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Kantasalmi, Kari; Kupiainen, Sirkku

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Classes with selective intake in Finnish Comprehensive School: A Problem of Societally Equal Opportunity for Schooling or a Boost for Learning and Equity in Pedagogical arrangements?

Abstract

This article discusses the political programs of welfare state and neoliberalism in the context of Finnish basic education. It unfolds developments in the welfare state-inspired comprehensive model by focusing on in/equity as a decisional dilemma in learning-group formation. Niklas Luhmann's societal theory and reappraisal of Ralf Dahrendorf's notion of "life chances" allow theoretical clarification between societally in/equal opportunities for schooling and organizational in/equity-concerns in pedagogical arrangements. Based on nationally representative data, we found that the modest diversification in the form of '*selective classes'* cater to better achieving students from families with higher educational status. We see this to signal resilience of the comprehensive model rather than its claimed erosion backed by policy analysts' reference to a neoliberalist turn toward market-modelled policy premises for public education. The selective classes, based on an emphasis of a curricular subject, attending to interest and motivation, supplement the Finnish focus on special education, characteristic for the comprehensive school since its adoption in the 1970s.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Welfare state, Systems theory, in/Equity, Pedagogical diversification, Selective classes, Comprehensive model

1. Introduction

This article is based on an empirical analysis of the impact of selective classes on Finnish ninth-graders' achievement and motivation within the comprehensive school and on their choice of upper secondary education, the first significant point of "institutional sorting" (Esser, 2016) in the system. With the empirical data, we explore 'selective classes' as a limited form of "choice interventions" (Peterson & Woessmann, 2007) within the Finnish comprehensive school. Based on student-level data, we ask more specifically whether the selective classes represent educational inequity justifying a claim of an erosive impact on the egalitarian foundations of the Finnish comprehensive school. Such envisions of policy-focused analysts are backed by claimed neoliberalist influence on national policies. Despite of our findings being open to diverse normative policy interpretations, we argue for reconsidering such interpretative frame much used in Finnish education policy-focused analyses.

From the viewpoint of societal theory (Luhmann 2012; 2013), we suggest more general reframing the presumed effectiveness of political steering attempts on pedagogical arrangements critical to educational in/equity dilemmas. To explicate the relevance of such within-school arrangements in terms of the in/equity dilemma, we briefly discuss the societally egalitarian principles behind the comprehensive school reform of the 1970s. In this, the reappraisal of Dahrendorf's (1979) understanding of "life-chances" from the perspective of Luhmannian view on functionally differentiated society has proven fruitful. It helps specifying key Finnish education policy concerns proceeding the 1970s comprehensive reform and subsequently regarding the presumed neoliberalist

policy turn of the late 1980s (Rinne, 2003). Preoccupations on the "diversification of whole old honorable Nordic social democratic comprehensive school" and a characterization of the "state educational narrative of decentralization, deregulation, marketization, and the rise of evaluation and choice" by Kivirauma and his colleagues (2003) has since marked much of the discussion on a neoliberalist threats for the Finnish compulsory scho oling.

Among these claims (see also Siekkinen, 2017), we find the presumptions regarding evaluation especially problematic in a country lacking clear proficiency standards and relying on just intermittent sample-based assessment in the monitoring of national learning outcomes. We argue that educational in/equity concerns suggest reconsidering the overt interpretation of evaluation-induced information as primarily a neoliberal governance technique. On the contrary, based on contextually sensitive student-level assessment data, in/equity considerations open evidence-informed instances for pedagogical arrangements. We admit some instances of *new public management* (NPM)-inspired changes in school administration (Ylönen, 2009; Antikainen, 2010) and economy-related primary school closures in rural regions. Yet, these tendencies hardly justify a sweeping argument pointing to a global neoliberalist politics effectively penetrating the organizing of Finnish basic education or depicting it as "post comprehensive" (Ahonen, 2014).

We suggest reframing the educational in/equity as a decisional dilemma imbedded in the school systems' self-referentially determined problems rather than forcing it to a polarized scheme between the welfare state and neoliberalism. Unlike contradicting ideologies in politics (e.g., neoliberalist market-based commercialization of education vs. protecting the society from it by promoting state-interventionist welfare programs), in/equity dilemmas internal to school systems can be solved to enable the continuity of formative intentions in pedagogically responsible communication. Thus, we suggest a policy-relevant, not a normatively policy-oriented view on the possible resonance of the comprehensive schools' arrangements and decisional oscillation (i.e., in/determinacy) between the political programs of the welfare state and neoliberalism. For observing the forming of selective classes in Finnish schools we suggest a more precise describing of the actual space for choice and analyzing of the relation of selective classes to learning outcomes and their social distribution.

2. Neoliberalism as an explanation for recent developments in the Finnish comprehensive school

Education policy debates of the past few decades often refer to neoliberalism as a globally expanding regime purporting market-modelled sectoral policies eroding nation states' welfare policy programs. Neoliberalism sprouted from Austrian theorizing of political economy Ludwig Mises and Friedrich Hayek in the University of Chicago in the 1950s. The word itself indicates a troubled connection to the political ideas of classical liberalism, much debated in Anglophone countries. Hayek identified himself as "neoliberal" to denote his abandoning of classical as well as the so-called "new liberalism" (e.g., Rosenblatt 2018, 226 and 264). With this he made a point in favor of keeping with the core ideas of the laissez-fair liberalism and consistent contesting of state interventionist liberal tendencies such as Roosevelt's New Deal or European post WW II welfare state programs, which he envisioned leading to totalitarianism. In the USA, Nobel laureate Milton Friedman ended up fostering neoliberal political movement as fundamentally opposed to another political program still viable in a variety of forms, namely the welfare state.

Since the 1970's, the Neoliberal movement has spread globally via think tanks and their networks (Djelic & Mousavi, 2020). *Atlas network* has 469 member organizations in its current directory including Finnish *Think Tank Libera*.[1] In Europe, the movement gained influence during the British conservative governments lead by Margaret Thatcher (PM 1979–1990). In the Nordic countries, the slightly more moderate *Stockholm network* (founded in 1997) has influential members also in Finland, such as the Finnish Business and Policy Forum[2]. Due to such spreading of political ideas and policy-making models, much of current criticism on education policy operates in rather bluntly polarized schemes (i.e., welfare state vs. neoliberalism). Focus in education policy tends to assume globally effective broad "neoliberal policy framework" implying "ubiquitousness of school choice policies" and the "choice mechanism" responsible for schooling mediated social disparities (e.g., Angus, 2015). Such presumptions hardly offer epistemic support for analyzing the "equal opportunity problem" (Peterson & Woessmann, 2007) and in/equity dilemmas imbedded in pedagogical arrangements. Yet, scrutiny of contextual differences as well as of differences across policy sectors are of paramount importance for understanding the penetrability of political programs fostering the 'market model' in organizing education (e.g., Gewirtz et al., 1995).

