

Quality Assurance and Evaluation (QAE) in Finnish compulsory schooling – a national model or just unintended effects of radical decentralisation?

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Abstract This article traces Quality Assurance and Evaluation (QAE) developments in Finnish compulsory schooling. The central question is this: is there a Finnish model of QAE? We conclude that it may be a rhetorical overstatement to speak about a specific Finnish ‘Model’ of QAE in a strong sense. However, neither is it valid to conclude that what happens in Finnish QAE merely reflects the unintended effects of radical decentralisation. The Finnish consensus on certain issues in QAE could be characterised as silent, and based on antipathy rather than on conscious and articulated principles. Finnish hostility towards ranking, combined with a bureaucratic tradition and a developmental approach to QAE strengthened by radical municipal autonomy, have constructed two national and local embedded policies that have been rather effective in resisting a transnational policy of testing and ranking. It is significant, however, that both represent a combination of conscious, unintended and contingent factors.

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) have become a vital element in the educational discourse of the Finnish state. Changes in education were linked to a general wave of administrative reform in which decentralisation and deregulation restructured the Finnish public sector. The breakthrough coincided with the deep economic recession of 1991–1993. Two interconnected ‘big ideas’ behind the reform were management by results and evaluation. The introduction of management by results has been recognised as one of the most significant administrative reforms in the Finnish (Temmes & Kiviniemi 1997, 38) and European (Neave & van Vught 1991, 245) public sectors. Evaluation as a social practice and a form of knowledge is not new in education. What is new, however, is its central position and strong interrelationship with quality issues in the new mode of governance, often characterised as New Public Management (NPM). It has been seen in terms of ‘major global turmoil’, involving the re-organisation of education globally, nationally, locally and institutionally (Brennan & Shah 2000, 13; Morley 2003, 170).

QAE is hard to define precisely. During the audit explosion, evaluation as a concept incorporated many related concepts such as planning, quality development and assurance, inspection and auditing. We advance two arguments here: first, some concepts may be more important in terms of what they do rather than what they mean (Rose 1999); second, the fuzzy, amoebic and scrappy character of evaluation may reflect its presence rather than its problem (Power 1997).

This article traces recent QAE developments in Finnish comprehensive schooling, and ask if we can discern a Finnish model? This question links the Finnish case to more general and theoretical issues concerning how we should understand relations between the trans-national, the national and the local. Is it still appropriate to speak about national models in the era of the ‘Global Educational Reform Movement’ (GERM)¹?

It is obvious that a strong version of convergence cannot be easily defended. It is more reasonable to emphasise, as does Green (1996, 23), that the “deep-seated historical traditions institutionalised in the structures, practices and institutional cultures are specific to each nation”, and therefore the ‘new’ is always entangled with and re-articulated through the ‘old’ (Simola in press). In this sense it is useful to conceptualise relations between the trans-national, the national and the local in terms of distinctions between *travelling* and *embedded* policies (Ozga & Jones 2006), or even through *vernacular* or *indigenous* globalisation (Ozga & Lingard 2007)

At the same time, however, we should also articulate these relations in terms such as *commonality within difference* (Marques Cardoso, 1998; cit. Ball 2001), *exogenous trends* (Sweeting & Morris 1993) or *paradigm convergence* (Ball 1998), for example. Indeed, we could see policy technologies, techniques and mechanisms as productive of a Foucauldian *dispositif*, a machinery that is characterised as inviting, tempting and persuading but also coercive, hegemonic and dominant. (Cf. also Simola, in press)

Therefore, the question is how to understand trans-national, national and local as a complex relationality rather than in relationships of domination or submission. This requires that even if commonalities are identified, “they need to be interrogated not simply in terms of their

¹ We are indebted to Pasi Sahlberg (2007, 263) for his witty expression about the new education reform orthodoxy “that outlines the logic and evolution of education development as most countries adjust their education systems to respond to fit new economic realities and social challenges”.

structural variety but also in terms of their inter-relationships and the resulting political and subjective effects over time” as noted by Ball (2001).

