EQUALITY IN WEIGHTED-CURRICULUM EDUCATION: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF *YLE*, *HELSINGIN SANOMAT*, AND *ILTALEHTI*

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Master's Thesis
Discipline
Department
University of Jyväskylä
Summer 2024

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

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Title Equality in Weighted-curriculum education: a critical discourse analysis of Yle, Helsingin Sanomat, and Iltalehti	
Subject English	Level Master's thesis
Month and year August, 2024	Number of pages 66

Abstract

Equality and equity have been a part of the discourse and development of the Finnish educational system for over 100 years. Educational equality, especially, has been central to the Finnish national brand. In political discourse, equality is such a well-regarded value that appealing to it can be used to promote various policy goals – even those arguably contradicting equality. Weighted-curriculum education (WCE) has been possible for Finnish schools since societal and legal changes in the 90s. WCE and class-based WCE have been debated topics in the public discourse over the past few years. This paper studied equality discourses regarding WCE published in Yle, Helsingin Sanomat, and Iltalehti and found that many discourses identified with educational equality in general were present with WCE discourses as well. In addition, new discourses were identified: individual responsibility, capability, identity, and meta. Discourses specific to WCE revealed elements of international trends, especially individualization and free market competition. A special interest was directed at English WCE, but it was found that English education was not seen significantly unique or different from other subjects.

Tasa-arvo ja oikeudenmukaisuus ovat olleet osa suomalaisen koulutuksen diskurssia ja kehitystä yli sadan vuoden ajan. Erityisesti koulutuksellinen tasa-arvo on ollut keskeinen Suomen kansalliselle brändille. Poliittisessa diskurssissa tasa-arvo on niin arvostettu, että siihen vetoamalla voi edustaa monia poliittisia tavoitteita – jopa tasa-arvon vastaisia tavoitteita. Painotettu opetus on ollut mahdollista suomalaisissa kouluissa 90-luvulta lähtien yhteiskunnallisten ja laillisten muutosten myötä. Painotettu ja luokkapohjainen painotettu opetus ovat olleet kiisteltyjä aiheita julkisessa diskurssissa viime vuosina. Tämä opinnäyte tutki painotetun opetuksen tasa-arvodiskursseja Ylen, Helsingin Sanomien ja Iltalehden julkaisuissa, joista löytyi suurta yhtäläisyyttä yleisen koulutuksen tasa-arvodiskurssin kanssa. Lisäksi uusia diskursseja havaittiin: yksilöllinen vastuu, kyvykkyys, identiteetti ja meta. Painotettuun opetukseen liittyvät diskurssit yhdistyivät kansainvälisiin trendeihin, erityisesti yksilöllisyyteen ja vapaamarkkinakilpailuun. Erityisesti huomiota kiinnitettiin englannin opetukseen painotettuna aineena, mutta englannin asema ei ollut erityisen poikkeava muista painotetun opetuksen oppiaineista.

Keywords: Educational equality, Equity, WCE, Weighted-curriculum education, Discourse, Finland, Newspapers, Articles, Equality, Educational policy, CDA, Critical discourse analysis

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1 INTRODUCTION

Weighted-curriculum education (WCE) refers to compulsory or non-compulsory education that specializes in a specific subject or content. For example, a comprehensive school student applying to an English language WCE class, would apply to have access to comprehensive education whose English lessons go further in content compared to "regular classes" – sometimes at the expense of other school subjects. Additionally, a further distinction is between *class-based WCE* and other forms of WCE. Class-based WCE means having a separate class within a school populated solely by WCE students of their chosen specialization. This WCE class then attends all other lessons (with possible exceptions) with their own class. In contrast, it is possible to arrange WCE by having the WCE students attend a "regular class" with the exception of their WCE lessons. It is these methods of class formation and "school shopping" that have been discussed recently in Finnish media from the point of view of equality and equity.

There is significant overlap between *equality* and *equity* but also some nuanced differences. The Cambridge online dictionary (Cambridge Dictionary 2024) defines equality as "a situation in which men and women, people of different races, religions, etc. are all treated fairly and have the same opportunities." The key appears to be a lack of favoritism, special treatment, or other discriminatory processes in accessing opportunities. Equity, on the other hand, takes the circumstances of individuals into account in pursuit of fair treatment. In other words, an equitable solution might not be equal by design. Cambridge dictionary defines equity as "the situation in which everyone is treated fairly *according to their needs* and no group of people is given special treatment" (emphasis added). Here, special treatment likely refers to unfair advantages – not treating individuals differently. The words *equality of opportunity* and *equality of outcomes* are sometimes used in papers on educational equality. This paper uses 'equality' and 'equity' with the understanding that they are synonymous with equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes.

Finnish language has words corresponding closely to equality and equity. The word of equality, "*tasa-arvo*", is virtually identical in meaning when compared to English. Correspondingly, two widely used online Finnish dictionaries, sanakirja.fi and sanakirja.org, translate "equality" into "tasa-arvo" and vice versa. Likewise, Finnish language has a translation for equity as well, but there may be a slight difference in meaning. Equity is most often translated into "oikeudenmukaisuus", which is synonymous with justice and fairness. A collection of special industry vocabulary and dictionaries, TEPA-termipankki (TEPA Term Bank 2024), describes "oikeudenmukaisuus" in the exact same terms how one would describe "equity". However, there is an element of vague generality to the term "oikeudenmukaisuus" as well. For example, the Finnish dictionary suomisanakirja.fi defines "oikeudenmukaisuus" as an act reflecting *a general understanding of justice*. In fact, when translating the word "oikeudenmukaisuus" into English in sakairja.fi, the results show fairness and justice but not equity. It seems that "equity" and "oikeudenmukaisuus" mean the same thing, but "oikeudenmukaisuus" means simultaneously a broader or vaguer aspect of justice making it somewhat less specific.

'Equality' is widely present in Finnish public education discourse and seems to be viewed mainly as a virtuous feature of a successful Finnish school system. In fact, equality is central to a national understanding and evaluation of education (Eskelinen, Kainulainen, Kujala, Niemelä 2022: 151; Tervasmäki 2018: 124—125, 151) as well as Finland's international brand as an exemplary education provider (Simpson 2018). For example, Finland's school export strategy relies on part on the national brand of Finland, which gained more interest after the beginning of PISA testing where Finland ranked highly along Canada and South Korea (Helkama 2015: 190). Thus, educational equality remains a highly valued aspect of Finnish identity.

Exploring the narrative elements of educational equality regarding WCE seems especially interesting given the importance given to equality by official discourse. In fact, the Finnish government under prime minister Sanna Marin simultaneously declared increasing inequality as the "greatest problem regarding education" (Ministry of Health and Education 2023: 23) while also setting a goal to make Finland internationally the top-rated country by equality (Ministry of Health and Education 2023: 10). For example, the Ministry of Health and Education's program "Oikeus oppia" ("Right to learn") includes financial plans to bridge the inequality gap by allocating resources to disadvantaged areas actively pre-empting or remedying inequalities. In terms of the two previously discussed understandings of educational equality, this policy would be categorized as equity. Advocates of equality might argue that equality is better achieved by allocating the funds evenly between schools.

One salience factor for equality discourses is the potential for harm done by school systems. For example, Reay (2018: 33—43) criticizes the UK school system for

maintaining or even exacerbating class divides through systemic structures and biases, such as favoring certain accents and scaffolding student identities to those who succeed and those who fail. Notably, as young as 10-year-old students in Britain connect success with careers and professions, making one failed standardized test as potentially "ruining one's own opportunities" (Reay 2018: 40—43). Crucially, Reay (2018: 33) argues that the school system in the UK cannot compensate for unequal societal realities because the school system was never designed to improve general equality. This contrasts with the Finnish education system. In fact, the promise of the Finnish educational system can be viewed as a general force for good in the society, for example by generating more equality, cohesion, and coexistence (Ahonen 2012: 94; Kalalahti, Silvennoinen, Varjo 2015: 384—385).