Social sciences' engagement with normative criticism has led the notion of neoliberalism to resemble "a broad, catch-all term" (Venugobal, 2015) with questionable analytic clarity. Even attempts to delimit neoliberalism to identifying variations of certain policy models (e.g., Prince, 2016) often presume its ubiquity, purporting dystopic diagnosis of our times. For instance, Bourdieu (1998) depicted neoliberalist "*destruction of collectives*" as led by "*initially flawed pure theory*", which at its outset neglected viewing education "*as such*", despite its determinant role for the mode of production. Yet, since the 1960s, neoliberalists also developed a theory of human capital, whereas Bourdieu himself became famous for introducing normative "cultural" capital conversions applied widely in educational inequality studies. In our Luhmannian view, theories as programs of societal subsystems of science are always epistemologically delimiting. Bourdieu (ibid.), however, pointed at neoliberalist theorizing of political economy having turned into a mere program of politics, enabling the realization of these theories. In our view, such transformation would mean that scientific theory turns into ideology with more general cognitive limitations to pursue political power.

Michel Foucault's diagnosis of our times was more deeply interested in neoliberalists theorizing of human capital, above all Nobel laureate Becker's (1964) seminal work. Foucault fitted such theorizing into his theory of governance exercising biopolitics, pointing to the role of education in producing the desiring subject, functional for the capitalist economic growth (see Moghtader, 2017). Thus, for Foucault, neoliberalism meant a regime that had elevated economics to the center of governments' "truth telling" (see Becker et al., 2012; Peters, 2016). In a similar vein, schooling would be offering a variety of struggling sites for subjectivity (e.g., Ball 2016). Such a view of an overwhelmingly oppressive regime governing our mind with evolving techniques must presume an utterly open notion of power. To avoid that, we prefer conceiving neoliberalism merely as an ideology, meaning a typical program form of power-mediated communication guided by a juxtaposition of government and opposition (Luhmann, 2000). Any ideology, including the ones

[1] https://www.atlasnetwork.org/about/our-story and https://www.libera.fi/libera/
[2] http://www.stockholm-network.org/The-Network/ and https://www.eva.fi/en/

aiming for protecting society (i.e., the welfare state) need to struggle (deploying networks etc.) to gain influence in politics structured in electoral cycles.

Given the generational experiences in English-speaking countries (e.g., Ball, 2015) one might understand intensifying rhetorical polarization between the political programs of the welfare state and neoliberalism. In empirical terms, such a political scheme, nevertheless, requires contextual specifications and sound epistemic doubt regarding its significance across the sectors of welfare services. In our view, rhetorical accentuations of policy discourses about education are secondary, a matter of a political subsystem, not directly operative in the pedagogical organization of the education system. The deeply rooted liberal tradition in English speaking countries tend to rely on market principles both in coordination of the economy and in organizing welfare state services, which is not that obvious in the Nordic countries with their welfare states often labeled as social-democratic (e.g. Schröder, 2017; West & Ylönen, 2010).

According (Luhmann, 1997), we doubt of direct causal influence of the subsystem of politics and its sectoral policy programs on internal operations of the education system. The intra-societal environment (e.g. politics, law, economy, and religion) rather conditions premises of decisions taken within school system. Moreover, neither politico-ideological inspirations for ”choice interventions” (Peterson & Woessmann, 2007) nor their impacts on equal opportunity are very clear. Therefore, specified assumptions based on a theory of society rather than on a presumed ubiquity political neoliberalism are in epistemic terms more fruitful. Furthermore, based on education policy analysis it is difficult to say something relevant about students' learning processes. At most, it is possible to infer likely changes in premises of an education system's internal decisions on pedagogical arrangements, e.g., the formation of learning groups and ways of pedagogical communication.

As it is always an empirical task to describe how external policy programs resonate with the internal structural state of a school system's decision making, we direct our empirical attention to specific features in the "assembling of the school" (Hunter, 1996). Namely, to the Finnish particularity of forming selective classes within the comprehensive school, and the relation of such pedagogical arrangements to individual learning, which is the fundamental concern of the societal system of education. Keeping systems theoretically (Luhmann) clear the difference between the globally observable societal subsystem of education and the organizational forms of "state educational systems" (Archer, 1979, 54), allows specifying in/equity concerns as decisional dilemmas imbedded in more or less local pedagogical arrangements. Such operational dilemmas are resolvable only in accordance with a system's fundamental intentionality of achieving rather better than worse learning outcomes through pedagogical communication. For second-order observers, Luhmannian conceptualizations allow connecting student-level assessment data with a school system's internal decision schemes (e.g., allocating students to classes), which accord the unique societal function of the education system. That is, the formation of persons with historically evolving specified knowledge, skills and competences.

Schooling as such is a paradoxical anchoring of education in society, i.e., forcing individuals to freedom. Meaning pedagogically responsible, yet from the learner's perspective external formative intentions. We conceive system boundaries not physical but as functionally differentiated modes in communicative processing of meanings. In this sense, the dependencies of an education system on

its intra-societal environment (i.e., other societal subsystems and organizations) are complex. Paradoxes in viewing a system's performance, not to be confused with its above mentioned globally unique societal function, appear differently depending on the reference system looked upon. Thus when referring education's relation to economy, no one denies the importance of schooled labor force for techno-science-based production of goods and services. Regarding comprehensive school, paradoxes rather appear in a view of more specified expectation of skills outcomes within a supply that is in principal the same for all.

Focus in the neoliberalists' early human capital theory was on measurable empirical factors such as time spent in schooling, and school facilities' comparability in terms of distribution in and between territorially demarcated populations or national economies. Such economist view most likely enhanced legitimating societal expansion of schooling and, at least in the well-off countries, turned attention towards quality of educational supply. Regarding the problem of equal opportunity, more attention to the equity-efficiency trade-off followed only later (Peterson & Woessmann, 2007, 13). However, taking 'human capital' to refer to personal qualities might appear odd for terminological scrutiny based on Marxian criticism of capitalism (e.g., Altvater, 2009, 44-48), but so would the Bourdieusian inspired capital conversions such as "reputational capital" deployed in educational policy sociology (Rinne, 2008). So far, no wide agreement on the meaning of equal educational opportunity prevail, and even less consensual understanding exists on deciding upon in/equity dilemmas in pedagogical arrangements.

Based on theoretical positioning presented so far, we claim that the organization of the Finnish basic education's comprehensive model has since its outset in the 1970s been mutually conditioned (i.e. resonated strongly) with the universalistic welfare state program. Yet, we acknowledge that even egalitarian-inspired reforms of a school system do not bear direct effects on pedagogical interaction and opportunities for individual learning. Accordingly, we relate our empirical research to a political interpretation of the reforms of the Finnish comprehensive school. In this, we question attempts to see the provision of choice in the Finnish basic school since the 1990s as a neoliberalist move. We claim that, explaining the development since the 1970s of the equal opportunity problem in the Finnish education system as a whole or in the comprehensive basic education in particular in terms of neoliberalism makes little sense. During the past couple of decades such a politico-ideological scheme may have marked amendments in austerity policies regarding economy, research, development and innovation (competition state), or social policy service sectors such as health-related and unemployment compensation (workfare) but these are not the empirical concern of this article.