We shed some light on these questions by examining a set of data that includes Finnish governmental documents (laws, decrees, education-development plans, national reports to the OECD and the EU, among others) and reports, as well as material on evaluation commissioned or published by national authorities, mainly the National Board of Education (NBE) and the Ministry of Education (ME), from the 1970s until the present. Further material for this article was gathered in interviews (#1 - #11) conducted in April 2007 with key Finnish actors in education policy, including heads and major actors from the NBE, the ME, the Finnish Education Evaluation Council (FEEC, *Koulutuksen arviointineuvosto*), the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA, *Kuntaliitto*) and the Confederation of Finnish Industries and Employers (CIE, *Elinkeinoelämän keskusliitto*).

Finnish education policy as a case

Finland is a curious case in terms of relations between the trans-national, the national and the local in education policy. Because of its geopolitical position after WW2, its specific relations with the neighbouring U.S.S.R. framed all of its international cooperation until the collapse of the socialist camp in Europe in the early 1990s. The most important international cooperative directions for official Finnish education policy, realised by the ME and the NBE, were, first, to other Nordic countries and secondly to UNESCO. Thirdly, Finland joined the OECD only in 1969, the last of the Nordic countries to do so, and it took several years before Finnish participation grew beyond diplomatic representation.

During the early 1990s the OECD became the most influential international organisation for education policy, and Finland has been represented on the CERI Governing Board since 1989. Finnish representation on the Education Committee of the OECD started a little later. The first official specialising in education was sent to the Finnish Mission at the OECD in Paris in 1990. This was a serious investment and only one or two other member countries sent a permanent special expert in education to their national mission. (Niukko 2006b, 106-107). Rinne, Kallio and Hokka (2004, 50–51) have shown that Finland was an early adopter of OECD influences. Since the early 1990s it has participated in a great number of country and thematic reviews after a break following its first country review in 1981. According to Rinne and his colleagues (2004), Finland could be seen as a model pupil of OECD since the 1990s.

This characterisation comes near to praise from the OECD side, which could have an ironic ring to it:

“Finland has a record of heeding the advice of past OECD education reviews. The review seems likely to continue that pattern helping to shape the future of a dynamic education sector.” (OECD 2003; cit. Rinne et al. 2004)

Finland is a country with a long and strong tradition of good and detailed statistics, which also cover the field of education. These statistics and the indicator systems were developed and organised primarily for national, top-down follow-up rather than for any international comparisons. For example, Kauko and Varjo (2008) emphasise the role of central administration as the main target group for the information production since the 1970s while the new comprehensive school system was implemented. Despite the administrative emphasis, Finland also joined in international evaluations at an early stage. It joined the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) at the very beginning, in 1958, and since then the Institute for Educational Research in Jyväskylä has been a collaborator in most of IEA’s comparative research projects. One could argue here that before the spectacle of PISA international comparisons were more a matter of academic rather than administrative interest in Finland.

It was largely accepted that the new comprehensive school system had to be implemented with strong top-down government. One of our interviewees (# 1) described the birth of the comprehensive school as a “reform implementation based on multi-level planning”, and another (#10) characterised the educational legislation of those years as a “handbook of good school keeping”, which had a tendency to swell. During the 1970s and 1980s the piles of circulars, statutes and decrees mushroomed, all aimed at regulating schooling practices from curriculum implementation to school-yard construction. In their *International Atlas of Evaluation*, Furubo, Rist & Sandahl (2002, 21) suggest that strong internal and external pressures caused the diffusion of evaluation to Finland. However, internationally, Finland is part of the second or even third evaluation wave. Its position is characterised by both high external and internal pressure in the 2000s.