This study looks at equality discourses regarding WCE from three widely read Finnish publications (*Yle, Helsingin Sanomat,* and *Iltalehti*) over a 10-month period. Using critical discourse analysis, this study sets out to illuminate how the Finnish understanding of educational equality is reflected in various discourses regarding WCE while also considering the fact that those discourses also play a role in shaping our view of WCE and Finnish education. Although equality can be used to argue for contradictory views (Silvennoinen, Kalalahti, Varjo 2016: 30), there is some research to argue that the public views on equality are still notably uniform and any differences are a matter of nuance and emphasis (Siekkinen 2017: 9). Studying equality discourses regarding WCE may illuminate emerging trends or beliefs and how understanding of educational equality is either reinforced or renegotiated in Finnish discourse. After all, discourse on what being in a Finnish school is and should be like also includes hopes, values, and visions for the future as education is seen by some as a "mini society" (Gorard 2013: 90) that teaches students to expect what living in a country like Finland is like.

This paper is structured in 5 different sections. In the following section, I explore relevant background to the thesis: the history of the Finnish education system examined through equality and equity, the current status of equality discourse, the development of WCE, the role of English in WCE classes, and a look at critical discourse analysis as a methodology. Next, in the methodology section, I outline my research plan and research questions in addition to an overview of the examined materials. The methodology section is followed by an analysis. Lastly, I present a conclusion that entails a summary of the analysis as well as discussion on the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 A short history of educational equality in Finland

2.1.1 Development of the Finnish educational system 1866—2000

This section presents a short overview of the development of the Finnish educational system from the 19th century to the 2000s from the point of view of educational equality. The purpose is to highlight the role and impact of educational equality in shaping educational policy and discourse as well as the values of each time. By understanding the historical context better, this hopefully allows this paper to better contextualize observations made with critical discourse analysis (CDA). As discourses are built on previous versions of the discourse, historical context is an important aspect of comprehensive use of CDA (Fairclough & Wodak 2010: 106).

The concept of equality has been intertwined with educational systems in the Western world since the beginning of the common school in the 19th century. This project of creating educated citizens on a mass scale can be viewed as one of the fundamental undertakings of the Western societies in the 19th century (Ahonen 2003: 20—21). The early stage of political discourse on common schooling was impacted by questions of national ideology and unity, the need for a generally educated population in the emergence of political democracy, and the need for skilled labor due to the development of science and industry (Ahonen 2003: 20—21, Högnäs 2001: 30; Saarinen, Kauppinen, Kangasvieri 2019: 142).

The concept of equality likely also transformed in meaning along with the societal changes happening in the 19th century West. The creation of common schooling for the general population is especially strongly intertwined with questions of equality. In the early 19th century Finland, the association for the promotion of a people's

school ("kansakoulu") appealed to equality as an argument for the creation of universal schooling (Ahonen 2003: 17). Political proponents of educational equality argued for unity and for the natural right to be educated, while opponents argued for the importance of educating the elite first and foremost and those who could hold power, which only included men at the time (Ahonen 2003; Saarinen et al. 2019: 124). In the end, through compromises between an exclusive and inclusive common school, the people's school ("kansakoulu") was signed into law and founded in 1866 (Kuikka 2007: 75; Ahonen 2001: 175).

The people's school in Finland remained highly unequal in nature despite already existing calls for schooling to become an equalizing force in society. It is questionable to what extent Finland's first people's school system can be called a common school, since the educational paths were separated into two parallel lines: the lower elementary school, which focuses on practical skills, and the higher upper secondary school ("oppikoulu") (Högnäs 2001: 30). The lower education path was a stigmatized dead-end in terms of further educational opportunities that the wealthiest would bypass via private schools or paid homeschooling and advance directly to the higher-level schools (Ahonen 2003: 51, Högnäs 2001: 30, Männistö 2007: 7). While the people's school improved access to education on a massive scale, it did not reach all educational ideals, such as equality or equity.

Equality in educational discourse was reinvigorated by the need for national unity after the civil war and World War II (Ahonen 2012: 145; Kettunen, Jalava, Simola, Varjo 2012: 32; Männistö 2007: 22—23). The meaning of educational equality transformed to fit the current needs and world views: the level of equality was tied to increasing material wealth (Silvennoinen, Kalalahti, Varjo 2016: 13) and the view of an equal society emphasized a population that had been educated to become full members of society, as well as the freeing of the "talent reserves" of the lower classes (Kettunen et al. 2012: 32—33). This form of understanding equality is similar to a narrowly defined understanding of educational equality (what is in this paper simply referred to as 'equality') where the goal is to guarantee equal opportunities to everyone by removing formal obstacles (Antikainen, Rinne: 2012: 476). Although education discourse on equality became more prominent and some pro-equality legislation was passed (Ahonen 2012: 145), Finnish education remained regionally and economically unequal largely due to the separate lines of education and the tuition-based private schools that would concentrate in cities to maximize profitability (Kettunen et al. 2012: 25).

The law of comprehensive school in 1968 combined the people's school ("kansakoulu"), secondary school ("kansalaiskoulu"), and upper secondary school ("oppikoulu") into a universal and free comprehensive school ("peruskoulu") (Ahonen 2001: 175, Kettunen et al. 2012: 39) led by municipalities (Aho 2016: 50—51). By 1977

the new comprehensive school was adapted to all of Finland (Saarinen et al. 2019: 126). Following this, the meaning of educational equality adopted new meanings with the political context of the time. Equality in education was viewed as a general and unselective human right, equally accessible regardless of one's background, and an equally viable basis for further education (Ahonen 2003, Kettunen et al. 2012: 33, 39). The discourse around equality also included equity: the desire for the new comprehensive school to actively reduce inequalities (Ahonen 2003: 156, Antikainen & Rinne 2012: 476; Kettunen et al. 2012: 47).

The more radical view of educational equality in the 60s was challenged during the creation of the new comprehensive school. Fear of the potential "dulling" effect of a uniform education and the political desire to invest in the elite and the academically gifted led a compromise by including ability groups ("tasoryhmä") within the comprehensive school making it possible for students to attend classes, such as mathematics and languages, based on their own skills and goals (Ahonen 2003: 156, Kettunen et al. 2012: 39). The ability groups received criticism for not adhering to the ideals of equality and were removed in 1985 (Rinne 2012: 368—369, Kettunen et al. 2012: 39, Ahonen 2012: 156). Despite some remaining institutional forms of inequality, the new comprehensive school was in many ways a success: it increased the equality for young people and the desire to seek further education (Ahonen 2003: 156, Ahonen 2012: 157—158). Finland had created the foundations of an educational system with equality, and, to some extent, equity, at its heart.

The following decades leading up to the 90s saw market-driven neoliberal ideas reshape the political discussion and the understanding of educational equality. The educational discourses during the 60s already introduced market-based concepts, such as "human capital" and seeing education as an investment (Aho 2016: 49; Kettunen et al. 2012: 26—27). This trend would continue and intensify during the 70s and especially the 80s when neoliberal ideals of free market competition reignited calls for the educational system to invest in the most gifted students (Ahonen 2012: 165, Kettunen et al. 2012: 48). The concept of equality began to adapt to the new societal context. Following this, equality shifted from a people's right to an education to an individual's right to pursue education "corresponding to one's abilities" (Ahonen 2003: 155, Ahonen 2012: 48). This shift reinvigorated calls for increasing choice within schools and to bring back ability groups (Ahonen 2012: 48), which was congruent with the new understanding of educational equality.