3. The Nordic welfare state and the comprehensiveness of the Finnish basic school

The plasticity of the notion of a welfare state, constitutive for the Finnish comprehensive school, becomes obvious when seen from the viewpoints of different societal subsystems. For example, economy observes the managing of scarcity and relates the performance of a school system with economic efficiency, while law observes the legality of education also regarding civic rights to schooling. Luhmann (1990) views the welfare state from the viewpoint of the political subsystem of the society. Accordingly, such a well-intentioned political program tends to burden economic and legal functionalities of the society (Luhmann, 1998, 67), as has recently been observed in connection to increasing migration (Antikainen and Pitkänen, 2014). The generosity of the welfare

program and ways of coordinating economy in each country is, however, an empirical matter (e.g., Schröder, 2017).

In conditions of strong neoliberal ideology, the politico-economic dilemma between increasing the variety of welfare services and reducing their abundancy (see Luhmann, 2000, 215) tends to cutting public expenditure and opting for increasing individual responsibility, meaning choices in commercially marketed educational supply. Within the 'Nordic welfare state model', a somewhat imaginary construct including Finland as a latecomer from the 1980s on (e.g., Kautto, 2000), such political accents would meet objections particularly regarding the basic school, viewed as a universal social right and a public investment for economic prosperity and social well-being. Yet, also in Finland, recent expansions of educational services have intensified the observing of an education systems' performance from the systemic viewpoints of economy, law, and politics. The politico-ideological inspirations for such concerns are, however, hardly neoliberalist, neither are their educational consequences. Thus, instead of adopting the unclear notion of neoliberalism into the *explanans* of the equal education problems one might look more closely at the differing ways of economization of schooling (e.g., Peetz 2019). Valuations of alternative costs in public expenditure differ from one country to another (e.g., schooling-level related unemployment) as does the space for liberal commercializing of education (e.g., supply and demand of shadow schools).

Disregarding methodological uses of 'ideal types', we argue that values (citizens' equal social rights, universalism, the state's and municipalities' responsibility for the welfare of the citizens) often attached to the 'Nordic model' still frame the key structures of the Finnish comprehensive school (see also Antikainen, 2010). Educational structures, however, mean for us system-internally recognized expectations for arrangements to conduct pedagogic communication aiming at best possible learning. Accordingly, the structural state of the basic education system needs to be viewed in complex interdependency with its intra-societal environment and related sector sensitive policy-frames and connected to the arrangements in the organizational complex that Archer (ibid.) called the "state educational system". We regard equal opportunity to education in the structural sense of "life chances" (Dahrendorf, 1979, 29–39), and view the evolving organizational school forms as opening new horizons of expectations (the structural aspect) for schooling trajectories and eventually better career prospects.

In this sense, 'equal educational opportunity for all' was a well-intended principle for the Finnish comprehensive school reform, whereas its realization is an empirical matter with evolving semantics over criteria and measurements. For us, societally egalitarian supply implies commensurability with measurable aspects of services (e.g., teacher-student ratios, school facilities, etc.). Normative aspects of fairness and justness as implied in the in/equity of opportunity for realizing individual learning potential appears more debatable, meaning unavoidable judgments in organizational decision-making regarding pedagogical arrangements[3]. Therefore, in this study, we explore the demand for systemic equity/inequity considerations concerning selective classes as option for choice included in Finnish comprehensive model.

[3] For the notion social equity see Guy & McCandless (2012), of equity in educational policy of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) see Bøyum (2014), for the Finnish terminological discussions on educational equity, see Ylönen (2009), Siekkinen (2017) and Kalenius (2020).

The basic education reforms (Sweden 1962, Norway 1969, Finland 1970, and Denmark 1975) established unified nine-year comprehensive schools free of tuition and other costs such as learning materials, in Finland also school meals. The Finnish reform started with legislative preparations during the 1960s, proceeded with regionally restricted experimentation, and was then implemented beginning from the north in 1972 and ending in 1978 in the more densely populated Helsinki metropolitan area. The whole age-cohort was to receive the same education without significant differentiation, accompanied by integrated pedagogical support. The reform also included a switch of viewpoint from mere aspiring equal educational opportunities via expanded uniform educational provisions to a more elaborate view of within-school equity of learning and achievement opportunities (cf. Langfeldt, 2011; Ylönen, 2009). Acknowledging of students' differing cognitive-emotional readiness for the learning expectations sets equity requirements also for the pedagogical arrangements of teaching. In Finland, integrated pedagogical support (university trained special education teachers and evolving semantics and structures for support for learning, cf., Thuneberg et al., 2014) has been a permanent feature in all subsequent adjustments of basic education. The notion of equity in the pedagogical process, however, conveys less established meanings than equality of opportunity in the sense of quantifying educational provision or setting university education as the standard for teachers.

The profound structural reform absorbed the preceding dual track system of public primary or 'folk' schools (grades 1–4/6) and a combination of private, state and municipal middle or grammar schools (grades 1–5/8, corresponding to the current grades of 5–9/12). The six-year primary school with an additional two or three years of civic school for students not entering grammar school (a majority still in 1970) offered limited opportunities for further academic education, leading mainly to vocational training. The other option was to attend only the first four years of primary school and continue through an entrance examination to a five-year middle school or an eight-year grammar school leading to the matriculation examination required for university studies. The fusion of the two school forms with differing historical constituents (see e.g., Ahonen, 2014) meant various organizational adjustments. Of special interest for our study is the initial partial surrendering from the ideal of 'same for all' to accommodate the heterogeneity of the student population by adopting streaming in the form of different levels of syllabi for the lower secondary grades 7 to 9 in mathematics and English.

Yet, it was discovered soon that the arrangement led especially boys and students from lower socio-economic status (SES) families to choose the least demanding classes (KOM 1975:109, 77–86), blocking their admission to the academic track of upper secondary education left largely intact in the reform. Seen to threaten the equality of (future) educational opportunity, this practice of attainment-based streaming ended in 1985. This was the time point when Finland could be viewed as fully includable in the 'Nordic model' of European welfare states (Kautto, ibid.) – and the time where education policy analysists (Kivirauma, et al., 2003; Rinne, 2003), viewed the neoliberalist turn inspiring Ahonen (2014) to speak of "post comprehensive" school. However, since 1985, there has been no different levels of syllabi in the comprehensive school except for students with special education needs (SEN), who may follow a personal learning plan if deemed necessary. Lately, however, many schools have differentiated ninth grade mathematics teaching for those who aim for advanced mathematics in upper secondary education but that does not compromise the learning goals for those who still follow the common national core curriculum.

Contesting the envisioned eroding of the welfare state inspired educational services, compulsory education was extended in 2020 (Law 1217/2020) to include the previously non-compulsory upper secondary education[4], which is already passed by about 85 per cent of the age cohort. Additionally, the temporarily suspended children's statutory right for early education and care was restored also for children with at-home parent in 2020, and a reform toward a two-year (as opposed to the current one-year) pre-school was expanded to cover 10,000 children in 105 municipalities between 2021–2024 (Law 1046/2020).