A significant side effect of the comprehensive-school reform was the amalgamation of the two existing teachers' unions into the Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ) in 1973. OAJ has become the strongest union in the important "umbrella organization" AKAVA, which includes all the unions of the academic professions. On the international level, OAJ

could be considered one of the strongest teachers' unions in the world.² An exceptional feature here, moreover, is that the majority of its members are comprehensive-school teachers. Some researchers are of the opinion that no important educational decision has been made without collaboration with OAJ since the late 1970s (see e.g., Lehtisalo & Raivola 1986, 176; Rinne & Jauhiainen 1988, 234). The Finnish teachers' union seems to hold a certain *veto* power over Finnish educational policy, and this has had and still has a strong effect, especially on Finnish comprehensive-school policy. (cf. Simola 1993)

In sum, it could be said that the central function of evaluation in the 1970s and 1980s was top-down control in a corporatist mode. Its developing function in the arena of schooling was, however, explicitly written down in the Development Plan for Comprehensive School, published in the early years of the 1980s (NBGE 1982). It was stated in the plan that evaluation should be engaged in more widely on the school level as a way to develop school-level action, which in turn was thought to foster the achievement of goals set for education.

The era of decentralisation and deregulation: management by results, QAE and the great recession

During the late 1980s and 1990s as a result of many interrelated social, political and administrative events and changes, discourses of quality and evaluation gained ground in the field of Finnish educational policy and governance. Changes affecting the growing interest in evaluation policies in education were realised in the context of the changing political atmosphere and the deep economic recession of 1991-1993.

The 1987 Prime Minister Harri Holkeri's right-left coalition cabinet aimed to bring about an essential change in Finnish politics. For the first time since WW2, the conservative Coalition Party now held the post of Prime Minister and its two decades in opposition were over. As far as education was concerned, this marked the end of the deal between the Central and Social Democratic parties in the ME and the NBE, and the right wing was set to dominate State educational discourse for more than a decade. The posts of the Ministers of Education also fell to right-wing ministers. To mark the beginning of the new era, Prime Minister Holkeri gave an epoch-making address in 1987 in which he redefined the central concept of Finnish education policy so far: people were different in terms of capacity, and equality meant the right of every pupil to receive education that corresponded to his/her prerequisites and expectations rather

² OAJ members are engaged in early-childhood education, basic education, upper-secondary-school teaching, vocational training, polytechnic-level teaching, basic art education, vocational adult education as well as university teaching. Over 95% of Finnish teachers are members of an organised trade union.

than the delivery of universal *Bildung* for everybody regardless of his/her sociocultural background. It is clear that this definition refers to *equity* rather than to *equality*.³

In line with the changing times, the social-democratic head of the NBE was replaced by a conservative in 1991. According to the declaration of the new era, the *Proposal of the NBE for a Structural Programme of Education* (NBE 1992), the development of the Finnish comprehensive school would be characterised by concepts such as ‘decentralised and consumer-based accountability’, ‘result-based public funding’ and ‘self-responsible individual learning’.

The changes in education were part of a general wave of decentralisation and deregulation in Finland. The process had started in the late 1980s with the Free Municipality Experiment (Law 718/1988), which gave local authorities in experimental municipalities more freedom to make independent decisions about their own organisation. Finally, The Act on Central Government Transfers to Local Government (Law 707/1992) and the Local Government Act (Law 365/1995) radically increased local autonomy and strengthened the judicial position of the municipalities. The new state subsidy system granted funding according to annual calculations per pupil, lesson or other unit, and liberated the municipalities from the former detailed ‘ear-marked-money’ budgeting towards the free lump-sum budgeting mechanisms for schooling. In general, the municipal practices of budgeting, accounting and auditing the administration and finances were changed to accord with the NPM doctrine (see, for example, Haveri 2000, 36–38).