The 90s introduced economically neoliberal changes to the Finnish primary school system. Funds for schools were no longer allocated for specific needs, which increased financial control on the municipal level (Ahonen 2012: 165—166). School choice became a reality when pupils and parents were free to choose a specialization line within a school or to apply to a school other than the one offered by the

municipality (Seppänen, Kalalahti, Rinne, Simola 2015; Silvennoinen et al. 2016: 17; Silvennoinen et al. 2018: 95—96). At the same time, schools also have the freedom to specialize making it possible to compete against other schools for "the best students" - although municipalities retain the power to limit school choice (for example, by region) (Silvennoinen et al. 2016: 16; Varjo et al. 2015: 71—75). The 1994 National Core Curriculum included a focus on each school crafting their own core curriculum increasing choice within education to new heights (Kauranne 2007: 205—210). These changes occurred during a political discourse that was heavily influenced by neoliberal values about education: educational autonomy, parental choice, privatization, managerialism, economic rationalizing, competition, commodification, and fiscal responsibility (Rinne 2012: 370, Silvennoinen et al. 2016: 13). The foundations for a competition-based and market-driven educational sector had been created.

The societal changes of the 90s seem to be reflected in how equality was understood and valued. The new interpretation emphasized educational equality as offering every individual an equal opportunity to pursue their own unique gifts and interests (Ahonen 2001: 188). In other words, common equality transformed into equality of the individual (Meriläinen 2008: 71—72). Throughout its history, equality as a national value has fluctuated in perceived importance in Finland, and in 1995 it was measured as markedly lower than in 2007 (Helkama 2015: 135—136). In fact, the law of the comprehensive school of 1998 no longer highlighted the unity of what schools have to offer – a difference to the 1968 law, which created the current foundation for the comprehensive school (Ahonen 2012: 171). However, neoliberal changes in education also faced resistance. Ahonen (2012: 49—52) argues that the 90s recession and the following erosion in the confidence of market forces might have been the reason why in some respects the 1998 law of comprehensive school was a compromise between market liberalism and equality.

2.1.2 Educational equality in the 2000s

The 2000s and 2010s were a continuation of the new way of framing educational equality through individual freedom. As an example, the Council for the Evaluation of Education in 2004—2007 used two different, and potentially conflicting interpretations, of educational equality: one where equality is achieved when educational opportunities are not dependent on the background of the pupil or parents, and another where equality is achieved by offering choices and options for individuals to seek education that best suits their own talents and interests (Kettunen et al. 2012: 48).

Offering options and uniquely tailored curricula is not necessarily inherently good or bad for equality. For example, bespoke curricula may help those who would otherwise struggle to adjust to a uniform curriculum. However, offering distinct educational paths may also lead to a system where some of those limited paths are

deemed better and only available to those capable of entry, which would not bolster school as a source of equality. This could lead to increasing ranking, comparison, and competition resulting in an education system that compounds, rather than lessens, existing privileges.

Socioeconomic trends in Finland indicate a need for an education system that addresses inequalities. Income and wealth gaps have grown relatively significantly in Finland and Sweden from the 90s to 2010s – this includes child poverty (Silvennoinen et al. 2016: 17—25). In fact, Silvennoinen et al. (2016: 23) affirm that there were more poor children in Finland in 2009 than in 1976. If education can promote equality, it seems the increasingly unequal societal context makes it more prescient than ever to examine this opportunity. Notably, there are signs to indicate that the school reforms of the 90s on individual freedom have increased educational inequalities (Rytkönen 2016: 32).

Education in a competitive system may increasingly serve the need to stand out. After all, a degree can often be seen as a means to access sought-after job positions and employment. Schools have had a role in selecting who has the merit to continue further with their academic career even before the market-driven school reforms of the 90s. However, by fragmenting educational paths into individual choices, there is increased pressure on students to be competitive from an early age and throughout their education not only to learn and grow but to secure competitive advantages for their future.

A competitive and individualized education system may pose issues regarding educational equality. Silvennoinen et al. (2016: 27—28) highlight how the competitive nature of education likely adversely impacts efforts to solve issues with educational equality, equity, and justice. Accordingly, Rinne et al. (2021: 56) characterize educational competition critically as: "Playing the education game starts to resemble the sports and entertainment industry that is built around the success of mega stars and key players." In addition, Jalava, Simola, and Varjo (2012: 87) similarly remark that the process of turning education into a competitive edge for individuals as a form of commodification of education, which contradicts the idea of education as a public good.

Finnish education in the 21st century faces challenges from an increasingly unequal society while representing a hope for countering that inequality. Some see the wider societal inequality as something that the educational system can address and remedy. After all, there are voices pointing out how the school system has a role in societal stability, especially by preventing an "us vs them" dichotomy (Silvennoinen et al. 2016: 27—27). However, if schools mostly reflect the surrounding societal context without much power to change it, then schools move from being agents for change and become opportunities to study and confirm wider societal trends. Arguably,

education is likely to include both ends of the spectrum to some extent. In summary, education can be a catalyst for societal change while also acknowledging that education is not the key to solve every societal issue – perhaps not even equality.

2.2 Educational equality through policy and politics

2.2.1 Educational equality in law

The historical significance of educational equality is reflected in current day education both in political discourse and in law. For example, the Council of State of Finland in 2012 listed three explicit goals for comprehensive education: becoming a humane member of society, having necessary skills and knowledge, and promoting equality and lifelong learning (Silvennoinen, Kinnari, Laalo 2021: 261). Additionally since 1999, equality can be found in the Finnish constitution regarding the treatment of children as individuals (Fundamental Rights 1999/731 6§) as well as ideals of equity regarding the right to receive education based on one's abilities and needs (Fundamental Rights 1999/731 16§). These legal and political measures legitimize equality as an officially recognizable part of education in Finland. Correspondingly, in 2000, Raivola (2000: 12) argued that by making equality an explicit goal of education the equalizing effect of schools can be made real.

Educational equality is present in both the constitution and the National core curriculum 2014[1] (NCC2014). The 1999 version of the constitution as well as a decree from the Finnish government from 2012 defines three national key goals for education: growth into personhood and membership of the society, the necessary knowledge and skills, and promoting equality and lifelong learning (Silvennoinen et al. 2021: 261). Regarding NCC2014, equality is also present as a value. In fact, Tervasmäki (2018: 133) lists the different ideologies present in the use of the word 'equality' in NCC2014: social democracy, multiculturalism, feminism, modern liberalism, and socialism. Not only is equality prominent in official Finnish education discourse, but it also draws from multiple different ideologies. It is worth noting from the language of many official documents that equality is seen both as part of education itself and a goal for education to cause. This ties education to progressivist discourses where education is seen as a key to societal change (Hansen, Säntti, Saari 2021: 284—285).

However, equality in NCC2014 may have some internal inconsistencies. Tervasmäki (2018: 133) underlines the fact that while commercial interests should not be a part of common education, the language regarding education in NCC2014 borrows

[1] National Core Curriculum 2014 (NCC2014) is a document guiding education through grades 1-9. This document is parallel to legal jurisdiction for teachers and educational staff.

terminology and concepts from economic discourse. For example, NCC2014 argues for educational equality both through education as intrinsic value as well as a way to gain *human capital* for the individual – in other words, turning education into an instrumental value in pursuit of other goals using concepts borrowed from economic discourses (Tervasmäki 2018: 133). Although education has been viewed separate from commercial interests, the larger ideological presuppositions are present in the language of the NCC.