Even if most upper secondary school graduates enter tertiary education through the academic track (96 % of research university students and 60 % of students in the universities of applied sciences UAS), equality of opportunity is guaranteed by offering access to higher education also for students of the vocational track through entrance examination. Since 2005, the (UAS) have offered degrees equivalent to B.A. and M.A. In addition, doctoral programs of research universities are open for UAS graduates who have attained the equivalency of an M.A. degree. This means that the Finnish schooling structure[5] is truly devoid of dead ends. Yet, the choice of upper secondary track can in itself be seen as a first significant point of "institutional sorting" (Esser, 2016) as the prospects for further education and career options for students attending the academic track clearly exceed those of students of the vocational track. While equality of life chances regarding educational provision has developed with increasing options, simultaneously, personal choices conditioned by a manifold of factors (school attainment, family support, motivation, employment prospects, belief in own abilities, emotions, etc.) have become more complex. In consequence, judgements of social equity in decisions concerning pedagogical arrangements in the comprehensive system defy easy solutions. We therefore point to the need of educational assessment studies in support of equity rather than a governance technique causing inequity as claimed by envisions of neoliberalist dominance.

Finnish compulsory education and the until 2021 non-compulsory upper secondary education, based on public funding and administered by municipalities or other public bodies, leaves little space for real school market. Due to the obliging nature of the national core curriculum, publicly provided learning materials, and the unified educational level (M.A.) of the teachers (B.A. for early education), actual differences in teaching quality can be expected to be small and are mainly random (i.e., not dependent on the catchment area's socio-demographic features). However, since the mid-1990s, possibility for choice within the basic school has increased through classes offering two or three hours more per week of a given curricular subject for students selected through aptitude or interest-based evaluation. The application and selection process differs by subject, grade level, and school, so we have chosen to refer to them all using the general term '*selective class'* as most have more applicants than students finally taken in (for the terminology regarding attainment grouping in English lower secondary education, see Taylor et al., 2020).

Finnish policy analysists (e.g., Kivirauma, et al., 2003; Rinne, 2003; Ahonen 2014; Varjo et al., 2018), however, envision these arrangements posing erosive threat for comprehensive model. Their

[4] Already the Education Committee of 1971 suggested in its Report 1973:52 the lengthening of compulsory education to cover what we currently consider upper secondary schooling. A seminar of interdisciplinary specialists in July 1974 examined the suggestions (see Carlson, 1974).

[5] By structure, we refer here to the hierarchy of requirement expectations, meaning that successive levels of education set outcome expectations for students of the preceding level.

claims share the depicted escalating of OECD-influenced neoliberalist infiltration in Finland (e.g., Rinne, 2008) aligning the administrative establishment across public services (including the school) by deploying organizational techniques of NPM. Moreover, modest diversifications of the national core curriculum are often interpreted in a political scheme as "conflicting objectives between universalism and selectivism" (Varjo & Kalalahti, 2019), the former attributed to the welfare constituents and the latter to their neoliberalist eroding. As the selective classes follow the national core curriculum except for few extra lesson hours, we believe this to be an overreaction '. Likewise, the national evaluation practices developed since the mid-1990s fall all too smoothly in the interpretative vein of neoliberalism-inspired governance, viewing evaluation as a "central plank of the neoliberal education policy complex" (Angus, 2015). Challenging such views, we note that the Finnish education system is hardly privatized compared to the Swedish (Yang Hansen & Gustafsson, 2019), not to speak of the English system (West &Ylönen, 2010). In addition, evidence for school shopping in the Finnish context where parents typically place their children in the nearest school is mainly based on interviews of parental preferences. Thus, we avoid over-interpretations of a marketization tendency, and reject diluted terms (e.g. quasi markets) as obscuring. Together with the strong emphasis of the Finnish education system on special education (e.g., Vainikainen et al., 2015) we suggest that the selective classes are rather a pedagogical arrangement trying to extend equity-treatment to students at the other end of achievement distribution. Thus, we aim to specifying decisional ambiguities and uncertainties regarding in/equity dilemmas imbedded in learning-group formations.

Surely, there is some indication of some parents beginning to consider basic schooling in terms of choice – even if not outright competition – when looking for the best for their child. Much of the diversification critique, however, is based on exploring how municipalities as organizers of schooling have responded to (some) parents' increasing expectations for school choice (e.g., Berisha & Seppänen, 2017; Berisha et al., 2017). Accordingly, any school choice behavior detected in parent interviews in relation to the social composition of the allocated school's catchment area or some subject-specific choice has inspired interpretations of marketization. In what follows we will briefly describe selective classes (classes with a subject-specific emphasis and interest or proficiency-based student intake) within the Finnish comprehensive school system and specify the related equity concerns in need of empirical investigation.

4. The limited space for school choice in the Finnish comprehensive school

Despite the shared UNESCO classification of education (ISCED), national education systems differ considerably in the ways they structure schooling. Organizational differences appear already at the timing of children's entrance into compulsory education and in the form of that compulsion. In Finland, school attendance is not mandatory in compulsory education (Jakku-Sihvonen et al., 1996, 23) but municipalities are obliged to control that parents attend to their children's educational rights, and to follow the learning outcomes of all students. Nevertheless, home schooling is rare, and the majority of parents enroll their children in the nearest municipal school the year the child turns seven, preceded by a one or two-year pre-school arranged in the school or in a day-care center. Already before that, after the end of the publicly funded maternal/paternal/parental leave of up to 402 days, all children have a statutory right to municipally provided early education for a family income-adapted fee. Repeating of class is rare (about 3 %), meaning that practically the

whole age cohort advances through basic education together, following the same core curriculum (FNBE, 2016) and getting a certificate for completed compulsory (until its extension in 2021) schooling after nine years of studies.

Since 1994, municipalities and schools have had some decisional power on the curriculum, but the local curricula cannot overdrive the goals, standards and assessment criteria set in the national core curriculum. Aligned with a new public management trend (Varjo et al., 2018), principals' role in school administration has strengthened in regards curricular adjustments, including some resource allocation and class composition. Thus, some schools are creating specific profiles within the municipal guidelines and budget frames, including provisions for optional subjects (e.g., foreign languages) or extra lesson hours in some curricular subject. Due to the neighborhood-based allocation of students to schools, warranted by law, the choice in Finland is mainly directed to between-school and within-school options based on selective classes, which follow the common curriculum except for a few extra lesson hours in some subject and are open to all students through some form of indicated interest and/or proficiency.

Since 1993, Finnish parents have had the legal right to choose their child's school. The right does not overrule the neighborhood catchment area principle, meaning that school choice is mainly a phenomenon of bigger cities where demographic changes have caused some schools to have more places than students in their catchment area. As there is no national testing to provide school-level data on learning outcomes, parents' school choice is mainly restricted to two strategies: to choose a commonly known magnet school, which offers specific curricular options and attracts students from outside its catchment area or to shy from schools with a large portion of non-native students (e.g., Kosunen, 2016).

Finnish research on school choice, mainly conducted under the neoliberal notion of marketization, has been tied to the late but fast-emerging social segregation in the bigger cities (Bernelius, 2003; Kosunen et al., 2016). It has centered on the policy-background of the choice or on parents' motives for choosing a non-catchment-area school or a selective class for their child (e.g., Berisha, & Seppänen, 2016; Kosunen, 2016; Seppänen, 2003; Varjo & Kalalahti, 2019). However, parents' impact diminishes as students proceed from primary to lower secondary education.

