

*Educational Equality Discourses in the Finnish
Comprehensive School System*

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Introduction

As part of the Nordic welfare state, Finland has, since the 1960s, been building a unified comprehensive school that has constituted part of the public welfare services. From an international perspective, our basic education system represents a rare universal type, as its guiding principles include freedom of charge, unselectivity and uniformity. The aim of these principles is also to provide a cornerstone for the unity of society. The policy of equality of educational opportunity has also been seen as a key element for the Finnish success as a nation and the equality of its citizens. (Julkunen 2006, 31; Rinne 2003, 154; Whitty 2011, 38-40.) According to the broad interpretation of equality, an individual's background should not predict his future status in the society (Husen 1975). The idea of the equality of educational opportunity suggests that children and adolescents have the same opportunity to complete the comprehensive school syllabus by the same principles, regardless of their place of residence, gender and parental wealth or social status (Jakku-Sihvonen 2009, 27). Basic education can be considered to provide the starting point for the implementation of educational equality and the basis for further studies.

It is easy to agree with the requirement of educational equality without wondering what it means. While appealing to equality is generally considered to be a sufficient justification, analysing its content is not deemed important. The concept of equality has been seen to be a kind of defining symbol that a number of people can easily agree with (Englund & Quennerstedt 2008). Generally speaking, in the public debate, education policy, and a number of education studies, equality is appealed to when it comes to defending or opposing various administrative or legislative initiatives. The content of educational equality is linked to the particular socio-political and cultural aspect advocated by the given author and to the relevant interpretational context. Equality always concerns the rights and duties of people (Espinoza 2007, 345; Kalalahti & Varjo 2012, 40) and, thus, it is tantamount to struggle for social power. At the same time, it also relates to the power of language in the construction process of the reality (Englund 2005, 40). The notion of equality is not only a tool for linguistic description; it also evaluates and creates different educational realities and various instruments for their implementation (Englund & Quennerstedt 2008, 717; Brunila 2009, 173; Tuori 2012, 278). The reality we live in does

not exist outside of us, but we are actively turning it meaningful while constructing it by means of language. The way we speak about equality is not indifferent. It can be referred to as parity, fairness, inequality or unfairness, and we can also speak about equality as a right, opportunity or in terms of equal availability. When discussing equality one can also refer to the equality of choice, high-quality education or fair allocation of resources. This article describes the modes of speaking used for educational equality. In the light of these, as a value and a goal educational equality appears to be highly multi-faceted and it also manifests itself as a combination of several factors. It is justified by very different modes of speaking, and some of these modes are partially supportive of one another while others represent an opposing discourse.

This article is based on my doctoral dissertation "Educational equality discourses and actors' reform of the distribution of lesson hours in Comprehensive School", examined in June 2017 in Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius. The interest with this research was to describe and understand the discursive construction of educational equality based on the texts produced at the beginning of the 2010's in the preparation of the Finnish national comprehensive school curriculum. Through these discourses, the aim was to understand the types of meaning educational equality takes and the ways in which the views on equality are justified in the Finnish education policy debate regarding the basic education. Moreover, the relevant actors' equality-related views were used to determine who is seen to be acting, towards whom, and what is this indicative of in the context of views presented on the educational equality. However, this article focuses on the discourses of equality while the examination of actors has been ruled out of its scope.

Concepts of Equality and Educational Equality

For the school system, balancing between the process of constructing equality and supporting individuals poses a permanent challenge. Traditionally, equality suggests the principle of similarity. All humans are equal. When applied to education, this means that such individual differences that a child or a young person cannot choose must not lead to their unequal treatment or unequal position in society. All pupils should be guaranteed equal educational opportunities. On the other hand, the principle of equality also includes the principle of individualization, development of personal abilities and needs from an individual viewpoint. By way of this, equality is strongly associated with diversity. With no differences, there is no need for equality. Therefore, equality is not concerned about eliminating diversity but about creating equality between those who are different and parity in diversity (Ahponen 2008, 128).