This new administrative landscape differed radically from the old one. Norm steering was replaced with management by the results and information steering and evaluation (Laukkanen 1994; 1997; 1998). The NBE Director General Vilho Hirvi put it in a nutshell:

“Genuine management by results in the educational sector has two fundamental elements: first, a steering unit that sets the goals and gives resources, and second, a level that creates the products and services, i.e., the schools. (...) The National Curriculum Framework sets the central objectives for learning and education that define the teaching objectives for obligatory, optional and elective subjects, etc. The municipal or school-based curriculum, in turn, expresses how these objectives are to be achieved. (...) The evaluation of effi-

³ As a symptom of the symbolic power of equality in Finnish educational discourse, there is no analogous concept for equity, even though it would be easy to find one (*oikeus, oikeudenmukaisuus*). The concept of equality is used in two contrasting ways. These two conceptions were connected in a curious both-and formulation in a major document published by the Educational Evaluation Council, (FEEC 2004, 15): “The economic and social welfare of Finnish society is based on an egalitarian public system of schooling. Its mission is to guarantee for every citizen *both* educational opportunities of good quality regardless of his/her sex, dwelling place, age, mother tongue *and* economic position *and* the right to tuition accordant with his/her capabilities and special needs and his/her self-development.” (emphasis added)

ciency means assessing how the main idea and the main objectives in the area in question have been realised. (Hirvi, 1991)

By the early 1990s all traditional forms of control over the teacher's work such as school inspections, a detailed national curriculum, officially approved teaching materials, weekly timetables based on the subjects taught, and class diaries in which the teacher had to record what was taught each hour had been eliminated. The only remaining control mechanism is set minimum numbers of lessons to be taught in each subject in each school. The inspectorate, traditionally hated by teachers and municipalities, opposed the idea of local freedom (#6). All these traditional means of control were to be replaced by evaluation, realised by the municipal and national authorities.

The recession of 1991–1993 marked the deepest crisis in peacetime of Finland's economy. Finland had the third highest level of unemployment in Europe after Ireland and Spain. It is widely accepted that without shifting decision-making to the local level the municipalities could not have been required to cut down spending as much as they did during the recession. Thus the new decentralised and deregulated mode of governance was moulded into the economic principles of savings and cutbacks.

Two rivals in the field: the NBE and the AFLRA

Due to the radical decentralisation and deregulation, two competing coalitions appeared in the national QAE field of compulsory schooling but neither of them have real normative power over the municipalities and schools. On the one hand the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education see QAE from the perspective of the education system and its legislation, while on the other the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA) and the Ministry of the Interior – often accompanied by the Ministry of Finance – see it in terms of municipal service production and legislation. Both of these coalitions have attempted to assume the role of determining the discourse of evaluation in the context of education.

Three of the interviewees (#3, #5 and #10) independently described a QAE system in which the NBE has no contact with the municipalities but deals directly with the schools and teachers, while AFLRA works with the municipalities and principals. AFLRA (2006, 18, 23) has also taken the stand that all evaluative actions in the field of education implemented in its municipal organisations should be organised in cooperation with the providers of education, which mostly means the municipality, and not with schools or teachers. It sees all evaluative action implemented in the municipality in the light of municipal autonomy and municipal

education policy. It also interprets the Basic Education Act as giving the right and duty to participate in educational evaluation to the municipality but not to schools or teachers. (see e.g., AFLRA 2006, 2)

The NBE's twofold status as a central agency with administrative duties and at the same time as an evaluation expert body started to provoke criticism, which made room for one more actor in the field of evaluation. The two coalitions focused on the principal question of the autonomy of the proposed Finnish Education Evaluation Council (FEEC). Should it be administratively integrated into the NBE or would the Institute for Educational Research in Jyväskylä be a better host? The result was a notably loose network of evaluators, with undefined authority, set up in 2003:

“For the purpose of external evaluation, there shall be a separate Education Evaluation Council attached to the Ministry of Education to organize activities in a network with universities, the National Board of Education and other evaluation experts.”
(Law 32/2003, 21§.)