Some newer research has investigated between-school and between-class differences through register data, revealing both 'natural' and school-choice-based differences (Berisha & Seppänen, 2017; Kuosmanen, 2020). Additionally, between-school variation is not only due to school choice but also to urban segregation with the catchment areas' socio-economical homogenization increasing differences between schools (e.g., Kortelainen & Kuosmanen, 2014). Consequently, parents living in the catchment area of a sought-after school have less need for school choice while choice by parents in lower SES-areas might improve equity of learning opportunities for their own children, even if their choice might have detrimental effects on the school the child ends up not attending. Yet, a growing number of parents with school age children attest to looking at the prospective catchment area schools when choosing housing (Vilkama et al. 2013). The special feature of the Finnish school choice is, however, that except for a few cases (e.g., the state-administered foreign language schools and university normal schools) the actual option for choice does not center on schools but on choice of foreign language and on classes with a subject-specific emphasis and selective intake (e.g., Kosunen, 2014).

Selective classes have their historical foundation within the Finnish comprehensive school in the value bestowed to music education already in the early 1900s (cf., Heimonen, 2014). While music has always been one of the curricular subjects in compulsory education, this valuation led in the 1960s to the establishing of classes offering 3 to 5 extra hours of music instruction with admission based on a test of musical ability (Kosunen, 2016; Törmälä, 2013). Likewise, parents' choice of their child's first foreign language (a mandatory subject that began earlier at grade 3, presently at grade 1) is used in many schools as bases for class formation. Great majority of Finnish students choose English as their first (A-level) foreign language but by choosing some other language offered in any of the municipal schools (Swedish[6], Russian etc.) parents can have influence on which school their child will attend. Duru-Bellat and Mingat (1998) showed in their study how the choice of foreign language in French collège, made primarily by the parents in collaboration with teachers, divided students not only regarding their future knowledge of, respective language, but also regarding their home background and prior (and future) school achievement. First foreign language is chosen earlier in Finland. Thus, lacking earlier school achievement as basis for the choice, parents' role is even more central. Lower secondary grades (7–9) offer further options for selective classes but then students primarily make the choice themselves, which increases the impact of school engagement and earlier achievement as well as personal subject-specific interest. Yet, also at the lower secondary level, applying to a selective class relates strongly to students' home background. Apparently, the interest for establishing selective classes first was in creating an inviting profile for schools and in improving students' school engagement. Lately, however, municipalities seem to have established such classes also to counter better achieving students from opting out from their neighborhood schools.

5. Ability-based student allocation and learning outcomes

Forms of ability-based allocation differ across countries. In some, such as Austria and the Netherlands, allocation into different tracks takes place relatively early, leading to differing academic demands and ensuing learning outcomes for students of the different tracks. In others, such as the Nordic countries and the US, most students follow the same curriculum at least through the first nine years of compulsory education. (OECD, 2012.) The first group represents open – real or assumed – ability-based differentiation but also the latter can – and often does – include scholastic aptitude-based differentiation within schools. This may mean relatively permanent grouping covering all subjects as in the case of Hungary (Csapó et al., 2008) and the Finnish selective classes (Kupiainen & Hotulainen, 2019), or be subject-specific as in the US advanced placement (AP) courses (cf., Chmielewski, 2014).

Arguments regarding ability-based tracking or streaming rest mainly on a perceived trade-off between equality and maximal learning outcomes (e.g., Entwistle, & Alexander, 1992; Hanushek, & Woessman, 2006). The central argument *for* ability-based grouping is that a better-fitted curriculum and appropriately paced instruction facilitate learning (Fani, & Ghaemi, 2011). From the

[6] Swedish as the other national language is mandatory at the basic (B) level, beginning at grade 6, for all in the schools with Finnish as the language of instruction. A-level Swedish, instead, is studied by only a small part of the age cohort and can be compared to the 'true' foreign languages as a subject. We note that students choosing some other language will also begin to study English during the primary grades to be at the same level of proficiency with the other students at grade 7. Inequalities in Sámi as language of teaching is a Nordic issue requiring discussion beyond the limits of this article (c.f. Seurujärvi-Kari & Kantasalmi 2017).

developmental viewpoint, this could be an argument for boosting equity across the ability distribution. Arguments *against* tracking center on inequity concerns of lower-ability students' poorer learning environments regarding teacher quality, curriculum, and peer effect (Duru-Bellat, & Mingat, 1998; Entwistle, & Alexander, 1992). The research concerning the dilemma is not unanimous, however, with some having found no evidence of ability grouping effects (Figlio, & Page 2002; Lefgren, 2004) while some (e.g., Loveless, 2009) have found a negative effect of the abolishment of selective AP-courses on especially minority group students' attainment through lowered outcome expectations.

Due to the two-level (school/student) sampling of the OECD PISA studies, only between-school differences have gained focus as an indicator for inequality. The same is true for the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre's (FINEEC) national assessments to monitor learning outcomes. However, analysis of between-school and between-class differences in three Nordic countries in the IEA Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study TIMSS 2011 (Hansen et al. 2014), reveled Finland to differ from the other Nordic countries with its considerable between-class differences. A longitudinal study covering a whole age cohort of students in the Helsinki metropolitan region in 2011–2014 (N = approximately 13 500) confirmed Hansen's and her colleagues' (2014) findings, showing additionally that the initial between-class differences grew during the three years (grades 7–9) of lower secondary school (Kupiainen, & Hotulainen, 2014). The study also showed that the classes differed in terms of students' home background but, lacking information on the formation of the classes, neither study could tie the differences to school choice or selective classes.

To address the aforementioned shortcoming, the current study combines data on class formation with assessment data on ninth grade students' cognitive competence, motivational attitudes, school achievement, and choice of upper secondary school. The data are drawn from a national learning to learn (LTL) assessment (cf., Hautamäki et al., 2002; Hautamäki & Kupiainen, 2014) with a nationally representative sample of Finnish lower secondary schools (Hautamäki, Rämä, & Vainikainen, 2019). The study will contribute to research on the relation between class composition and learning outcomes (e.g., Belfi et al., 2012) and, more specifically, on the possible impact of the selective classes within the Finnish comprehensive school.

Of special interest will be the impact of class composition on students' track-choice in the dual model of Finnish upper secondary education (general and vocational, approximately 55 % vs. 45 % of the age cohort, respectively). The choice between the two tracks acts as a strong division line in young Finns' lives, reflected later in adult literacy (Malin et al., 2013) and health, employment, and even lifespan (THL, 2018). Each student is allowed five choices among all available upper secondary programs across the country with schools choosing their students by ranking the applicants based on their grade point average (GPA). On average, students entering the academic track have considerably higher GPA than those entering vocational education.

6. Research questions

To investigate the education-policy relevance of the selective classes from the point of view of educational equality and equity, we have set two empirical research questions regarding students' allocation to classes in Finnish lower secondary schools:

1. How prevalent are selective classes in Finnish lower secondary schools, and what are the curricular profiles of these classes?
2. How do students in selective and non-selective classes differ from each other regarding cognitive competence, motivational attitudes, school achievement (GPA) and choice of upper secondary education, gender and home-background?

