This is the accepted manuscript of the article, which has been published in Policy Futures in Education 2018, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210318811031

Official publication: Tervasmäki, T., Okkolin, M-A, Kauppinen, I. 2018. Changing the heart and soul? Inequalities in Finland's current pursuit of a narrow education policy. Policy Futures in Education. Online first. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210318811031

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Changing the Heart and Soul? Inequalities in Finland's Current Pursuit of a Narrow Education Policy[1]

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Abstract

The Finnish educational system is well-known for its excellent learning results, highly trained teachers and egalitarian values. However, when the political leanings of the government change, its policies are usually altered as well. In this policy report we give an account of the recent changes and current trends in Finnish education policy. We analyse the characteristics of the Sipilä Government's current education policy since 2015, and compare it to the Nordic welfare-state ideals of universalism, equality, and social justice, which have traditionally been the key building blocks of the Finnish education system. The Government's policy appears to be narrow-minded and ignorant of issues related to educational equality, stressing instead the importance of a flexible workforce and national competitiveness. We will reflect on the characteristics of Finnish education policy in light of the debate regarding academic capitalism and as part of an overarching trend of social inequality in Europe.

Keywords: Education policy, Finland, inequality, competitiveness, welfare state

> "Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul."
> (M. Thatcher, 1981)

Introduction

For decades, basic education has been *the* factor in Finland that has moderated and equalised the significance of social class and stratification. However, according to the two most recent PISA Indices of Economic, Social, and Cultural Status (ESCS), the impact of social background and status has increased: in 2012 it was already becoming evident, and in 2015

this was even more the case. Regardless of their country's high ranking in both European and global contexts, Finnish educational researchers, social scientists, and policy-makers have paid particular attention to the declining trend in *learning outcomes* since the PISA of 2009, especially when compared to the 2003 results (e.g. Vettenranta et al. 2016; Taajamo, Puhakka & Välijärvi 2014; Kupari et al. 2013; OECD 2013). But increasingly, concern has also been shown over the *rising inequalities*, which have also been linked to the poor learning outcomes (Vettenranta et al. 2016; see also Grahn-Laasonen 2016) – particularly the distinctions that divide learners according to their family background, socioeconomic status, gender, and region.

Almost forty years ago, Margaret Thatcher described herself as being "irritated about the whole direction of politics [...] towards the collectivist society" (Sunday Times 1981). She aimed to challenge this by using economic arguments and means. Our concern regarding the current Government Programme in Finland is about its political rhetoric that prioritises economic competitiveness, and the consequent ramifications on education policy. Our paper critically evaluates the strategic priorities of Prime Minister Sipilä's education policy and draws particular attention to the mismatch and dissonance between the present Government Programme (2015–2019), the National Core Curriculum (effective as of autumn 2016), and the Education and Research Development Plan (MEC 2012). Our main argument is that certain core elements of the equality of opportunities ideology that has been at the heart and soul, not only of Finland's welfare state but also its education policy, have been profoundly denigrated. In doing so, we exemplify the debate about the tensions between education policy and socially critical research, which challenge policy by questioning the adequacy of prevailing policies for social inclusion and justice (see e.g. Boyas, Vigurs & Lubienski 2018); about resisting dominant ideologies and marginalising practices (Tesar and Arndt 2017) and and neoliberal discourses and reform models of education (cf. Lubienski 2018).

Current education policy framework in Finland

The Sipilä Government has five priority policy areas for reform in its programme, one of which is to "improve Finnish education from lower secondary education to higher education and to reinforce interaction between education and working life. These measures are to improve the level of competencies, reduce the numbers of socially deprived young people, enhance the effectiveness of research and innovation activities, and to create novel education exports." (VN 2016.) All five priority areas highlight particular aspects that the government values overall: *efficiency, flexibility, working life, business sector, digitalisation, customer orientation, and innovations.*

