in the [19]90s; even [acknowledged professors] ... gave statements...they questioned the product so to speak, that the comprehensive school is, though not in quite these words, expensive and inefficient and that kind of rhetoric, which was also insisted on by the Confederation of Finnish Industries in their pamphlets back then. It started to spring from all directions. And I don't know, this is kind of ... but was it eventually so that PISA in fact might have saved the Finnish comprehensive school, I can't answer this, but one might play with that question. (Researcher 2)

Even while there seemed to be a discourse casting PISA in the role of revealing the good qualities of Finnish schools, the discussion prior to the PISA results, accompanied by the deregulations and educational reforms, left a permanent mark on the Finnish comprehensive school. The PISA report seemed to 'turn the boat' and change the discourse, and in particular the audience. Analytically, this seemed to be more of a happening than an intentional act, but the impact of PISA was considered enormous. PISA was described as culminating much of the development of schools and opening new discussions about the international marketization of education.

I think that the PISA results were kind of like . . . not like a happy accident, but more like an accident in happiness. . . . It sort of like jammed up things. . . . When you get feedback that you are doing damn well, then of course you try to retain all that is good. . . . Sometimes a positive thing that is happening to someone is not positive for the person's future. (Politician 1)

I remember that in parliament, one politician stood up and said, 'Hey boys, now we can invest in something other than comprehensive schooling' . . . So now that we are so good at this, we can start saving. (Administrative Leader 1)

Clearly, the surprise PISA results had a two-fold influence on educational politics, according to the narrative: first, it was followed by internal preservation and protection of the comprehensive school (and halted all intended changes, according to the interviewees, because Finland scored at the top); and, second, by international fame and marketing efforts, such that up to the present time more and more actors attempted to profit personally from the favourable outcome (which was confirmed in the interviews). Bad news internally about the school was hardly heard, or even publically discussed:

There were an awful lot of politicians at an event [about] the PISA results, and there was this huge Eureka moment – that the comprehensive school is so good, that we have been worried about it for no reason. That we don't have to be this good, as we were first in everything. That was politics, and there the PISA success ended up being negative. . . . [Other reports] were done much more carefully concerning the differences between schools and classes, and the ministry was often informed about it: 'Now were going down.' . . . and this caused a counter-reaction from the civil servants, who said yes, but in PISA we're doing fine. And that's important, because the politicians are not interested in anything else. (Administrative Leader 1)

At the same time, the interviewees described how Finland was borrowing policies from outside, fixing minor issues and trying to maintain the schools and the image as the 'best system among OECD countries' despite the later declining results. These were the main topics in the narrative with regard to education politics and policies during this period. It was evident that there was a major shift in the performing game: Finland became a reference society and played that role for those outside the country. Connections with both international and national audiences became more complex.

If you want to get across [to politicians] where the innovations come from, I think that, in a way, it's from their own political background organizations. . . . And that's probably how it has always been, so that some proper country gets benchmarked where they have a similar governmental coalition or people in power as themselves. . . . But it's mainly European countries, or Canada or the States then, but it's pretty hard for them to say we should do this or that, as they have some pretty horrible [PISA] results. (Administrative Leader 2)

International organizations [and] OECD parameters are read when they suit us. And now we get new PISA results, and then we read them. I'm afraid . . . of the political process in the future, as we already have people who think less [in comprehensive school] would be enough; but what happens when the results sink? The guilty party has to be found. Finns always start looking for the guilty ones. They take their shotguns and go out to find the guilty. Where do they find them? (Stakeholder 1)

After the thickening concerning the PISA reports, the external influences referred to were reduced to a number of references to either the OECD or the OECD-countries, where success in the OECD-originated rankings created a new frame of international reference. On a national level, the narrative of the early 2000s and perspectives for the future included the notion of not having a clear political consensus on comprehensive education. This has probably been the case for decades where highly politicized topics are concerned, such as forms of equality, quality and, later on, benchmarking.