6.1 Data

The data were drawn from a national assessment of learning to learn (LTL) competence of 7,492 ninth grade students (49.6 % boys, mean age 15,29 years) in 83 schools in 66 municipalities across Finland in spring 2017 (cf., Hautamäki et al., 2019). Principals of 59 schools in 54 municipalities answered the questionnaire on the 'nature' of the classes participating in the study, based on a classification of an a priori investigation of most common class types in Finnish schools. Due to the representative sample of schools in the study and the high number of students in the 59 schools of this secondary analysis (N = 6,706 vs. the N = 9,083 of the whole sample), the study can be judged to provide a sufficiently representative picture of the prevalence of selective classes in Finnish lower-secondary schools. Yet, we have included in the analyses the 24 schools from which we do not have data of class allocation to act as a point of comparison.

6.2 Measures

In the national assessment, students' cognitive competence was measured with a wide set of cognitive tasks from the Finnish LTL test and a curricular test for ninth grade mathematics, which students took as part of their regular mathematics course work. From among these, we have chosen for the present study two constructs: seven tasks from the LTL test, representing verbal reasoning (three tasks), mathematical reasoning (three tasks), and reading comprehension (one task), and the curricular exam in mathematics.

The verbal reasoning tasks comprised the Deductive Reasoning, Missing Premises, and Analysis of Relevant and Irrelevant Information tasks adapted from the Ross Test of Higher Cognitive Processes (Ross & Ross, 1979). Mathematical reasoning was measured with three tasks: Hidden Arithmetical Operators based on a task by Demetriou and his colleagues (Demetriou et al., 1996; Demetriou et al., 1991), Invented Mathematical Concepts modified from Sternberg's Creative Number scale (Sternberg, Castejon, Prieto, Hautamäki, & Grigorenko, 2001) and Analysis of Relevant and Irrelevant Information adapted from Ross and Ross (1979).

As indicators for students' motivational attitudes, we chose two larger constructs, built from scales based on several theoretical perspectives: The latent construct for mastery motivation comprises six sub-constructs from the LTL affective component: Mastery-intrinsic and Mastery-extrinsic motivation, Agency: effort and the reversed scales Avoidance orientation, Means-ends-belief: chance and Self-handicapping. (E.g., "My primary goal in school is to learn new things", "Getting good marks at school is important to me", "I work hard to do well at school", "I have no interest in doing anything extra for school", "Failure at school is mainly due to bad luck" and "I give up easily if my assignments look too demanding", respectively). The latent construct for self-perceived ability comprises likewise six scales from the LTL affective component: Self-concept in mathematics, reading, writing, and thinking, Agency: ability and Control-belief: achievement. (E.g.,

"Mathematics is easy for me", "I am a good reader", "I'm good in writing all kinds of texts", "I'm a fast thinker", "I have the necessary ability to do well in school" and "I get good grades when I decide to", respectively).

6.3 Methods

To answer the first research questions regarding the prevalence of different class types, we combined principal's answers to the question regarding the type of each individual class. To answer the second research question, we first performed basic descriptive analyses to evaluate the reliability of the cognitive and attitudinal constructs. After that, we performed between-group (class) analyses with ANOVA, using η^2 (eta square) as an indicator for effect size (Cohen, 1988; Cohen et al., 2002). According to Hattie (2009, 79) and Maher and colleagues (2013 Table 2), these can be contrasted with the Cohen's *d* values as small effect (η^2 = 0.001–0.039), mid-size effect (η^2 = 0.060–0.110) and big effect (η^2 = 0.140–0.200).

7. Results

The prevalence of selective classes in the sample is shown in Table 1. As can be seen, 20 per cent of the 6,706 students of the 59 schools whose principal answered the questionnaire, studied in classes classified by the principal as having a non-regular intake. In addition to the selective classes based on some form of student selection, these include small classes with or without an official special education class status. Class-size for special education classes is restricted to 10 students by law but classes with a smaller-than-average class size, meant to support the learning of weaker students, is a relatively common practice in Finnish schools today (cf., Hienonen et al., 2018; Kupiainen & Hienonen, 2016; Vainikainen et al., , 2017).

Table 1.

Regular, selective and small/SEN classes: number of students, share of girls and boys, and class size

	Students	Share of students	Classes	Share of classes	Girls	Boys	Class size
Regular classes	5 373	**80 %**	299	**76 %**	**51 %**	**49 %**	**19.04**
Academic emphasis	514	**8 %**	25	**6 %**	**55 %**	**45 %**	**21.05**
Non-academic emphasis	468	**7 %**	24	**6 %**	**43 %**	**57 %**	**20.57**
Small and SEN classes	351	**5 %**	48	**12 %**	**61 %**	**39 %**	**10.25**
Total	6 706		396		3 418	3 280	
Unknown class formation	2 377		144		48 %	52 %	18.80
Total	9 083		540		50 %	50 %	19.04

Classes with an academic emphasis comprised classes based on a foreign language or a STEM (mathematics or science) choice (54 % vs. 46 % of students). The difference in the share of boys and girls in classes with an academic emphasis was mainly due to classes emphasizing mathematics (64 % boys) while the difference in the language-based classes was small (51–52 % boys). Classes with a non-academic emphasis comprised girl-dominated classes based on music, visual or performing arts and on media (77–64 % girls) and boy-dominated classes based on sports (57 % boys). The small SEN classes were all boy-dominated.

Differences in students' cognitive and motivational constructs in the different types of classes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Students' cognitive competence, motivational attitudes and perception of their own ability in regular, selective and small/SEN classes *

	LTL Cognitive tasks		Mathematics exam		Mastery motivation		Ability-belief	
	Mean	Std. D.	Mean	Std. D.	Mean	Std. D.	Mean	Std. D.
Regular classes	41.8 %	15.61	39.0 %	13.28	4.71	0.83	4.92	1.06
Academic emphasis	53.2 %	17.25	48.0 %	17.95	4.90	0.77	5.23	0.96
Non-academic emphasis	45.8 %	15.77	41.5 %	14.03	4.85	0.80	5.11	1.07
Small and SEN classes	29.5 %	12.19	29.5 %	11.52	4.45	0.83	4.49	1.18
p	<.001		<.001		<.001		<.001	
η^2	0.065		0.051		0.010		0.015	
Unknown class formation	44.4 %	17.12	40.9 %	15.23	4.72	0.86	4.94	1.09
Total	43.0 %	16.45	39.9 %	14.39	4.72	0.84	4.94	1.07

* Reasoning and math exam are indicated by the percentage of correct answers, self-reported motivational attitudes and beliefs were measured with a 1–7 Likert-type scale, where 1 = not at all … 7 = exactly so with 'negative' scales reversed. NOTE: Between-class differences (p, η^2) are calculated at student level only for schools with more than one type of classes.

As can be seen from Table 2, the students of classes with an academic emphasis outperformed students of other types of classes in both the LTL tasks measuring general cognitive competence and in the curricular mathematics exam. The main source of difference was the weak attainment and less favorable attitudes of the students of the small/SEN-class but the differences stayed statistically significant at level $p < .001$ even between the regular and selective classes ($\eta^2 = .0389$, $\eta^2 = .031$, $\eta^2 = .006$ and $\eta^2 = .008$, respectively, for the four variables in Table 2). As can also be seen, based on the mean scores the schools that have not revealed their class composition most probably contain approximately the same class-type distribution as the schools who have done so.