Nonetheless, educational equality remains a salient feature in official discourse and law in Finland. For example, the Ministry of Health and Education's report in 2023 noted that it included a record number of mentions on 'equality' (Ministry of Health and Education 2023: 12). Perhaps the high frequency for the term 'equality' is not surprising given Finland's national branding as a country of high-quality education and educational equality. In fact, the same report (Ministry of Health and Education 2023: 10) states that the goal of the government is to make Finland the top-rated country in terms of equality. For example, the Finnish government made changes to the law on equality by requiring pre-school institutions ("*varhaiskasvatus*") to make an equality plan.

2.2.2 The impact of globalization on Finnish educational equality

It is worth mentioning that globalization may also impact national understandings of equality. Finnish education is to some extent shaped by transnational trends, such as EU directives and economic forces (Silvennoinen et al. 2021: 245—276; Rinne, Silvennoinen, Varjo 2021: 43—60). According to Rinne et al. (2021: 43—60), lesser government control and the increased uniformity of education around the world are examples of global trends driven by transnational interests that have the potential to shape Finnish education as well. These interests may also influence the interpretation of educational equality. If global forces trend toward more uniform education, it may also bring about it a more uniform – and potentially a less nuanced – understanding of educational equality.

In the 21st century, Finnish education has been increasingly rationalized through market liberal arguments and a new form of management (Rinne et al. 2021: 46—47). An example of market-driven trends in education is the decentralization of executive decisions to municipalities and rectors (Saarinen et al. 2019: 123, 145). This trend can be seen in the increased role of municipalities, school choice, and market-driven competition between schools and pupils, for example. Saarinen et al. (2019: 145) add to the discussion by highlighting the potential danger in eroding a common basis for an equal education for all. The new form of management mentioned by Rinne et al. (2021: 46—47) is similar to New Public Management (NPM), which can be found in decentralization committee reports from the 80s (Ahonen 2001: 181—183). The three central

components of NPM as they relate to how education is organized are the independence and accountability of lower sections of hierarchy, measurable accountability for the organization, and free market competition between public and private organizations – in this case education providers (Ahonen 2001: 180—181). In fact, it is a global trend for the private sector to become more involved in education (Holford et al. 2012: 56). In the end, many of the market-driven changes to Finnish schools were adopted with relatively little resistance (Rinne 2012: 371).

While current global trends may steer Finnish education to fully adopt a NPM style leadership, it seems that not all aspects of NPM are met with equal acceptance. For example, national tests for the end of comprehensive education have been opposed throughout the 90s and 2000s due to a fear of it leading to ranking lists (Jalava et al. 2012: 98). In contrast, the Swedish schools have adopted more features of a competitive market-based economy, including ranking databases of school performances for parents to make informed school choices and the dissolution of the principle of free education (Rinne 2021: 47). Performing poorly on these ranking lists could brand some schools as undesirable, which could create a vicious cycle keeping such schools poorer (Ahonen 2012: 166). While school choice already promotes a certain level of comparing schools, perhaps an official ranking list is seen as going too far against the idea that people have of the Finnish educational system. This public idea of the Finnish educational system would likely require a renegotiation of the value and content placed on equality and equity in order to be congruent with all changes fitting an NPM model.

One clear example of globalization affecting the Finnish education discourse is the PISA metric. Finland has been seen as a "model student of the EU" in implementing EU and OECD guidelines and decrees for education (Silvennoinen et al. 2021: 258). Some of the effects of placing high emphasis on PISA scores are a concern for failing to live up to expectations or comparing unfavorably to other countries (Hansen et al. 2021: 293—295). In addition, there are other globalized methods of measuring educational performance, such as the Lisbon benchmark starting from 2004, which has goals for becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world (Holford & Mohorcic Spolar 2012: 46—48). However, as Holford and Mohorcic (2012: 46—48) argue, economic indicators are more developed compared to "softer" goals, such as equality and social issues. Therefore, it might be that globalized metrics on education steer the focus disproportionately to those aspects of education that are measured and evaluated. Notably, this does not diminish the importance of "softer" values, but it may be one way in which globalized education metrics steer the conversation on education.

In conclusion, the Finnish educational system and the surrounding discourse is shaped by both national and international forces. In some ways, Finland has been

eager to adopt global education trends. In other ways, Finland has shown reluctance to adopt global educational trends. It seems Finland has adopted a hybrid approach where the educational system accepts and welcomes some values and discourse elements of market-based education but is less willing to fully implement the adjacent policies, such as ranking lists, privatized education, even more increased individual choice, and larger commodification of education. While increasing school choices starting from 90s is a step towards an individualized market-based education, it is one implementation of a far longer list of neoliberal possibilities.

2.3 School choice and educational equality

2.3.1 School choice in the Finnish education system

School choice in comprehensive education means a certain level of freedom for a pupil and the parents of a pupil to decide which school they wish the pupil to attend. The ability for pupils and parents to choose a specific school for comprehensive education is made further meaningful if schools are free to specialize or otherwise offer differing services. For example, a desire to pursue music may lead parents and students to apply to music WCE classes. However, parents likely also wish their pupil to achieve ambitious grades and to have a safe learning environment, and this may also act as a reason to apply to WCE even absent explicit goals regarding the subject taught as WCE.

The school choice dynamic resembles that of a customer and service provider, where the pupil and parents become "customers" shopping for the best alternative for education and schools act as the service being sought (Silvennoinen et al. 2018: 102). In a market-liberal economy, the commodification of education and individualization of choice and responsibility in the form of school choice seems like a logical point of evolution. There are various measurements by which one could make their decision of the optimal school. Currently, all comprehensive schools in Finland have the right to profile their schools to pivot towards certain learning contents, as long as every school fundamentally follows the national core curriculum (Kalalahti, Silvennoinen, Varjo 2015: 374). This "educational branding" (schools profiling and catering content to an audience) can be a way to appeal to the "customers" (parents and pupils) and stand out favorably from the competition.

The unequal aspects of school choice lie in how school choice is practically utilized. In theory, school choice is perfectly equal: every student has the right to apply to any educational path regardless of their background. However, students and parents are not on an equal basis when it comes to utilizing this option. An infromed use

of school choice requires strategic knowledge of education that can help parents and students to see the importance of choices (Rytkönen 2016: 32). In other words, a school choice, though equal in nature, ignores the fact that people do not have equal capabilities to utilize and benefit from this choice in practice. In fact, when evaluating educational equality in the 2010s, Ouakrim-Soivio, Pulkkinen, Rautopuro, and Hildén (2018) confirmed what previous studies have discovered as well: the equal opportunities of Finnish students to seek education after comprehensive education seems to not be a reality for many.

School choice as a phenomenon is tied to the social class of the student and their family. In fact, the correlation between class and school choice in Finland is similar to that of other countries with significantly more pronounced class differences (Kalalahti et al. 2015: 382—391). For example, the mother's educational background correlates with the student studying in weighted-curriculum (Kalalahti et al. 2015: 382—383). The parents' educational background is also positively correlated with grades: students of highly educated parents demonstrate stronger proficiency in A-level languages (Ouakrim-Soivio et al. 2018) and final school grades (Kupiainen 2019: 114—116) compared to students with less educated parents. Likewise, higher grades are also correlated with being in weighted-curriculum education (Seppänen, Kosunen, Rinne 2018: 75). In fact, when observing students who earn a grade of 9 or higher, there is a clear contrast between students from different social classes. More than half of students who come from high- or middle-class background and achieve a 9 or higher are in weighted-curriculum education compared to a third of students who achieve an equally impressive grade but come from lower-class backgrounds (Seppänen et al. 2018: 75).