Besides the effect of such government policy and general legislation, basic education (grades 1–9) follows the criteria and guidelines outlined in the national core curriculum for basic education (POPS). Municipalities and schools formulate their own, more detailed curricula where the local characteristics can be emphasised within the limits of core curriculum. The current POPS (2014) only came into force in autumn 2016. The proposed objectives have been: (i) growth as a human being and membership in society; (ii) requisite knowledge and skills (building up general knowledge and widening the world view); and (iii) promoting knowledge and ability, equality and life-long learning. (POPS 2014, 20). These goals are

furthered, for instance, by building up students' social agency, their 'ecosocial' education, and their cultural understanding:

> "The leading idea of ecosocial knowledge and ability is creating ways of living and a culture that foster the inviolability of human dignity and ability for renewal of ecosystems while building a competence base for a circular economy underpinned by sustainable use of natural resources. […Education] reinforces creativity and respect for cultural diversity and promotes interaction within and between cultures, thus laying a foundation for culturally sustainable development." (POPS 2014, 16)

The basic education curriculum reflects the latest Education and Research Development Plan 2011–2016 (KESU) which has focused on the rise in educational inequality and its objectives are: i) to reduce the gender gap in skills and education; (ii) to reduce the impact of students' socioeconomic background on their participation in education; (iii) to improve the position of disadvantaged groups; (iv) to foster an awareness of democracy and educational institutions; and (v) to help students improve their social and emotional skills (Ministry of Education and Culture [MEC] 2012).

> "School communities face the challenge of coping with an increasingly diverse and unequal society. […] Over the past few years, tolerance has not developed in the way envisaged. […] There needs to be a greater understanding of human diversity and a more equal treatment of individuals. School activities must underline inclusion, well-being, security, and respect for one's fellow human beings." (MEC 2012, 20.)

Issues of equality and fairness are thus prominent in both KESU and POPS, but the current government's agenda has buried the importance of these, at least rhetorically, under superficial and technical details that highlight a more industry-driven approach. This has been reinforced by confirmation that *no* new Education and Research Development Plan or its equivalent will be drawn up (according to a personal communication regarding this received from the Ministry of Education and Culture, 18.1.2017). Previously, KESU has been an essential strategic executive document that explicitly outlines the goals for education and research development. However, the current government has claimed that this document – considered significant for the past 25 years – is now no longer necessary, as education development will now be guided by what the government calls "key projects".

Our focus here is to review current education policy and the discourse surrounding research (Tervasmäki 2016), which has highlighted that significant rhetorical emphases from the current curriculum for basic education (POPS 2014) are clearly missing in the latest Government Programme (2015-2019). Informed by Laclauian discourse theory, the present study analyses the ideological features of the curriculum in terms of the values they represent.[2] Whereas the value basis of POPS underpins horizontal objectives linked to social justice and cultural diversity, the present programme restrictively views education as being subordinate to the labour market. This is the so-called competitiveness discourse (see Hautamäki 1993; Kantola 2010; Kantola & Kananen 2013).

Treating education as something that should be determined by the demands of the labour market reflects a broader neoliberal discourse at work across the globe. Its impact on social and education policy has been extensively discussed on both international (e.g. Ball 2012; Holland, Hughes & Leitch 2016; Mundy, Green, Lingard & Verger 2016; Rizvi & Lingard 2010) and national levels (e.g. Antikainen & Rinne 2012; Simola, Rinne, Varjo & Kauko 2013) with slightly different emphases. Some, such as From et al. (2014) for instance, have drawn attention to the diverse mechanisms which distinguish pupils from one another within a basic education system. In the wider social context these mechanisms increase *selectivism*, in other words, educational segregation, individualisation, and intergenerational social class inheritance. Selectivism thus has the effect of working against notions of *universalism* – such as equal training opportunities and social justice – which have previously been the cornerstones of welfare-state ideology (From et al 2014).

Based on this dichotomy between selectivist and universalist notions, we argue that the current Government Programme overrides many previous key education policy goals, and that it shows little concern, let alone any concrete means, for ending the current trend towards increasing inequality, however strongly the nationwide core curriculum and education and research development plans assert otherwise. We reflect on these paradigmatic and rhetorical inconsistencies as part of an overall trend towards social inequality that is presently happening in Europe, and which also relate to the debate on academic capitalism (see also the notion of historical and ideological divisions as discussed by Boyas, Vigurs & Lubienski 2018).