Here, by educational equality, I do not mean that every Finnish child or young person should undergo a unified teaching provided in the same way. I believe that equality requires individual treatment of children and young people when it is intended to overcome things like cultural, linguistic or social disadvantages. I believe that the goal of the educational equality is, above all, to develop an equal educational capacity for all young people so that they become capable and motivated to pursue secondary education. Based on the Nordic way of thinking, this approach to education must, above all, take into account those children and young people in need of support during their school attendance.

A number of scholars have studied educational equality either in terms of equality of opportunity (Arneson 1989) or equality of results (Phillips 2006, Roemer 1998). Here, equality of results, i.e. factual equality, suggests the idea that, in the society, education allows people with different starting points to achieve the same results and equal status and pay in the labour market (Holli 2012, 78; Laiho 2013, 28). In Finland, equality of educational opportunities has been the leading ideology ever since the beginning of the 1970's when the concept of comprehensive school was first adopted. Even if there is a wide range of interpretations about the equality of opportunity, in general, it can be said that while not appreciated for its own sake, the equality of opportunity concerns specifically

the creation of opportunities. This principle is based on the positive concept of liberty regarding the actual choices and possibilities open to individuals. The goal is not necessarily equality of results since the emphasis is on the same rights to choose of all individuals. The particular way an individual seizes the available opportunities is up to the person. The aim is primarily to ensure such legislative, social, economic and cultural circumstances that pose no obstacles to people or their participation. (Arneson 1989; 85; Dworkin 2000, 89; Espinoza 2007, 355-356; Roemer 1998, 455; Ylönen 2009, 55.) Equality of opportunity is, by nature, a political concept since its implementation requires societal decision-making concerning the allocation of social resources (Järvinen & Jahnukainen 2006, 140).

Six Discourses on Educational Equality

The used research material allowed the identification of six discourses on educational equality. Out of these, the Common School Discourse examines equality for all children and young people regardless of their place of residence and socio-economic status, in terms of extensive general education with the same content. Here, equality is manifested in its radical and relative interpretation. This discourse stands for the solid trust in the goals set for the Finnish education policy specified in terms of equality and parity. These are considered as generally accepted principles that should not be questioned. Education is seen to provide an integral part of a broad societal process aimed at promoting democracy and social justice (Griffiths 1998, Pinar 2004, 164-165).

The Differentiation Discourse approaches educational equality as a weak or absent equality. Here, the mode of speech emphasizes inequality and increasing disparity between the regions, schools and pupils. The concept of equality relates to inequality, which undermines the integrity of the comprehensive school and the norm of equality between those acting at the different levels of the school system. In this discourse, equality in education appears in its radical interpretation. It can be interpreted in terms of equalising the differences between school resources and demands for tailoring the teaching arrangements and methods of marginalized pupils who do not enjoy school with

the purpose of providing uniform capabilities for all for the sake of further learning (see Holli 2012, 78, Laiho 2013, 34-35).

Compared to the previous two, the Freedom Discourse views equality in terms of free choice and education as a civic right, as opposed to the tradition of unity and perceiving education as a social right (see Englund 2005, 45-46, Englund & Quennerstedt 2008, 718). The individual equality related to the neoliberal interpretation of equality adopted by this discourse refers to the pupil's ability to make choices based on the individual needs and skills to which the individual has a subjective right of choice. This is also extended to the right to choose the school.

The approach adopted by the State Control Discourse to the educational equality departs from the point of view of regional equality and nationwide parity, whereby the teaching provided in the comprehensive school is based on its specified goals converging both in terms of content and amount, distribution of lesson hours, educational content and the professional qualifications of the teachers. Here, equality is interpreted in radical terms relating to the removal of obstacles found in the educational learning environment. The task of the State is to equalize the playing field between different actors.