Family background alone does not explain differences between students in school. A study by Hautamäki and Thuneberg (2019) examined the effect size that parental educational background has on student achievement. The results corroborated Ouakrim-Soivio et al. (2018) and Kupiainen's (2019: 114—116) findings on the positive correlation of school grades and parental educational background, but, crucially, found the explanatory power to be relatively small (Hautamäki & Thuneberg 2019: 81—83). In other words, when controlling for other variables, parental background explains a small amount of the academic success of a student. Instead, the class a student is a part of at school holds a greater explanatory power in explaining academic success (Kupiainen & Hotulainen 2019: 147—148; Kupiainen 2019). In essence, it is the combined average educational level of the mothers of a class of students or even a school that holds greater explanatory power (Hautamäki & Thuneberg 2019: 81—83). In summary, the parents' educational background explains only a small amount of a student's academic success if the student is in a class or school with students from lower educational backgrounds. However, it seems that if the entire class

or school is made up of students from higher educated backgrounds, the impact of everyone's background compounds and explains a greater degree of academic achievement for each individual student. In fact, the type of class a student is in has a greater correlation to academic achievement compared to which school the student attends (Kupiainen 2019: 110—113) and possible differences between schools are also affected by class formations (Hautamäki & Thuneberg 2019: 91).

School choice has largely been an urban feature. After all, meaningful opportunities to choose one's educational path relies on the municipality being sufficiently big and urbanized to accommodate school markets (Kalalahti, Silvennoinen, Varjo 2015: 378). Larger and more populated municipalities are able to provide conditions for "school markets", which provide meaningfully varied choices to students (Kauranne 2007: 203—204). This has implications for educational equality on a national scale. One form of inequality could be the fact that only larger urban areas are able to capitalize on increased individual choice and competition. As a result, school markets that rely on large urban environments to generate competition seem to undermine the notion of a comprehensive education system that provides the same base level of education to everyone no matter what school they attend.

2.3.2 The effects of school choice on equality

It is perhaps the compounding of academic benefits for a limited number of students that makes the discourse around weighted-curriculum education (WCE) and educational equality prescient. One concern for an educational system that strives for equality is argued by Seppänen et al. (2018: 77—78): the process of applying for WCE excludes students with less privilege. Likewise, Kalalahti et al. (2015: 377) continue by arguing that using selective public services can become unequal due to differing class-based resources, such as capital, in navigating and benefiting from these choices. Attending WCE is reflected in where the students come from and how well the student performs at school. There is a potential for comprehensive education to become more polarized due to this self-selection pressure enabled by school choice. For example, those students who attend WCE are more likely to have made study-related choices earlier in their school career, perform academically well, and come from educated families that place importance and necessity in school markets and choices (Kalalahti & Varjo 2016: 46—58).

Handing school choice to those with the most resources to benefit from it can lead to undesirable selection biases for schools. For example, Silvennoinen et al. (2018: 104) list three concerns for the equality of modern comprehensive education, of which the first one is especially poignant:

1. The disappearance of privileged students from "bad" schools
2. The growing disparity between genders and immigrants

3. The disappearance of small, local schools, which challenges the subjective right to education in remote rural areas

The first point in the list above relates to the availability of school choice. There are a number of reasons for students or parents to want to apply for a WCE, but some general trends for reasonings can be observed. For those who apply to schools other than their nearest available school, a unifying feature is a belief or experience of unsuitability or lower quality of that initial school (Kalalahti & Varjo 2016: 60—61). This can be challenging for schools where student enrollment is tied to funding. As Ahonen (2012: 166) argues, this may result in a vicious cycle where rejected schools become poorer and, therefore, have less opportunities to remedy the negative outcomes.

WCE has an influence on academic achievement as well. In a large-scale study measuring academic performance among 9th grade students, Kupiainen (2019: 152—156) found that students from schools formed on the emphasis of *lukuaine*[2] scored notably higher. In addition, while differences between schools are still low enough to not cause significant alarm, the trend is towards inequality (Silvennoinen et al. 2018: 104) and it is mostly driven by differences between students and class formation (Hautamäki & Thuneberg 2019: 91). Likewise, the trend towards inequality is most prevalent in the capital region, which is partly explained by class formation through WCE (Ouakrim-Soivio et al. 2018). Class formation in the form of WCE seems to include a selection bias within it compounding positive academic results.

In conclusion, it seems like WCE includes great potential for systemic educational inequality. While some may argue that school choice is another form of equality by offering unbiased barriers of entry into various meritocratic paths of education, there are arguments for WCE and school choice *producing* mechanisms of segregation and inequality that disproportionately benefit higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Silvennoinen 2018: 102). In fact, Lintuvuori, Jahnukainen, and Hautamäki (2017: 332) estimate that higher education and career opportunities may not be fully realized as a byproduct of individualization. Therefore, it is worth examining the extent to which WCE and school choice change the landscape of Finnish educational equality.

2.4 Educational equality and English education in Finland

English language has an undeniably visible status in Finland. After the Second World War, English supplanted German as the language of international cooperation within

[2] *Lukuaine* (literary translation: 'reading subject') is a Finnish term that refers to a collection of school subject in a similar manner to STEM. Lukuaine refers to mother tongue and literature, second national language and foreign languages, mathematics, environmental studies, biology and geography, physics and chemistry, health education, religion and ethics, and history and social studies.

a couple of decades (Ihalainen, Nuolijärvi, Saarinen 2019: 54). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Finland oriented economically and politically further towards the West, and in the process cementing English as the "mandatory" foreign language in Finnish compulsory education at the expense of German and French (Saarinen et al. 2019: 127). The integration of English into education goes beyond comprehensive education as well. For example, universities have frequently added English as a second or third working language in their courses (Ihalainen et al. 2019: 54). Although Finnish law does not mandate schools to teach English, in practice, every comprehensive school teaches at least English as a foreign language.

In Finland, English has a function as a lingua franca – a language among those without a common language. This is perhaps not surprising as English has spread around the world at an unprecedented scale (Mauranen 2009: 292). David Crystal (1997: 71—75) argues that access to knowledge as one of the key reasons for the rapid spread of English: many technological innovations during the industrial revolution originated from English-speaking countries and were thus recorded in English. In the 21st century, English continues being a dominant language in science (Hiidenmaa 2010). The status of English in officially non-English speaking countries can prompt discussions around potential political issues, such as the understanding of English becoming a dividing line that creates inequality (Tandefelt 2010: 31—32). Tandefelt (2010: 38, 40) lists some examples from Scandinavian countries: the Danish language policy acknowledges that the field of research and industry are in danger of being overtaken by English and, in Norway, English taking over areas of society as the majority language is seen as a potential threat. Finland faces likely similar challenges and opportunities in terms of English as a lingua franca and the language of science and industry.

For students, English may be viewed favorably when compared to the language attitudes woven into Finnish and Swedish, which may include associations to nationalism or elitism (Ihalainen, Nuolijärvi, Saarinen 2019: 56). In a study, Kupiainen (2019: 103—104) confirms that positive and negative attitudes correlate somewhat with grades in Finnish and Swedish lessons. Interestingly, attitudes towards English had the least impact on grades; attitudes did not explain as much of the grade variation when compared with other written subjects (Kupiainen 2019: 103—104). One possible explanation for this could be that English is actively present in the lives of students outside of school, thus blurring the line between a school subject and something related to the students' interests. The content of English lessons can positively impact participating in English discourses outside of school, giving a positive feedback loop as available discourses and hobbies become available to the student.