Since the early 1990s these two coalitions have launched training courses, published literature and devised models for their target group. AFLRA's first publication, *Quality Challenge – Public Government needs quality thinking* (AFLRA 1993), authorised by the Ministry of Finance, introduced concepts such as the ISO 9000 standards, and criteria for Quality Awards, auditing and benchmarking for the public sector. They also discussed Total Quality Management, the Balanced Scorecard, the Quality Matrix and the European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model in their later publications. Their main argument was that all evaluation implemented at municipal level should be seen first and foremost as a tool of municipal management and as part of the political processes and decision-making in the municipality. The external evaluations directed towards the schools should also be organised in cooperation with municipal authorities and not directly with schools and teachers. As far as the NBE was concerned, the curriculum and its development were at the core of QAE. For example, the 2004 National Framework Curriculum (NBE 2004) was based very much on the idea of evaluation: while the word ‘education’ was referred to 79 times, ‘evaluation’ was mentioned nearly five times more often (380) – more than once on every page.

Since the 1990s attempts have been made by many national institutional actors to push through evaluation in educational and governing discourses. In summing up the administrative reforms of the 1990s, the evaluation group for educational administration in Finland stated, however:

“ (...) One of the most serious institutional issues in our educational system is the unsatisfactory *relation between the State and the municipalities*. (...)The decentralisa-

tion level of the educational administration in Finland is one of the highest in Europe, according to the information of the OECD.” (Temmes, et al. 2002, 129, 92; emphasis in original)

At the same time, a European Commission study on the evaluation of schools providing compulsory education in Europe states that Finland is one of the few European countries – the others are Italy and Norway – in which there is no direct control from the national to the school level (EURYDICE 2004).

Local implementation of QAE

In a curious and ambitious publication, three ex-officials of the NBE attempted to find explanations for Finnish success in recent education surveys such as PISA. They call the new period of education policy in Finland since the early 1990s “the era of trust” (Aho et al. 2006, 12). In interviews with state-level politicians (Rinne et al 2002; Simola et al. 2002) we conducted in the late 1990s we found unanimity and a strong belief in the superiority of local decision-making. According to the interviewees, expertise rested in the municipalities and in the schools, and it could only be drawn upon if the decision-making power was at the local level. This was a remarkable contrast to the international discourse on neo-liberal education: while in many countries the motives inspiring market-driven accountability policies were based on distrust, in Finland the same ideology was motivated by trust.

One should not overstate the rhetoric of trust, however. The basic idea was clearly expressed by the late Secretary General of the Ministry of Education: evaluation is a pivotal element in the new steering system since it “replaces the tasks of the old normative steering, control and inspection system” (Hirvi 1996, 93). The first attempt to apply a strong evaluation system came to light in the last draft of the Curriculum Framework of 1994, which included a detailed *Structural Model of Evaluation* emphasising effectiveness, efficiency and financial accountability, summed up in 33 issues to be evaluated. This was dropped from the final version, however. (Simola 1995, 297)

The Framework for Evaluating Educational Outcomes (NBE 1995b) was published a year later. It was a rather loose model for a national evaluation system analysing selected “evaluation objects”, again using the concepts of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The change in regime of the 1990s is tangibly present in the NBE’s framework – or at least in the rhetoric: the three E’s are the cornerstones of the New Public Management (NPM) doctrine (e.g., Lähdesmäki 2003, 65–69). Due to the decentralising and deregulating administrative reforms

however, the Framework for Evaluating Educational Outcomes has no legal power and was a mere recommendation addressed to all education providers in Finland. As a part of its information management, the NBE published a multitude of texts characterised as ‘inspirational material’ (*virikemateriaali*) especially for evaluation.

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

As one concrete element of the new evaluative control, in 1999 the NBE published “The Criteria for School-leaving Evaluation in Basic Education” (NBE 1999). The introduction refers to the need for equality in evaluation that serves as a basis for placement in subsequent education. The same kinds of criteria were published for early and middle-stage evaluation in the 2004 Framework Curriculum (NBE 2004), too. In fact, this could be seen as the only direct and normative evaluative mechanism reaching the classroom level.

Given that all these QAE proposals were directive rather than obligatory, it is no wonder that their implementation at the municipal level varies widely. One of the key factors affecting the implementation of any state-level reforms in Finland is the curious and rare structure of the municipalities. They vary widely in size, ranging from Helsinki with its half a million inhabitants to Sottunga, a municipality in Åland with 117 inhabitants. Consequently, there are very many of them – as many as 415.