The view on equality adopted by the Legal Discourse sets out from the laws and regulations and the international law. Educational equality presents itself as a pursuit of equality between various groups. The mode of speech focuses on the status and rights of minority groups with regard to the majority population. Instead of an opportunity, educational equality is seen, above all, in terms of a right that belongs to both individuals and groups. In this discourse, educational equality is interpreted from the conservative, liberal, and relative concept of equality.

The mode of speech used by the Internationality Discourse emphasizes the orientation in the future, continuous development of education and the achievement of excellent ranking in the international performance assessments while highlighting the need for the creation of a high level of skills in pursuit of economic competitiveness. In this discourse, educational equality is presented in the neoliberal expression of equality. Here, the view on education is instrumental whereby equality provides a means for achieving other ends. When seen through the six discourses presented above, the various meanings given to the

educational equality verify the findings made in the previous studies about the multitudinous nature of equality and the linkage of these meanings to the context of the given speaker and their usage for the justification of various educational policy goals. (See Gillies 2008, Espinoza 2007, Englund 2005, Englund & Qunnerstedt 2008, Herrera 2007, Kalalahti & Shadow 2012, Pylkkänen 2012, Pulkkinen & Roihuvuori 2014.) Figure 1 below summarizes the various interpretational approaches to equality included in the presented discourses related to the educational equality.

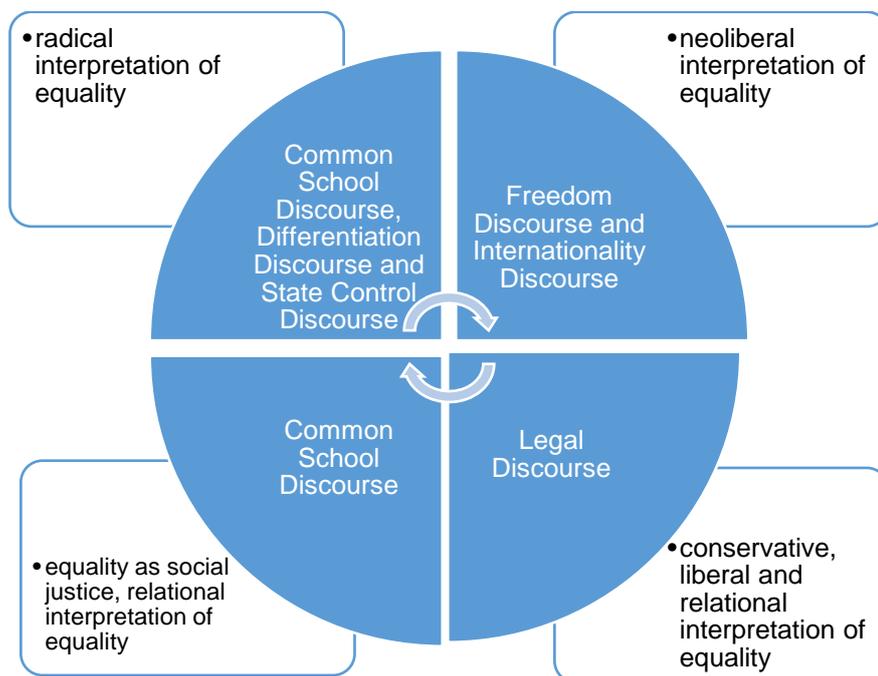


Figure 2 Interpretations of equality represented by the discourses on educational equality

As a research finding it can be stated that, in the education policy of the Finnish welfare state, educational equality in terms of teaching provided for all, regional and socio-economic equality, as well as joint opportunities for further learning still appears to be backed by a strong ideological and political will (see also Laiho 2012, 33, Rinne & Vuorio-Lehti 1996, 161; Simola 2015, 389-390; Ylönen 2009, 224).