In terms of academic performance, English education produces equal results in some areas and unequal in others. For example, results in English tend to highlight certain differences between schools but not so much between genders. Ouakrim-

Soivio et al. (2018) mentions that students studying *A englanti*[3] have differences in academic results between schools that are notably high when compared to many other subjects, such as mathematics, especially when assessing speaking abilities. In contrast, English studies tend to produce relatively small gender differences. Academic gender differences in English are the smallest out of subjects belonging to *lukuaine*[4] (Kupiainen et al. 2019: 101). The same relatively low gender difference is not replicated in other languages. Kupiainen et al. (2019: 101) continue to highlight that out of subjects belonging to *lukuaine,* the academic results in mother tongue and second national language studies were the most affected by gender.

Some other relatively minor themes around inequality in English as a foreign language (EFL) education in Finland are the difference the learner's first language can make and the emphasis on native-sounding speech. Regarding the learner's first language, Ouakrim-Soivio et al. (2018) found that English skills among Swedish speaking population have been better compared to Finnish speakers both in 1999 and 2013, where the difference was statistically significant in the latter year. However, there is yet no concise answer as to why this is the case. In addition, Seppänen et al. (2018: 76) note that WCE favors students who speak Finnish or Swedish. In this sense, WCE may be an educational policy that is less accessible to non-native speakers.

The other theme of inequality in EFL education in Finland is a native speaker bias. As English is the current lingua franca with a variety of "official" or otherwise legitimate Englishes all over the world, there are arguments in favor of approaching English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary through an international perspective rather than strictly limiting English to one specific culture. EFL education may in fact be more open to teaching an international variety of English compared to other foreign languages, but foreign language education in general is likely still based on the primacy of a "standard form" of the target language when teaching that language (Mauranen 2009: 296).

Conversely, there are some indications for EFL succeeding in themes of equality better compared to other foreign languages in Finland. For example, English assessment may be less susceptible to bias in certain contexts in EFL education in Finland. In fact, Sahlström and Silliman (2024: 17—18) found that English language assessments regarding the matriculation examination showed significantly less bias between the evaluation of immigrant and non-immigrant students. The authors were not certain what could explain this.

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[3] *A englanti* (literary translation: A English) = English starting in grades 1—6 of basic education.
[4] *Lukuaine* (literary translation: 'reading subject') is a Finnish term that refers to a collection of school subject in a similar manner to STEM. Lukuaine refers to mother tongue and literature, second national language and foreign languages, mathematics, environmental studies, biology and geography, physics and chemistry, health education, religion and ethics, and history and social studies.

Overall, it seems there is no significant concern over inequality regarding EFL education in Finland. There are some indicators touching on inequalities in foreign language education in general as well as some that indicate EFL education being comparatively equal or unbiased in certain contexts. However, this does not mean that English education in Finland is not a relevant study topic for educational inequalities. After all, weighted-curriculum education (WCE) can create systemic inequalities and English-centered education is one type of WCE available. It would be interesting to explore WCE impact on equality between English and other subjects.

2.5 Discourses and analysis on educational equality

2.5.1 An overview of CDA as a form of analysis

The framework or methodology for this study is based on critical discourse analysis (CDA). This framework was chosen to further understand the role of 'equality' in WCE discourse. As covered in the previous section, 'equality' in the context of education has been both understood differently and used to argue seemingly contradictory positions on educational policy. CDA may help discover current trends in using and understanding 'equality' due to its focus on studying the relationship between a word and how people understand that word at any given time. For example, Pietikäinen & Mäntynen (2009: 11) highlight how the word 'punainen' (Finnish for '*red*') in some contexts is linked with girlhood although the word itself does not instruct people to understand it in such a context. Likewise, 'equality' is scaffolded and reinterpreted by social and linguistic contexts that appear outside of the word itself.

Of interest in CDA is also the relationship between the semiotic and the material – where discourse steers and shapes concrete policies, and vice versa. For example, economic discourses may present certain imagined realities, or economic imaginaries, and then seek to transform these imaginary realities into reality (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012: 82). In fact, Pietikäinen and Mäntynen (2009: 12) concur that the central thesis of discourse analysis is that reality is built in social interaction, where language and semiotic systems of meaning employ a key role. By seeing discourse and action as possible parts of the same continuum, this research aims to further understand Finnish educational culture and values in addition to language.

CDA allows a fluid range of studying meaning-making in discourse. For example, one way to approach elements of discourse is Van Leeuwen's (2008: 7—12) categorization of the features of all "actually performed social practices", including, for example, actions, participants, and the adjacent eligibility conditions. Likewise, the approach could rather focus on highlighting aspects of a discourse piece's goals,

claims, values, and premises (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012: 88—89). The idea being that the ways of presenting or narrating a topic are part of the meaning-making process, which influences our socially constructed understanding of the world. After all, a central premise of social constructivism is that truth is constructed in social discourse between people, making it separate from external reality. CDA positions itself in the conjunction of language, human interaction, and reality contextualized by culture and history. Therefore, CDA was chosen as a method to study our understanding of educational equality, and how reinforcing or challenging this understanding may be used to shape culture.

However, CDA as a methodology is not without fair criticism. In 2005, Blommaert (2005: 31—33) presented some common pieces of criticism towards CDA, including the conflation of pragmatics and semantics, vagueness, and a framework, which allows the researcher's biases to influence the study process. Staying unbiased is adopted as a central goal in conducting this research. The topic of equality relates to injustice, fairness, community, belonging, and human value, which are emotionally potent topics, and they can be difficult topics to detach personally in favor of objectivity. Therefore, this study is conducted with explicit focus on avoiding biases from steering the research process or influencing how the results are later interpreted.

2.5.2 Previous studies on Finnish education and equality discourses

The Finnish educational system is primarily based on equality rather than equity, although both are present. According to Siekkinen (2017: 5), the Finnish educational system has been dominantly in favor of equality since the 1970s with the introduction of the comprehensive school. Correspondingly, Silvennoinen et al. (2016: 28) describe the entire Finnish comprehensive education as representative of equality. However, equality and equity are not mutually exclusive and features of both can be found in Finnish education. For example, schools can get extra funding to help teach classes who include students who might struggle more due to language barriers or other similar reason (Latomaa 2019: 191). This is an example where resources are targeted to increase equity, or at least mitigate inequality, within the educational system.

If the Finnish educational system leans towards the idea of equality, then it is likely reflected in education discourse as well. In fact, there are discourse elements, which allude to the idea of equality. For example, Välijärvi, Linnakylä, Kupari, Reinikainen and Arffman (2002: 28) conducted a study on Finland's high PISA scores in 2002 and formulated one of the reasons for success as: "In Finland it is thus of little consequence where students live and which school they go to. The opportunities to learn are virtually the same all over the country." According to the quotation by Välijärvi et al. (2002: 28), all schools all over Finland offer the same opportunities for success, illustrating a successful example of the equality.