In which direction should this comprehensive school be taken? There is no common view on it to my mind.... We talk about digi-leaps and stuff, but what do we want? What is the system, what are we looking for? And this discussion should be conducted in a parliamentary group and over governmental terms in order to find a consensus, which we had then; well, it probably wasn't unanimous then when the comprehensive school was established, but it created a shared thought that this is a good thing. (Stakeholder 2)

What is evident is that the internationalization of evaluation and cross-country rankings through benchmarking seemed to change the audience for the comprehensive school through events taking place in different fields (such as the economic depression) and forums (international comparisons and benchmarking): the shift in the performing game from a national audience to an international audience, especially in the role of the 'best' model, thanks to OECD reporting, reflects some later national-level intentional acts in comprehensive education politics. As a lasting and unexpected situation, the Finnish PISA success also changed the relations of political actors. In contrast to the 1990s' critique, comprehensive schooling suddenly became a political conservation area for all the major stakeholders – rhetorically speaking, at least, at the time the story was told. Despite this 'freeze-frame' situation, there seemed to be no shared vision about the future direction for the comprehensive school. However, by the end of the first decade of the new millennium, new criticisms related to the content of learning and digitalization began to be directed at comprehensive schools.

Table 1 present the results showing the thickenings discovered in the narrative on the entire timeline of comprehensive education politics, the central events and influential actors and the form of management game during each period.

**Table 1.** Time periods, central events, actors and audiences in Finnish basic education.

Period	Central events (in order of appearance)	Central actors (in order of appearance)	Audience: acts and happenings
Pre-comprehensive period (–1977)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Law of comprehensive education 1921</li> <li>• 1966 Election</li> <li>• 1968 Skeleton law for comprehensive education</li> <li>• 1970s school reform and its implementation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The State</li> <li>• JV Snellman</li> <li>• Mikael Soininen</li> <li>• Social Democrats</li> <li>• The Centre Party</li> <li>• Nordic co-operation</li> <li>• Private grammar schools</li> </ul>	National, internal: acts of borrowing policies
From steady development to 1990s crisis (1977–2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1984 Curriculum reform</li> <li>• Abolishing banding groups</li> <li>• 1980s Municipal reform</li> <li>• Economic depression</li> <li>• EU membership</li> <li>• The 1998 Law for comprehensive education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The State</li> <li>• Municipalities</li> <li>• Confederation of Finnish Industries</li> <li>• The National Coalition Party</li> <li>• Committee for overall reform of school legislation (1996–1998)</li> </ul>	National, internal: acts of following and applying neo-liberal reforms and patterns of decentralization
PISA as international success and new national management game (2000–)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PISA 2001</li> <li>• European migrant crisis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OECD</li> <li>• European Union</li> <li>• International guests</li> <li>• Ministry of Finance</li> <li>• Minister of Education</li> </ul>	International: becoming a reference society (happening)

## Concluding discussion

As we have noted above, the narrative of the Finnish comprehensive school, and the politics surrounding it, seem to consist of three major periods: the emergence of the comprehensive school (the 1970s); major reforms during the 1990s; and the period after the first PISA results in the early 2000s. What distinguished these three periods of comprehensive education politics from each other were the thickenings in the storyline with a strong described connection to the overall political situations, both nationally and internationally, and external occurrences outside the scope of education politics. The two first periods were discursively described in the interviews as times of intentional politics and policy-making with regard to comprehensive education, when the audience for the story was national and the discussion involved only borrowing ideas from abroad. The first period reflects the birth of national solidarity, which later took the form of a left–centre coalition with goals of social and regional equality in basic education. JV Snellman was discussed as a central actor who played an important but controversial role in the construction of common education, because he promoted *Bildung* and education, but not necessarily a uniform comprehensive education system: he preferred a dual model. Mikael Soinen, as an individual actor, was mentioned often in the interviews. Curiously, internal shifts in educational attitudes of the Agrarian Party during the period (see Arola, 2003; Kivirauma and Jauhiainen, 1996) were not raised as a central part of the story, although such a discussion might have been expected based on the backgrounds of the interviewees. Nor were the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and especially the clergyman Uno Cygnaeus (often considered to be the father of Finnish public education), mentioned in the interviews as important actors as often as they are cited in the research literature.

The comprehensive school reform implemented in the 1970s was described as being strongly supported by academia, which then in the last period, thirty years later in the narrative, was used as one of the explanatory factors behind the success of Finland's students in the PISA tests. During the second period, in the 1990s, the processes implementing neoliberal policies to different extents brought new tones to the discussion of borrowing and lending educational policies. In the narrative, the political right wing was blaming the comprehensive school for 'equalizing' students too much and not serving the needs of a changing business world and neoliberal market principles, such as individual choice. Organizations such as the Confederation of Finnish Industries ended up publishing their own brochures about school development (see Ahonen, 2003: 169–171, 173–175). In addition, some researchers were accusing the comprehensive school of reproducing the social order and failing to advance the goals of social change and equality (Ahonen, 2003). However, heavy criticism of the Finnish comprehensive school was dampened after the good results shown by Finnish students in the PISA 2000 report (Rinne and Järvinen, 2011); later explanations in the literature for the reasons behind this success and its consequences have been ambiguous (see, e.g., Sahlberg, 2011; Seppänen et al., in press).