Discussion

Images of impacts by the neoliberal ideology on the Finnish education policy have been conjured up by a number of educational experts. Yet this study shows that the neoliberal ideology of the international education policy has not, for the time being, made itself tangible at the Finnish national level of basic education. The study at hand also points out that the views on the basic education system and the content of education presented by the key education policy groups, such as the unions representing various groups of teachers, NGOs, municipalities, central government agencies, and universities, stand exceptionally close to one another (Sarjala 2008, 69). There are differences of emphasis, as the public debate on inequality and marginalization or the presented demands for increased freedom of choice indicate, but the belief in the importance and preservation of the educational equality remains strong. In terms of objectives, the ethos of equality focuses on the socializing function of education and on bringing the individual up as a member of the community. Education is seen as a common good, in terms of providing all the children and young people with social and human capital supported by the public education. In this study, this is evidenced by the strong role played by the discourses highlighting the common good of equality.

Nevertheless, regional and inter-school differentiations together with the marginalization among the pupils are seen to pose a threat to the education on equal terms. All this reflects the more general tendency towards social inequality where the school is perceived to provide an especially important tool in combating these developments. The school should mitigate the social differences in the society and promote the internalisation of thinking in terms of social equality.

With the help of different norms for guidance, the State is expected to put an increasing emphasis on the national equality of education and the equal opportunity for pupils allowing them to grow and learn by clarifying and strengthening the national guidance. Such strengthening of the national guidance is reflected, for instance, in the demands presented in the curriculum for the criteria specified for the good level of skills and the minimum level of skills, in the form of national assessments and, on a more general level of education policy, as appeals to the objectives stated in the government programme. This

study stresses the intensification of the normative control by the State, which has, in part, been influenced by the general process of legislative engagement, according to which the social problems should be resolved by means of legislation. This, however, limits the autonomy of municipalities (Nyyssölä 2013, 28-29), reflected in the contents of the Freedom Discourse as the desire expressed by the education providers towards a greater freedom in organising the said education.

Although this study shows that, on the comprehensive school level, the ethos of thinking in terms of social equality remains strong; it also provides indications of modes of speech on equality promoting an individualistic approach and the good of the individual. In particular, efforts to achieve a high level of skills while driving economic success by means of education together with the international performance assessments challenge the traditional social democratic ideology of equality by emphasizing individualism and the diversity of individuals along with the neoliberal interpretation of equality (Simola, Seppänen, Kosunen & Vartiainen 2015, 90-91, Simola 2015, 389-391; Ylönen 2009, 215-217) as well as seeing the equality of opportunity in terms of efficiency (Gillies 2008, 688). Thus, equality appears as an individual equality (equity) emphasizing the provision of tuition and education according to individual needs whereby the common good no longer provides the starting point (Jakku-Sihvonen 2009, 28-29, Kalalahti & Varjo 2012, 41, Simola 2015, 389, Simola, Seppänen, Kosunen & Vartiainen 2015, 95-99).

At the national policy level, the significance of equality is, then, seen within the narrow perspective of pursuing achievements and equality is represented through its measurability. At the same time, different interpretations on equality adopted at the local level lead to different ways of implementing the education policy. (Englund & Quennerstedt 2008, 718.) First, the assessment of education may focus only on the learning performance with regard to the set objectives (Sahlberg 2015, 146), or second, the school institution seeks to develop only certain types of knowledge and skills deemed to be expedient for the effort of keeping up with the development (Englund & Quennerstedt 2008, 718; Lempiäinen 2009, 54; Sahlberg 2015, 191-192). Instead of developing the overall personality of the child and the young, the emphasis is shifted over to the capabilities desired in the scientific world and on the labour market (Poropudas & Volanen 2003, 78).

Identifying the various meanings and contradictions of the educational equality provides a key starting point for the promotion of equality and the monitoring of its implementation. Balancing between the issues of individual and social equality is one of the most important questions for the future educational policy. How to increase the motivation for learning while enabling the average competence of all pupils at the end of comprehensive school? On the whole, is there a way the school can respond to this challenge?

In the future, the world will become increasingly complex. The main function of the education is to equalize the differences between the children's backgrounds. Here, the atmosphere of national trust in the opportunities provided by the education as a promoter of social justice must be cherished and promoted. The question is about a choice between values.

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