Paradigmatic changes and inconsistencies in education policy

Tervasmäki (2016) examined the ideological features of the basic education curriculum from the perspective of Laclauian discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe 2001 [1985], Laclau 2007). From this angle, the text of the curriculum appears to have been shaped by a political mode of articulation, meaning that elements of the discourse, such as concepts and values, are articulated in such a way that they become combined in *chains of equivalence* that are shaped by certain focal signifiers or nodal points to allow for semantic plurality (Tervasmäki 2016, 46–55; Laclau & Mouffe 2001, 94–148). Political articulation in the curriculum can in this way be linked to political ideologies, the core features of which have been categorised by Heywood (2012). The results of the present study suggest that the bulk of values contained in the curriculum come from focusing on the following as principal objectives: economic, social, and regional equality (social democracy, multiculturalism); altruism, critical thinking, and the realisation of individual potential (modern liberalism, social democracy); understanding cultural diversity and global citizenship (multiculturalism, liberal-democratic global citizenship); and on the progress of an eco-social *bildung* or civilisation (shallow ecology) (Tervasmäki 2016, 65-74; POPS 2014, 14-19). This rhetoric sets out basic education objectives which are broad and multidimensional in content, the ideological aspects of which suggest relatively uniform and universal values (Tervasmäki 2016, 92, 96) – such as those underpinning the welfare state and equal educational opportunities (From et al 2014). These themes are also critically tied up with the discourse surrounding the education of those with an immigrant background who are generally in a weaker position in this respect than the majority of the population.

Rhetoric in the curriculum emphasises the importance of pupils' holistic development and of cultivating notions of *bildung*, whereas in the Government Programme it describes education as a means of producing the necessary skills required by the labour market. The government has set aside certain priorities conventionally associated with education – such as exercising critical thought, education for democracy – and principles such as emancipation and educational equality and equity. The government's rhetoric instead places a substantial emphasis on 'improving competitiveness' – a discourse that arrived in Finland in the late 1980s and spread into areas such as the public sector where it had previously been thought to be inapplicable (Kantola 2010, 106-108). This sounds a lot like Antti Hautamäki's (1993, 203-206) vision of an education system based on "competitiveness services" where the chief role of schools and colleges is simply to serve the greater objective of economic competitiveness by producing a more efficient workforce. The competitiveness discourse stresses the importance of individual choices and actions, and values an entrepreneurial spirit that easily adapts to the needs of the market (Ball 2012, 30-31; Harni 2015). Ideologically it is rooted in a neoliberal ideology (Heywood 2012, 49-50) that is incompatible with both the key objectives of KESU and values expressed in the curriculum. This blinkered view of education policy ignores fundamental issues regarding the equality of educational opportunities, and sociocultural inclusion. It is thus implicit in endorsing educational segregation, atomisation , intergenerational inheritance of social class and education – in other words, *selectivism* (From et al 2014).

What is the basis for this change in education policy? Some of it can be found in the Report on the Future (2014), instigated by the Ministry of Education and Culture. This highlights the importance of developing, on the one hand, digital learning environments similar to those used in the workplace; and on the other, cultural and physical education policies with the overall aim of reducing the cost of health and welfare provision. These are themes that are clearly dear to the Sipilä Government, and yet they seem to overlook conflicting proposals made in the same report (MEC 2014, 19) to, for example, improve civic education (in understanding one's democratic rights and duties). The Sipilä Government appears to have embraced a policy of strategic management as detailed in the final report of the project to reform the Government's Steering Framework (OHRA) and the project to monitor the government programme (KOKKA) that preceded this. Strategic management emphasises short-term policies alongside clearly outlined objectives and means. This management model aims at limiting the number of policy goals so that they can be more easily incorporated into an economic framework. (Elomäki, Kantola, Koivunen & Ylöstalo 2016; VM 2014, 5-6, 21).