Discourse analysis of Finnish education has identified several different types of discourses. For example, Siekkinen (2017) identifies six types of discourses around educational equality:

1. Common school discourse
    a. *Equality for all children regardless of socioeconomic factors or residence with the aim of promoting democracy and social justice.*
2. Differentiation discourse
    a. *Allocating resources to marginalized students and schools to counter weaker forms of equality.*
3. Freedom discourse
    a. *An individual's freedom to choose is seen as a civil right. This discourse links with neoliberal values and school choice, for example.*
4. State control discourse
    a. *The state's role is to level the playing field between different actors in education.*
5. Legal discourse
    a. *Equality is a legal right that belongs to both individuals and groups.*
6. Internationality discourse
    a. *Equality is a tool to achieve other goals, such as international prestige by achieving excellence in rankings.*

There is some overlap between the various types of discourses identified here. Additionally, it is also possible to detect trends that align with discourses of equality and outcomes. A person arguing for equality would likely combine elements of common school, freedom, and legal discourses. Likewise, arguments for equity would perhaps be most supported by common school, differentiation, and state control discourses.

Some discourses conceptualize education as a certain type of societal power. For example, Hansen et al. (2021: 284—285) identify three different types of discourses regarding education: progressivism, investment point of view, and governance. Firstly, progressivism interprets education as a central tool for societal change. Secondly, the investment point of view conceptualizes education as a source of wealth for the nation. Finally, the governance point of view regards education as a traditional form of governing and societal power. On the other hand, Alanen and Alastalo (2021: 192—193) describe a 'regime of well-being' ("hyvinvointiregiimi") as the section of society which strives for improved health and well-being, in which reducing inequalities through education is one method of improving well-being. This type of understanding seems to exist within some of the previously mentioned discourses of education and is another example of equality playing a role in shaping our values and understanding of education whether as a value by itself or an instrument to achieve something else desirable.

Some discourses around educational equality highlight a negative or concerned approach. For example, Hansen et al. (2021: 289, 292) note how Finnish education

rhetoric has a tendency of being concerned for the future of education while simultaneously seeing "the new" in education as something inevitable that schools should strive to incorporate sooner rather than later. A well-known recent example of this type of discourse impacting policy is likely the school reforms of the 90s, which increased weighted-curricula and individual choices as a response to school being perceived as a homogenizing facility (Saarinen et al. 2019: 129). In the discourse surrounding the school reforms of the 90s, the equalizing or homogenizing impact of common school may have been viewed as mostly negative rather than an example of a successful form of equality.

An interesting argument for a flaw in the Finnish educational equality discourse comes from Simpson (2018: 33), who argues that ethnocentrism is a central part of Finnish discourses and sentiments to the detriment of true equality. Simpson's (2018: 33) argument highlights the discrepancy of proclaiming equality while determining that same equality through state boundaries and national branding. After all, limiting equality to belonging to a specific legally defined group of citizens goes against the fundamental idea of equality. This raises the questions: does one have to be Finnish in Finland to have equal access to Finnish equality? How is our understanding of equality formed by discourse that ties equality tightly as part of the citizens of a particular nation and its brand?

A part of the discourse surrounding education and educational equality are various reports on education. One example of an influential report is the PISA results. These reports tend to illustrate the state of education through specific indicators, which can then impact discussions around education. However, these indicators do not necessarily have to be measurable to function as discourse pieces. Education reports on the future of schools in the Nordic countries employ four main parameters: numbers (results, comparisons), the change and unpredictability of society (adaptation and skills for future), technological innovation, and children's wellbeing (Hansen, Säntti, Saari 2021: 296). It is interesting to consider how our view of education might change if most school reports used different indicators and parameters.

Educational equality is tied to the surrounding societal context where changes in society can also change how we understand educational equality. Starting from the 90s, educational equality has moved towards a more individualized definition with school choice and other options following (Meriläinen 2008: 71—72). In fact, it seems that discourses around individual capabilities have emerged next to equality (Silvennoinen, Kalalahti, Varjo 2016: 30). As stated earlier, some understandings of educational equality may hold contradictory views within. Nonetheless, it is clear that the surrounding societal context can change the way we understand educational equality. This is echoed by Silvennoinen, Kalalahti, and Varjo (2016: 11—12) who note that the relationship between equality and politics can change and adapt over time.

Additionally, educational policies can be the cause of inequalities while those inequalities simultaneously act as a justification for pursuing those educational policies even further. Rytkönen (2016: 33) describes this type of reasoning as something of a vicious cycle. For example, schools that go through a reform where individual choice is greatly increased may experience adverse effects on educational equality as a result. However, because the current understanding of educational equality relies on the individual, the remedy to those adverse effects is to further increase individual choice. The reason why the individual is vital for our understanding of educational equality is due to our societal context and how it informs our worldview.

Finally, an interesting element of equality discourse is its potential significance in highlighting social trends. Helkama (2015: 137) suggests that equality may in fact be a sort of distress signifier for when society encounters more distressing and uncertain times. This idea could suggest that distressing times in a society increase the calls for solidarity and equality, which shows in increased calls for educational equality as well - regardless of whether questions of equality have a significant correlation with the contemporaneous societal uncertainty. If equality in general is truly a distress signifier, it could be that discourse around equality increases during uncertain times but not necessarily in favor of equality either. After all, increased equality is likely not universally seen as an adequate response to uncertain periods of time. Therefore, educational equality might become a type of arena for discourses born from a lack of sense of safety where that lack of safety results in a desire to address equality in some sense – whether for or against.

3 RESEARCH

3.1 Objects of study

This study looks at equality discourses surrounding weighted-curriculum education (WCE) in written online articles published in *Helsingin Sanomat* (www.hs.fi), *Iltalehti* (www.iltalehti.fi) and *Yle* (www.yle.fi) over a period of 10 months from the 1st of June 2023 to the 1st of March 2024. The choice to focus on written articles is due to the relative popularity of Finnish people engaging with written online news rather than listening of watching news online. In fact, 75% of Finns report preferring to read their news online – this is a high percentage even when compared internationally to other countries (Media-alan tutkimussäätiö 2023: 74—75). The covered material is further narrowed down into published articles. This excludes the public discourse in the comment section under each article, for example. However, the published articles can include published pieces, such as opinion pieces, columns, and articles.

Helsingin Sanomat, *Iltalehti*, and *Yle* were chosen due to various reasons. These reasons are all covered in a recent coverage on the Finnish media landscape by Media-alan tutkimussäätiö (2023), a foundation focused on studying media in Finland. *Helsingin Sanomat* was chosen due to its large representation among paying subscribers for online news coverage: of all study participants who pay for their digital news, half reported subscribing to *Helsingin Sanomat* (Media-alan säätiö 2023: 63). On the other hand, when looking at weekly online reach (individual users accessing a site, meaning one individual accessing the same site from various devices is still counted as one) among unpaying visitors, the tabloids *Iltalehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat* have a higher weekly reach than *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Yle* with *Ilta-Sanomat* having a marginally higher reach (Media-alan tutkimussäätiö 2023: 60). This would make *Ilta-Sanomat* a natural second choice for this study. However, since *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Helsingin Sanomat* are

both owned by the same publishing company, *Sanoma Oy*, at the time of this study, the second publication was chosen to be *Iltalehti* instead. The difference in weekly reach between *Iltalehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat* is not significant, and choosing *Iltalehti* guarantees a look at publications from three different companies.

Finally, *Yle* was chosen mainly due to it being the most trusted news source in Finland (Media-alan tutkimussäätiö 2023: 50—51) in addition to being a publicly funded source of news. The high level of trust towards *Yle* is perhaps connected to the fact that Finnish people tend to have comparatively high trust in mainstream media with only a minor section who question its legitimacy (Media-alan tutkimussäätiö 2023: 40). Additionally, Finns tend to value publicly funded news more than most countries compared in the study by Media-alan tutkimussäätiö (2023: 50—51), which could also partially explain the high level of trust among Finns towards *Yle* as a source of news. Considering all these factors, *Yle*'s digital news and articles are the third and final choice for media to be examined in this study.