As expected, the classes also differed regarding student's home background as indicated by the highest education of mother and father reported by the students (Table 3).

Table 3.

Parents' education for students in regular, selective and small/SEN classes *

	Mother's education		Father's education		Data available	
	Mean	Std. D.	Mean	Std. D.	Mother	Father
Regular classes	2.87	1.153	2.73	1.219	4511	4407
Academic emphasis	3.35	1.196	3.24	1.311	428	420
Non-academic emphasis	3.18	1.225	3.05	1.289	399	386
Small and SEN classes	2.36	1.038	2.19	0.966	230	224
p	<.001		<.001			
η^2	0.016		0.016			
Unknown class formation	2.98	1.203	2.85	1.279	2055	2015

Total	2.93	1.18	2.79	1.249	7623	7452

* Despite the non-linear scale for parents' student-reported education (1 = basic school, 2 = vocational education, 3 = high school, 4 = BA, 5 = MA or higher) it is here transposed to a mean. NOTE: Between-class differences (p, η^2) are calculated at student level only for schools with more than one type of classes.

Table 3 shows clearly the relation between students' home background and the kind of class where they study during the years of lower secondary education. Especially clear is the mainly academic background of students of the classes with an academic emphasis and the overrepresentation of student from less educated families among the students of small and SEN classes.

The link between students' lower-secondary class type and choice of upper secondary track is presented in Table 4. Both give support to the recently debated concern of growing heritability of education in Finland (e.g., Berisha et al., 2017). Despite the positive impact the adoption of the comprehensive school in the 1970s had on educational equality (Pekkarinen et al., 2009), forms of inequity within schools seem to persist.

Table 4.

Upper secondary track choice and final GPA (scale 1 = fail to 10 = excellent) for students in regular, selective and small/SEN classes.

	Track choices (max 5)				GPA		
	Academic	**Vocational**	**Both**	**None**	**Mean**	**Std. D.**	**n**
Regular classes	44 %	35 %	21 %	0 %	7.76	1,043	5133
Academic emphasis	70 %	13 %	16 %	0 %	8.34	0.961	498
Non-academic emphasis	66 %	20 %	14 %	1 %	8.17	0.948	454
Small and SEN classes	11 %	75 %	12 %	2 %	6.88	0.867	307
p					<,001		
η^2					0.066		
Unknown class formation	48 %	32 %	20 %	1 %	7.90	1.113	2215
Mean / Total	47 %	33 %	20 %	1 %	7.82	1.073	8607

NOTE: Between-class difference (p, η^2) for GPA is calculated at student level only for schools with more than one type of classes.

As can be seen in Table 4, attending a selective class was strongly related to students´ school achievement (GPA) and, accordingly, to their choice of upper secondary education. Applying only to the academic track was overwhelmingly most common for students in classes with an emphasis in mathematics (89 %, mean GPA 8.80 on a scale from 4 to 10), despite girls' generally better school achievement and the subsequent overrepresentation in academic track schools. Among the students of the current study, 52 percent of girls but only 32 percent of boys applied to only academic track schools.

8. Discussion and conclusions

In this study, we have discussed the educational goal of best possible learning outcomes for all students, meaning simultaneous aspiring for egalitarian comprehensive provision and equity of opportunity for all to realize their learning potential (e.g., Benbow & Stanley, 1996). On such terms,

an education system's performance appears differently paradoxical when viewed against expectations of law (e.g., realization of legal right or obligation to schooling), politics (e.g., realization of equal opportunity to proceed in schooling) or economy (maximal learning outcomes in terms of justified public cost). As educational paradoxes tend to paralyze the continuity of pedagogically responsible educational process, they require covering up or time-consuming measures to dissolve. The possible in/equity-related consequences require justifiable pedagogical arrangements. These can take diverse forms depending on the structural state of the national education system, its intra-societal environment, and local circumstances.

Regarding an operationally closed, self-reproducing and self-referentially problem-oriented social system of education, its external neoliberalism or welfares state tuned politico-economic expectations can only irritate (e.g., inspire or depress) concrete organizational decisions within the education system but not directly cause them. For instance, the political reading of PISA results hardly influence basic pedagogical interaction but might touch non-teaching educational planning and evaluation (Luhmann, 1996, 14–52). Likewise, the Finnish sample-based national assessments do not provide information that would allow comparing learning outcomes in different schools, undermining claims for any significant market for an informed choice mechanism. Perhaps this is why critics depicting a neoliberalist threat on the Finnish comprehensive school point at administrative changes, such as the decentralization of some educational decision and the adoption of some organization techniques of new public management. Accordingly, not only international evaluations but also assessments supporting pedagogical reflexivity for the in/equity dilemma of pedagogical arrangements are interpreted as part of the ubiquity of the neoliberalist agenda. We have argued that instead aiming to normatively committed policy-orientation (e.g., Gewirtz, & Crib 2009, 185–205) sociology of education could rather be enhancing reflexivity within education system. That is, by facilitating theoretically specified empirical analysis of education's complex societal interdependency with other sub-systems for adequate grasping of school system internal decisional dilemmas.

We have argued that globally circulating neoliberal ideology does not easily penetrate historically determined national or municipal educational decision-making or school-specific pedagogical arrangements. To show this, we have described how Finnish basic education's comprehensive model is even today deeply rooted in the universalistic and generous distribution of education services resonating strongly with the evolving welfare state program. Furthermore, we have argued that treating the in/equity dilemma related to the restricted space for choice in the Finnish comprehensive system as evidence for neoliberalist political influence is misplaced. Admittedly, the empirical evidence provided in this article lends itself to diverse interpretations about the system's internal in/equity. Nevertheless, we claim that the found differences in learning outcomes between the regular and selective classes with their socially differing student bodies does not suffice to endorse claims of a neoliberalist eroding of the underlying welfare state program-inspired egalitarianism of the distribution of educational services. Rather, we were surprised that only half of the selective classes were of academic emphasis implying possible ability-bias while the other seemed to cater predominantly to students' personal interests in the form of music, sports, and art. In total, the results seem to point to a diversified supply aiming to serve students' and families' divergent aspirations rather than foster societally unequal distribution of services – or even to aim at better learning outcomes for a restricted share of students. This is in clear contrast to the early years

of the comprehensive school, when open streaming brought forth differing learning outcomes, conditioning students' further educational and career options.

While the welfare-regime emphasizes every student's right to a uniform curriculum (Ahonen, 2014), the labor-markets of the developed countries signal for more differentiated and selective outcome expectations. This inspires education system to reformulate the paradox between same provision and best possible learning outcomes in continuous reforms while acknowledging the relative uncontrollability of educational outcomes and admitting that organizational decisions are the only available tools at hand (Corsi, 2013). Meaning, turning paradox into internally solvable dilemmas to enable the pedagogically justified operations. Thus, the Finnish in/equity concern related to selective classes can rather be seen as an organizational decision regarding pedagogical arrangements than an issue of political power-debate. Such decisional space for municipalities has increased in the past few decades.