The NBE conducted two surveys (Rajanen 2000 and Löfström et al. 2005) of QAE implementation at the local level. In general, these surveys do not give a very reliable picture - for two symptomatic reasons: the task of responding was given to lower-level and thus not necessarily well-informed staff in many municipalities, and many did not even reply (22.5% in 2000 and 19% in 2005). In both cases it is indicative of the low priority given to QAE. Ac-

According to the 2000 survey (Löfström et al. 2005, 19), only one third of the providers of comprehensive education said they had *some* system of evaluation to underpin their work (Rajanen 2000, 31). The 2005 survey contained more detailed questions on what this ‘system of evaluation’ they used was. Only a few of the respondent municipalities used the models AFLRA had been promoting for a decade, such as ISO, Quality Awards, Balanced Scorecard and EFQM, while a quarter of those using some model referred to the NBE’s Efficiency Model of Educational Evaluation. The great majority (more than 70%) said they capitalised on “their own application of different models”, which could mean anything from a genuine new model to no evaluation at all.

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

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

At the same time, however, one of our interviewees (#6) described the chaotic situation as ‘evaluation bloat’ (*arviointiähky*), referring to a colleague from a Northern municipality complaining of more than 50 different evaluation tasks per year. S/he also emphasised the lack of any coordination in the field as the various actors were jealously clinging to their evaluation ‘fiefdoms’:

“It’s a runaway, runaway situation, there is no systematic indicator production, except those few twenty or so of the NBE gathered together for their indicator publication (...) there is no coordination, it’s overlapping, overlapping even in one state authority (...) when all these inquiries arrive at the municipalities, it does look like a chaotic evaluation bloat. We don’t have much to develop, we should have some coordinated information production here, indeed.” (#6)

The frustration seemed to be most evident among our interviewees from the NBE, while in AFLRA there appeared to be a kind of complacent acceptance of the predominant situation (#8). One NBE official explains his/her frustration:

“... we have no jurisdiction to touch anything, we have no legislation about it, we have no mechanisms, we have nothing. This, in a nutshell, is our biggest weakness.”

(#5)

This stagnation is reflected in the recent report of the Working Party for the Development of Educational Evaluation (ME 2007a), set up by the ME: virtually the only concrete proposal was to move the FEEC office to Helsinki. There are also serious political projects on the agenda of both main coalitions: at the state level, the role of the NBE in the evaluation process is an open question, and AFLRA is currently engaged in the PARAS project for restructuring local government and services in Finland, the aim of which is essentially to reduce the number of municipalities.

Finnish QAE curiosities in basic education

Our research material indicates that at the national level the QAE discourse has at least four specific characteristics. First, at the most general level, since the middle of the 1990s official texts have repeatedly stated that the evaluation is “for developing educational services and not an instrument of administrative control” (e.g., ME 1995, 55; 1996, 85). The Basic Education Act of 1999 (Law 628/1998, 21 §) stated that “[t]he purpose of the evaluation of education is to ensure the realisation of the purpose of this law and to support the development of education and improve the prerequisites of learning.” However, AFLRA as a municipal interest group consisting of all Finnish municipalities, challenged this official educational “truth” about evaluation, claiming that it had been wrongly promoted to schools and teachers primarily as an instrument for development. According to AFLRA, all evaluation implemented in municipal organisations is part of municipal evaluation, which means at the same time that it is a tool of municipal management and control (AFLRA 2002, 23).

Secondly, the information produced through evaluation serves the administrative bodies and the schools rather than the public or families. The Basic Education Act makes no reference to families, parents or customers among those interested in the evaluation of knowledge beyond the school achievements of their own children. Only incidental reference is made in texts such as the government’s preface to families needing evaluative knowledge in order to make their school choices. Since the mid-1990s families and students appear as an afterthought:

“The purpose of the evaluation system is to produce the information needed in local, regional and national development work and educational decision-making. Besides this, the evaluations should produce information on which students and their families can base their choices.” (ME 1996, 85)

AFLRA (2006, 18) also challenges this by arguing that information provided by evaluations should respond to the needs of citizens in the municipalities along with needs of municipal and state politics and government, and of different types of authorities and employees (see also AFLRA 2002, 23).