The 1990s were described as a period of shifts in the political atmosphere, which then encountered an unexpected turn when the PISA results appeared. This was analysed as a happening, one that also changed the performing game – the emergence of an international audience (Rhodes, 2011) – of policy-making and caused new forms of management games, and acts. These may be interpreted as the pillars for the discussion about Finland as a reference society (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Takayama et al., 2013; Waldow et al., 2014), because in the beginning of the third period there was a major change in the audience. According to the narrative, PISA brought the discussion of Finnish comprehensive education into an international framework overnight. In the current description of this period, a new national management game (see Rhodes, 2011) could be observed, because this part of the story was emphasized in particular in the quotidian storytelling of the Finnish success of education.

The aim of finding causality between education politics and policies (reforms) and success in learning outcome rankings has been of interest for external audiences as well as for educational export in the later 2010s. It seemed that certain unintentional happenings were explained further as intentional acts, because these explanations would fit better the purposes of the following period and change the management game: the role of changing the setting and thus the influence of the double temporality is evident. One could also argue that the recursive nature of the stories makes it possible both to reinforce or challenge current discourses in the political debate by referring to the perceived past. As well as these 'lessons to be learned from the past', storytelling also provides for addressing different audiences by connecting the story of the comprehensive school to national politics in other fields, such as the welfare state and social issues; the narrative of teacher education; the narrative of educational research in different universities and their links to developing comprehensive schooling (especially in the 1970s in discussions of the cultural turn); the narrative of the curriculum (which is probably the most interconnected); and the narrative of international trends in education (such as the role of OECD reporting) and political changes in the surrounding world (such as the collapse of the Soviet Union during this time frame). Each of these themes could be the subject of an article of its own: they deserve to be mentioned.

Concerning internal and external influences, the latter part of the decade commencing in 2010 seems to constitute a new period in the narrative of Finnish comprehensive education politics, in which the influence of international organizations like the OECD, the economic depression and 'managerialization' of public administration changed the internal power relations and forms of steering the comprehensive education politics. As key findings in the analysis, two factors should be emphasized: first, the role of the PISA reports as a turning point in comprehensive education politics; and, second, how this then led to the discussion of the comprehensive school as a success story of a kind, especially under the term 'social innovation'. The use of the word 'innovation' is most likely time-bound and requires a sense of double temporality (Farred, 2004) of events: in the narrative, several happenings were rationalized as acts in the storyline, even if the people involved in those events recall a great deal of contingency along the way. This notion links the findings of this study to the earlier literature on Finland as a reference society of a kind (see Takayama et al., 2013; Waldow et al., 2014). That position, it seems, is something that has been internally negotiated on the national level, and the aims of also capitalizing on it economically have been pursued somewhat late, albeit currently strongly in the form of educational export. However, the lack of capacity of telling an appealing story about the success, constructing a consistent and rational narrative, has been one of the pitfalls on the way of profiting fully from it for educational exporters.

What becomes clear is that the narrative approach has provided a methodological tool with which to observe the interaction of acts and happenings and their external influences as a series of events. The combined storylines constructing the narrative in the given socio-historical context actually reveal the contingency of the events. The relations of actions and consequences reconstructed in narratives are not at all as rational, which we explain as being due to double temporality. Explanations of events change over time; but certainly some of those described as acts in the storyline of the Finnish comprehensive school were indicated as being a contingent series of happenings. Sometimes they were described as being based on acts which led to new acts, and sometimes, like the PISA results, they were just perceived as surprises which eventually shaped the system's entire performing game.

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## Notes

1. The period of the Enlightenment is generally regarded as having started in the mid 17th century and lasted until the start of the 19th century. See, for example: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history>
2. Referring to both self-cultivation of persons and nation building, the original German concept of *Bildung* has a historically exclusive meaning with regard to upper social strata (*sivistyneistö*) and ‘non-vocational’ contents of education, (*yleissivistys*).

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### Author biographies

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