With this management model in mind, the final report of the OHRA proposed a significant reduction in the number of strategic management documents, due to the overall "unstructured" impression that they give, noting that "at worst, strategies are conflicting" (VM 2014, 16). This 'downsizing' can be interpreted as referring to terminating KESU, as it engaged a variety of agents and dozens of objectives. But when this termination was proposed as a bill, those that had previously participated in its planning voiced special concern about the need for them to be consulted and the need for democratic decision-making to be transparent (see e.g. OAJ 2015; Professoriliitto 2015). Government policies had previously been clarified and made explicit in KESU as a focused and strategic executive document, but its termination signals a shift to closed decision-making regarding education policy, where power has become more

concentrated than ever before at government and ministry levels. From the government's neoliberal perspective of improving competitiveness, simply narrowing down the number of policy options is attractive in itself, as having too many objectives only slows down their attainment.

A short account of two education reforms introduced by the Sipilä Government follows: the first is concerned with a new "vision" for higher education and research in general; and the second concerns vocational education in particular. These reforms clearly illustrate some characteristics of the government's education policy[3].

In February 2017, the MEC described future reforms to be made in collaboration with the university community and its stakeholders that would enable "the development of a high-quality, effective and internationally competitive higher education system in Finland by the year 2030 (MEC 2017a)". The memo (MEC 2017b) was released after a six-month process but did not include any precise objectives for institutions. It can thus be seen more as an imaginary narrative (Beckert 2016) used to frame higher education in the necessary terms required for more functional policies to be implemented thereafter. The narrative stresses how digitalisation would improve national competitiveness in terms of the new technologies and competencies it would require. The slogan, "*Bildung*, knowledge, science, and technology for the benefit of humanity and society" (MEC 2017b, 21), places special emphasis on the values that have traditionally been associated with the comprehensive Humboldtian ideals for university, and yet the content of the document is far from that – human sciences are ignored completely. Instead, mathematics and the natural sciences among other STEM subjects seen as the most vital resources for providing the competence base necessary to regenerate society, improve the potential for innovation, and increase national competitiveness (MEC 2017b, 10-13). Perspectives from the humanities and social sciences are seen, in comparison, as irrelevant to the demands of future society.

When it comes to reforming vocational education and training, the government's "key project" is to find "a competence-based and customer-oriented system and to improve the efficiency of vocational education (PMO 2017, 38)". It proposes hands-on learning in the workplace and an increase in individual learning paths with a complementary reduction in regulations that might prevent this. The wider objectives of the reform are to improve communication between education and the workplace, and to respond to the rapidly changing needs of the economy.

In line with the previous government's policy of cutting vocational education funding in 2012, Sipilä's government has cut education funding by 190 million euros. At the same time, due to the influx of refugees and the recession, which has caused many older people to take the opportunity to retrain and upgrade their qualifications, the overall number of students has grown. There has also been a growth in the need for special education in this sector, as vocational education is also seen as an effective way of tackling youth exclusion. Yet in spite of these societal obligations, the level of per capita funding proposed for vocational education in 2018 was even lower than it was in 2009 (Ammattiosaamisen kehittämisyhdistys 2017).

Another aspect of these two reforms is that they were only applicable to their respective areas, whereas KESU covered the education system as a whole, from the early years right up to adult education. Because the themes of interest contained in these reforms are similar to those previously addressed when drawing up KESU (vis-à-vis the structure and scope of

educational institutions, degree structures, training requirements, guidance practices, management, financing, effectiveness, and so on), we can only assume that these two separate reforms are an attempt to recast the themes (previously covered by KESU) within a strategic management framework. What is the reason for this, and how does this affect other levels of education?

Anna Elomäki and cowriters (2016, 391) have analysed the effects that this so-called 'strategic management' has had on equal opportunities, and come to the conclusion that "complex issues regarding structures and power are being summed up in two words and simplified into quantification goals. In this way, searching for means and measuring results has replaced any real discussion of values, inequality, and power." The Hellman, Monni and Alanko (2017) review of Finland's Government Programmes also shows that notions of the Nordic welfare-state that have played a key part in Finland's recent history until now – such as individual choice – were dropped completely by the Sipilä Government's Programme. This begs the question: should education be evaluated simply in terms of quantitative input and output such as these, or is there more at stake here? It has been argued that education system has lost its status as the leading authority on knowledge acquisition; it has been forced to open itself up to external reform proposals, *and* to demonstrate its economic effectiveness just like any other business enterprise (Deleuze 1992; Leuze, Martens & Rusconi 2007). This leaves us asking who is the leading authority on knowledge acquisition, if not the education system, and how should educational reforms be carried out?