Thirdly, practically no education official or politician has supported the provision of ranking lists or making schools transparent in competition by comparing them in terms of average performance indicators. The Education Committee of the Confederation of Finnish Industries and Employers (CIE) has been virtually the only body to openly back English-type league tables and national testing⁴ (CIE 1990; 1991). The Standing Committee for Education and Culture of the Parliament of Finland stated first in 1998 and then again in 2004:

“The publicity concerns only the main results of evaluations. The purpose of the new Basic Education Act is not to publish information directly linked to an individual school or teacher. Publishing the evaluation results cannot in any case lead to the ranking of schools or the categorisation of schools, teachers or pupils as weak or good on unfair grounds.” (CEC 1998)

This stand against educational league tables was tested in court in two separate appeals in 2000 and 2003 in the two big cities of Turku and Vantaa, which were made to the regional administrative courts following the municipal education authorities’ decisions not to publish school-specific information on comprehensive schools. In both cases, the focus of the appeal was on school-specific performance indicators that, it was argued, parents needed in order to make their school-choice decisions. In its final decision in 2005 the Supreme Administrative Court ordered the municipal educational authority to hand over the school-specific evaluation results to the appealing party. Our interviews featured some vivid descriptions of the shock, on both the central and the municipal level (#10 and #3), caused by this “horrifying decision”. Despite the 2005 court order, however, the Finnish media have so far only published school-specific evaluation results of the Vantaa case. The silence here is very meaningful, and probably says something about the Finnish ethos concerning league tables and school-specific evaluation results in general. Informally, we learned that the municipalities were in strong agreement not to evaluate? schools in such a way that the results could be used to produce ranking lists.

Finally, Finland has not followed the Anglo-Saxon accountability movement in education, which advocates making schools and teachers accountable for learning results. Traditionally, the evaluation of student outcomes has been the task of each teacher and school. The only standardised high-stakes assessment is the matriculation examination at the end of upper-

secondary school before students enrol in tertiary education. Prior to this, no external national tests or exams are required (Aho et al. 2006, 12).

One of our interviewees (#10) suggested that it was, at least partly, because of the pressure from the Education Committee of the Confederation of Finnish Industries and Employers (CIE) to introduce national testing that the NBE in 1994 launched a series of thematic sample-based studies as an alternative to the national testing scheme. The person in charge of those studies describes them as follows:

“Since 1994, large national assessment projects have been carried out, suitable for use in fine-tuning the assessment methodology. The national learning result assessment system has become a central way of producing data on the effectiveness of operations. Wide-ranging evaluations of the state of education have made use of large-scale surveys, statistical data, interviews and statements given by professionals.” (Jakku-Sihvonen 2002, 3)

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the idea of large, national, sample-based learning tests was not unknown in Finland before the mid-1990s. Adding to the various international comparisons, the Institute for Educational Research conducted a large national survey in 1979 to in order to follow-up the consequences of the implementation of the new comprehensive-school system. The project was mainly funded by the National Board of General Education and its aims are retrospectively considered both academic and administrative – a typical double bind between the Institute for Educational Research and the National Board of General Education in the 1970s. (Väljjarvi, Linnakylä & Kupari 2005, 220)

The Finnish QAE model?

It appears clear that it may be a rhetorical overstatement to speak about a specific and intentional Finnish Model of QAE– at least in the way Aho et al. (2006) attempt to explain Finnish success in the recent PISA comparative listings. Not even the four most well formulated proposals mentioned above were articulated in their entirety by any of the interviewees or in any of the documents as a list of guiding principles for QAE practices. Nor is it valid to conclude that what happens in Finnish QAE merely echoes the unintended effects of radical decentralisation.