Moreover, there is no empirical evidence of the quantitative development of the supply of classes with a special emphasis, pioneered by the music classes of the 1960s. Our data from 2017 indicates that at least the variety of such classes has widened, prompting the current in/equity discussion, albeit in a different mood than the streaming of the early years of the comprehensive school. We offer the case of selective classes as exemplifying how continuous change is the modern way to dissolve or rectify disturbing observational paradoxes in the expected process goals of education. Reform is a form for legitimating (Corsi, 2020) leeway for pedagogical arrangements facing the uncertainty of achieving the set goals. Pedagogic conduct aims to better than worse learning and purports reflexivity of outcomes aside. Meaning, also complex in/equity considerations as the operational dilemma at the crux of this article. Studies on public administration acknowledge this as an equity/efficiency trade-off in decision-making (see Fernández-Gutiérrez & Van de Walle, 2018).

The option for under-aged students to make choices that jeopardize their future educational choices, as was the case between 1970 and 1985, contradicted the universalistic ideal of the Finnish comprehensive school reform. The arrangement was a temporary compromise to bridge the transition to the new school form (Ahonen, 2014), which replaced the earlier tracked system. We described the comprehensive nature of the Finnish basic school leaning on Dahrendorf's (1979) structural notion of "life chances". Thereby, we clarified the difference between a welfare-politics inspired universalistic egalitarian reform logic and the question of equity/inequity in the current Finnish practice in allocating students to schools and classes. This allowed us to frame empirical questions regarding possible differences between students in regular and selective, aptitude or interest-based classes, which have emerged as a Finnish way to offer parents and students some choice within the comprehensive school. Using a representative sample of 6,700 ninth graders, we looked at the differences in students' cognitive competence, school engagement, gender, and home background according to the type of class they attended through lower secondary education. The study contributes to the knowledge gap left by earlier Finnish education policy and school-choice studies based mainly on document analyses and parent interviews.

Of the students participating in the study, 15 per cent attended selective classes, half of them with an academic (e.g., foreign language, math) and half with a non-academic (e.g., art, music, sports) emphasis. The small share of students gets weight when compared to the less than 30 percent of upper secondary students who succeed in continuing their studies in higher education directly after

graduation. Students of selective classes outperformed students in regular classes and expressed stronger school-engagement. As expected, students in classes with an academic emphasis outperformed their peers in classes with a non-academic emphasis. In view of the results, especially the academically oriented selective classes could be seen to represent attainment or ability-based streaming within the Finnish comprehensive school. Yet, as half of these classes reflect parents' choice of first foreign language in primary school, usually based on just a general assessment of the child's verbal abilities, the classes might not fully warrant the name of 'ability-based'. The same could be argued for music classes even if the selection is often based on a standardized test of musical aptitude, as the testing and selection is not made among the whole student body but only among the students whose parents want to present them for the test. The classes with an emphasis on math or science, beginning at grade 7, can be seen to rather reflect the students' interest in a few extra lesson hours of math – or an expectation of the other students sharing their interest – than representing the overall best math students. The most curious group are the classes based on football or some other form of sport, often beginning already in primary school with a student intake probably based more on extra-curricular interest than scholarly attainment.

As expected and supporting the concern of possible threat to equality posed by the selective classes, their students came, on average, from families with higher educational status than the students of regular classes or, especially, the small classes of students receiving special support. Especially clear was the preeminent performance of students of the math-oriented classes, which defies (in the Finnish context) their boy-dominated student body. Overall, boys and girls were relatively equally represented in the selective classes as girls were clearly overrepresented in classes with a non-academic emphasis other than sports. This can be seen later reflected in girls' overrepresentation among students applying to the few selective upper secondary schools (e.g., a High School of Art / Music), whose student selection is based on evidence of interest and aptitude on side of GPA (Kupiainen 2016, 198), an aspect not analyzed closer in the present study. With the selective class students' higher GPA and stronger preference for continuing their studies in the academic track, they have a high probability of counting among the successful 30 percent of the age group advancing immediately to higher education. Based on their study of applicants to five 'elite' upper secondary schools, however, Tervonen and his colleagues claim that the equal quality of upper secondary schools overrules the effect of school-level factors in students' advancement to higher education (Tervonen et al. 2018).

Yet, of importance from the point of view of equity is that unlike the streaming of the early days of the comprehensive school, today's selective classes differ from others by offering a few more lesson hours and content in the chosen subject as opposed to the lowered standards of the earlier streaming. Furthermore, all students are assessed against the same goals and criteria of the core curriculum. Accordingly, following Dahrendorf's notion of "life chances", we would be inclined to see the selective classes not as a threat to equal opportunity but as an effort to adapt the school to the heterogeneity of the student body. Within a school system, which has been known for long for its prompt diagnosing of and support for learning difficulties (e.g., Thuneberg et al., 2014; Vainikainen et al., 2017), we see the selective classes explored in this study as a structural proposal for pedagogical differentiation across the full ability distribution. However, as our empirical results show, despite their open-to-all application process the selective classes tend to extend the differentiation to factors, which threaten the equality goals of the comprehensive school. Yet, fifty

years of comprehensive school has made clear that equal opportunities cannot and do not produce equal outcomes (cf., Kalenius, 2020), meaning that some form of structural differentiation might be in place to serve individual students' educational aspirations and rights, and hence equity. One solution could be to substitute the current selective class model with subject-specific accelerated streaming, already adopted to ninth grade mathematics in many schools in. Such restricted streaming that would not cover all classes the student attends might be expanded to most subjects to offer individual choice with less unwanted social differentiation as most students would be studying most subjects in mixed classes.

As a limitation, we concede that the cross-sectional nature of our empirical study does not allow making claims of the possible advantage students of selective classes get from their selected class composition. In this, we defer to earlier research on the impact of class composition on not only students' learning but also on other educational outcomes (e.g., King, 2019). Accordingly, also regarding the earlier Finnish study indicating growing between-class differences during lower secondary education (Kupiainen, 2016), there would be a dire need to replicate the current study in a longitudinal setting at least across the lower secondary years. Furthermore, only the use of propensity score matching would reveal whether the found differences between the selective and regular classes just reflect differences in their student composition or whether selective classes really offer added value to their students.

A critical aspect not addressed in the present study due to lacking data on students' ethnic background is the system's ability to respond to the ethnic diversification of the student population, a relatively late phenomenon in Finland. Despite efforts to support own-language learning and the teaching of Finnish/Swedish as a second (or third or fourth) language to students with an immigrant background, the gap between native and non-native students is similar to the gap between boys and girls, both among the biggest among the OECD countries in the PISA studies (OECD, 2019). Our study can help rethinking educational responsiveness in the face of intensified immigration causing challenges to the national school systems framed in citizenry-focused welfare state programs (Antikainen & Pitkänen, 2014). We believe it is important to foster theoretical reflection on how to approach the current and future state of egalitarian schooling and empirically unfold educational in/equity within school arrangement – including the threat or affordances pedagogical diversification and individual choice can offer in it.

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