It could very well be possible that this switch from long-term goals (as contained in KESU and POPS) to shorter term ones outlined in an industry-led, labour market-oriented Government Programme will result in pupils with a narrower skill set (e.g. Okkolin, Lehtomäki & Räsänen 2014; Sen 1993; 1999). One has good reason to ask how such a narrow-minded and instrumental view of education truly serves individual pupils' needs, if it does not also provide them with the tools to critically evaluate the life choices they have ahead of them – especially in terms of the aforementioned underlying values at stake (e.g. social democracy, modern liberalism, liberal-democratic global citizenship, and shallow ecology). There is also good reason to think that education policy should *de facto* be committed to a far-reaching interaction with society, taking into account all the intersectional features of its social and cultural diversity, as well as their potential for generating inequality.

It has previously been argued that the current science and higher education policy in Finland promotes academic capitalism (see Kaidesoja & Kauppinen 2018; Kauppinen & Kaidesoja 2014; Ruuska 2017); and from the above case examples it seems the current education policy is equally subservient to the economy. Pupils are being encouraged to embrace entrepreneurship, self-employment, and competitiveness to be better prepared for a more flexible labour market at the expense of job security; and are in many ways being denied a broad base to their education on the grounds that it is irrelevant to the current needs of the economy. In fact, equality of opportunity and a broad base to one's education, which a management document such as KESU would have guaranteed (had it not been omitted), could actually ensure much better job security in a labour market that is increasingly susceptible to fluctuations in the market economy.

This current trend illustrates how education has now become an ideological vehicle for the state, over which the economic elite now seems to have gained a significant grip. For

example, the Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK) has certain objectives for education (Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto 2018) which form the principal part of the Sipilä Government's education policy (Tervasmäki & Tomperi 2018). At basic, vocational and higher education levels, this policy would seem to reflect a wider class-based hegemonic strategy present in other sectors of social policy, aimed at creating more favourable institutional conditions for capitalism (see Sotiris 2013).

What is interesting in this context is how this discourse has turned the concept of what is politically extreme on its head. Whereas education encouraging neoliberal entrepreneurship and competitiveness is seen as hegemonic (that is, a naturally integral and indispensable part of the system), education in democratic issues – such as gender equality – has been described as dangerous ideological propaganda. For instance, MP Mika Raatikainen (2016) wrote a written question to the Minister of Education and Culture questioning the validity of a project (The Right to be Me –project, Isot-hanke 2017) undertaken to promote gender equality, seeing it instead as a means for spreading "contentious ideology". Interestingly, the expectation that every student in Finland need to learn about entrepreneurship has not been contested in public discussion, even though its' goals and contents can be linked to neoliberal ideology (see e.g. Harni 2015; cf. Fernández-Herrería & Martínez-Rodríguez 2016).

Does this comparative lack of attention and the termination of KESU reflect wider efforts to to suppress the limits of this debate? In this respect, it is important to know just what is being treated as normal or abnormal, and who the "us" in this discourse actually excludes. The drawing of these lines should be seen as the political articulation of hegemony at its purest (Laclau 2007, 44-45; Mouffe 2000, 5). As there is no long-term strategic development approach, it is possible to make swift, flexible, and unattached policy changes to fit the market-oriented Government Programme framework. Nevertheless, in light of the fact that hegemonic power is naturally quite fragile and can be challenged, it will be interesting to see the kind of criticisms that today's education policy will almost certainly court in the future and that we would certainly encourage.