We do not suggest that there is no consensus in the education field on these issues: there is, in fact, a very strong tradition of consensus in Finland. The General Director of the new NBE joked about that in a parliamentary discussion in the early 1990s: “The parts of the addresses

concerning education policy, and its importance and needs for development, could be written by one and the same person” (Hirvi 1996, 42). This consensus on certain issues in QAE could be characterised as *silent*, based on antipathy rather than conscious and articulated principles. Our interviewee from the NBE compared the reception of market discourse in schools and other public services:

“The schools and other educational institutions were clearly the stickiest of all. And the discussion was about this terminology, for example this issue of customership: who is the customer of the school? And that was very foreign to the school people.”
(#5)

However there has been clearly articulated antipathy towards ranking lists. The informal consensus at the municipal level not to study schools in a way that would enable the results to be used to produce ranking lists is a good example here. On the national level, the sample-based thematic studies of learning achievements implemented by the NBE, could be seen as a genuine part of a Finnish QAE model. One could say that this innovation essentially counteracted both external and internal pressure (cf. Furubo et al. 2002, 21) in favour of national testing, and thereby also against ranking lists. Paradoxically, what may have strengthened this antipathy to ranking was bureaucratic tradition (see, e.g., Tiihonen 2004; Pekonen 1995; 2005), according to which administrative innovations are basically considered to support the system and its developments rather than to open it or inform citizens about it.

Another Finnish peculiarity, the emphasis on development rather than control in QAE, seems to be a slightly different case. Even though there certainly are individuals among education politicians and officials who consciously support the development rather than the control approach, it seems arguable to claim that the hegemony of developmental QAE has been the result of a radical decentralisation and deregulation policy rather than conscious political will. To put it simply, development rather than control may be more easily implemented by means of inspirational material or friendly guidelines without normative power.

It could be concluded that, until now, the Finnish antipathy towards ranking, combined with a bureaucratic tradition and a developmental approach to QAE strengthened by radical municipal autonomy, have represented two national and local embedded policies that have been rather effective in resisting a trans-national policy of testing and ranking. It is significant, however, that both of these are curious combinations of conscious, unintended and contingent factors. Therefore it also seems evident that the articulated

unity these practices constitute is rather fragile given the exogenous trends and paradigm convergence of the GERM.

QAE practices have indeed recently become more expansive, academic and politicised (Linakylä 2002; also #11). Other Ministries apart from the ME, the NBE and the FEEC, in particular the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Finance, are actively cooperating with AFLRA and the Regional Administration to frame and recommend QAE activities, and are also running independent evaluations on the municipal and school levels. Very recently, the future of national sample-based learning-result assessment has proved to be not so stable and taken-for-granted. On the contrary, according to the new Director General of the NBE:

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

Nevertheless, if local passive resistance and national mute consensus do not create overt politics, they certainly give time and space for reasonable readjustment or even for the creation of a national model. A more obvious outcome, however, may be a Finnish combination of wishful thinking and stubborn resistance: if we stand just one more day, maybe the world will change and we will be saved. This kind of optimism was evident in the QAE field as stated by one of our interviewee:

“Internationally, it will still go in the direction of accreditation and control for some time, and towards international comparisons. These are the trends and it won't take too long, but still some time, though. Because nobody wants to work on something for such a long time when the results are put to no use. (...), but this hard line, it won't last for ever, before I retire there'll be talk of these developing evaluations.”

Let us conclude with another quotation from the same actor. We believe it captures some of the characteristics of this quiet consensus, albeit clearly and strongly contested, from above and from the outside:

“Just as a personal deliberation, I have a strong personal love-hate relationship with evaluation. I know it will stand you in good stead if it is used properly, but it's rarely used properly. Therefore it's a bit like drinking alcohol: a small amount is O.K.; it's good for your system and so on. With evaluation it's the same thing.

If it's accurately focused and accurately used, it produces knowledge that's useful for management."

As a comment from a QAE officer this sounds reasonable, but how it will work in a world that is saturated with evaluation is another matter – even though we know that there is evidence that we could live without it. The same could be said of alcohol - and the Finns are not especially known as moderate users of anything.

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