There is clearly a case for arguing that the current blinkered view of education policy is simply a way of justifying capitalism (see Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Rather than seeing education as a means for coming up with new solutions to a changing world, this seemingly 'safer' line of thinking reinforces the status quo by rendering the capitalistic market system as attractive, and recasting demands for equality of opportunity as themes of minor significance. Rather than dwelling 'unnecessarily' on the dangers of capitalism, it focuses instead on the security that it provides for individuals and families – as long as they are committed to reinforcing and maintaining their employability (cf. Holland, Hughes & Leitch 2016). The way in which the neoliberal ideology framing the government's education policy places freedom of choice and responsibility on the shoulders of able individuals mirrors Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis regarding the way capitalism is being presently justified in the world. Unfettered from the restraints of KESU, it now seems that every level of Finnish education is 'free' to focus more on entrepreneurship and competitiveness, even if this means that the curriculum will be narrower.

Reflections

In this paper, we have drawn attention to an inherent conflict between the core curriculum for basic education and the Sipilä Government's education policy, in both rhetorical and ideological terms. The core curriculum is anchored in universalist principles such as equality of educational opportunities and social justice, while the government prefers to think of education as a selectivist means for improving competitiveness that is subordinate to the demands of the labour market. By doing away with a national education and research plan, education policy seems reduced in scope and limited to the short term. Future reforms planned for higher education and the ongoing reorganisation of vocational education are further examples of this mindset that merit concern. In disregarding crucial issues of equality and social justice, the government's education policy has resulted in a rhetorically overt neoliberal discourse that is incompatible with universalist objectives such as equality of opportunities. It is just a question of time before the erosive consequences of this rhetoric will begin to show: educational segregation, atomisation and intergenerational inheritance of social class will become more and more common in Finnish society.

And these developments are not only happening in Finland, but across the world. It was noted in a comparison between EU member states, for instance, that there has been an overall increase social inequality (Schraad-Tischler & Kroll 2014). These results go some way to show how the implementation of economic and fiscal discipline during the global economic crisis have deepened the social gap in many EU countries. These signs of inequality have shown up in surveys and studies time and again, but the Finnish system has chosen to ignore them more often than not. Nevertheless, PISA results have drawn attention to the effects of increased segregation in the Finnish education system – the downward trend in academic results can be traced back to pupils' socioeconomic status, family background, school, and where they live (see e.g. Vettenranta et al 2016). In addition, it seems that poverty for families with children has become more common in Finland (Salmi, Närvi & Lammi-Taskula 2016), and the proportion of male citizens dropping out of education and the labour market is now higher than the average among OECD countries (OECD 2016, 357).

Even in terms of improving competitiveness and catalysing economic growth, the government's narrow basis for its education policy appears self-defeating. Economic research (Krueger & Lindahl 2001; Wössmann 2008) has shown that investing in the education of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, in particular, will be compensated several times over and in fact yield more economic growth than investing in the comparatively well-off. At the moment, in Finland, the ethos of the welfare state has fallen by the wayside (Kantola & Kananen 2013; Hellman et al. 2017) and it seems that the country is on course to follow the Anglo-Saxon model of a competitive state, where the Schumpeterian ideas of market efficiency, competitiveness, and innovation are prioritised. Cutbacks have been made in the public sector and social policies are increasingly based on the idea of workfare policies (Jessop 2002; Dean 2007), which emphasise individual responsibility for social security (Kantola & Kananen 2013; Kananen 2017).

Nevertheless, the universalist principles of social equality and justice that form the idealogical basis for a welfare state – based on a strong public sector financed by taxes – are still appreciated by the majority of citizens in Finland (Muuri, Manderbacka & Elovainio 2012). In other words, these ideals are still very much in the "heart and soul" of Finnish citizens. It is therefore quite reasonable to question the legitimacy of the current government's

education policy. It seems intolerable that we have to wait to see just how bad inequality in society gets before the government invests once more in educational policies that recognise issues of equality and social justice; and this seems even more pressing as Finland becomes increasingly multicultural.

Acknowledgements
We would like to thank Prof. Markus Jäntti for his comments on the version of this paper that was previously written in Finnish.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

[1] This policy report is a translated, updated, and extended version of what was published in *Kasvatus* journal (Tervasmäki, Okkolin & Kauppinen 2017).
[2] Our analysis in this discussion paper, however, draws more on a qualitative analysis of policy documents rather than a specific discursive paradigm and methodology.
[3] For a comprehensive analysis of the Sipilä government's education policy from May 2015 to July 2018, see Tervasmäki & Tomperi (2018).

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