WCE for English classes will be in particular focus during this study whenever suitable. In order to highlight practicalities or observations regarding WCE, it may be necessary to highlight concrete examples from WCE classes. In these instances, the focus will be on English-language WCE. The reason for narrowing the WCE examples to English is driven by the fact that this study is conducted within the department of languages and communication as part of studies in the English language program. It is also interesting to see whether English WCE holds a distinct position in equality discourses given English's status as a lingua franca.

3.2 The research plan and question

This study looks at published online articles about WCE in *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Iltalehti*, and *Yle* over 10 months. The focus of the research is on educational equality discourses regarding WCE, with a special interest in English education. The special interest in English education shows as an emphasis in showcasing examples and discourse pieces of English language being a part of WCE. As part of the tradition of discourse analysis, this study explores the meaning-making of equality discourses: while discourses reflect reality, they can also build our understanding of reality. The research questions are such:

1. How is educational equality understood?
2. What types of discourses are associated with WCE and educational equality?
3. Does English education have a particular role in equality discourses around WCE and school choice?

These questions were chosen to give an overview of WCE-related equality discourses in Finland and to further understand the role of English education within it. Additionally, these questions help describe the values attached to equality and equity as well as how those values are negotiated publicly. I would argue that WCE is one of the current points of contention in the history of educational equality discourses and understanding it can help the reader construct a continuum of the history of equality discourses in Finland. A historical comparison may also reveal interesting similarities or differences in future research. Finally, a critical look at the discourses regarding values and policy can contextualize known or hidden structures of power in how equality is linguistically applied to education and WCE.

The depth of linguistic analysis is also kept mindful to the purposes of the study. After all, there may be a point where depth of analysis may detract from understanding certain linguistic mechanisms. At least Widdowson (2010: 166—167) argues against excessive analysis due to the possibility of losing relevant contextual mechanisms, for example with ambiguous texts. An example presented is a placard "All dogs must be carried" in a metro station. By doing in-depth analysis, it is possible to identify various possible ways of interpreting the placard text (Do you need to pick up and carry any dog you see around? Do you *need* to be carrying a dog to enter?). However, given contextual clues for readers to interpret the placard, the number of metro visitors who would interpret the placard incorrectly is likely nonexistent or extremely low. Therefore, is focusing solely on the text (excluding the context surrounding the text) meaningful in reflecting how the text in the placard is understood in reality? This example showcases a situation where in-depth analysis may remove the results from the initial goal – especially if that goal has a more pragmatic nature.

3.3 Methodology

The materials were gathered using the search feature found from each media publication's website. The same search procedure was used for all websites to ensure comparable results. Two tests were conducted to ensure the search features function properly. Clearing these tests was a requirement before proceeding with the study. First, the websites' search function was tested by manually looking for a recent article and using a keyword from that article in the search. For example, *Iltalehti*'s search feature was tested using the topical word "lakko" (*strike*). The search feature on all three websites passed the keyword search test. Another test was conducted with the conjugated term "vaaleihin" (a conjugated version of *election*). The search results showcased published works with other conjugations of the work "vaaleihin" as well as the given conjugated version. All three websites cleared the conjugation test as well.

Following the tests, articles were collected from *Yle*, *Helsingin Sanomat*, and *Iltalehti* using predetermined search terms. The search terms used were "*painotettu opetus*" (weighted-curriculum education), "*painotusluokka*" (weighted-curriculum class), "tasa-arvo" (*equality*), "*opetus*" (education), "*englannin opetus*" (English education), "*englannin painotus*" (English weighted/specialization), and "*englanti luokka*" (English class). For each search, the results were skimmed through and any potentially suitable article for this research was copied onto a computer. Altogether, 14 articles were copied from *Helsingin Sanomat*, 7 articles from *Yle*, and 1 article from *Iltalehti*.

The number of collected articles being significantly different between the media sources is notable. There are some possible explanations for the low number of published works retrieved from *Iltalehti*. While the search tests indicate that the search engine takes conjugation and the location of the search term into account, there could be other hidden factors preventing access to relevant published works. It is also not clear what the time frame of the search results is as the search engine does not allow the user to specify the time of publication. However, some of the search terms returned articles from June 2023 to the present day, which is a sufficient range in publishing history for this research. Additionally, it might be that WCE and educational equality topics are not covered extensively by *Iltalehti*.

In contrast, the search procedure produced significantly more articles from *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Yle*. This indicates that WCE has been a recurring topic for *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Yle* during the selected 10-month period. It is interesting to hypothesize why this might be. Perhaps the differences can be explained by the interests of the target audience of each of the three publications. If this is in fact a factor, it would indicate that readers of *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Iltalehti* are on the opposite ends of a spectrum of interest towards topics on educational equality regarding WCE and school choice.

After collecting the articles, they were read to ensure that they were relevant to this study. Two articles were rejected due to them not actually revolving around matters of WCE and equality despite showing up with those search terms: one article from *Yle* and two articles from *Helsingin Sanomat*. The number of articles examined in this study is as follows:

Iltalehti	1
Helsingin Sanomat	12
Yle	6
Total	**19**

Table 1: The number of articles from each media source

The articles in further detail are listed below. Note the reference code above the article publication date. This code will be used later in this study to refer to each article. The dates are written using the Finnish method of writing: days, months, year. The publications are listed in the order of *Iltalehti*, *Helsingin Sanomat*, and *Yle*, with the article reference code appearing in numerical order from smallest to largest. Some numbered articles may appear missing (for example, HS11) due to them being excluded from the study. Additionally, specific quotes are numbered for subsequent references with a colon and a quote number, such as HS3:1. For example, code HS3:1 would refer to quote number 1 from the third article of the HS material. Finally, under the original Finnish article title is an English translation of that title. The translations were created specifically for this paper.

Article title	**Ref. code & Date**	**URL**
Suoraa puhetta: Tämä kaikki suomalaisessa opetuksessa on vialla *Frank talk: This is what is wrong in Finnish education*	IL1 29.12.2023	https://www.*Iltalehti*.fi/kotimaa/a/8791b7f1-2ddc-48a4-8cd5-889838aa07a9
Painotuksella voisi lisätä koulumotivaatiota ja oppimisintoa *Weighted education could increase school motivation and hunger for learning*	HS1 15.3.2024	https://www.hs.fi/mielipide/art-2000010290746.html
Nasima Razmyar vaatii Helsingin poliitikoilta vihattuja muutoksia kouluihin *Nasima Razmyar demands hated changes to schools from Helsinki's politicians*	HS2 11.3.2024	https://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/art-2000010283934.html
Laaja tutkimus: Huono-osaisten alueiden kouluissa vallitsee raadollinen luokkayhteiskunta pääkaupunkiseudulla *Extensive study: A brutal class society prevails in schools in worse-off areas in the capital area*	HS3 11.3.2024	https://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/art-2000010256005.html
Tulevaisuuden koulu *The school of the future*	HS4 3.3.2024	https://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/art-2000010121536.html
Näin Helsingin pormestarin kuohuntaa aiheuttanut kouluidea otetaan vastaan musiikkiluokassa Pakilassa *This is how the mayor of Helsinki's contentious school proposal has been received in Pakila's music classes*	HS5 14.2.2024	https://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/art-2000010213368.html

Tehdään kaikista luokista erityisluokkia *Let's make all classes into special classes*	HS6 14.2.2024	https://www.hs.fi/mielipide/art-2000010222087.html
Lahjakkaita lapsia on kaikilla alueilla *There are gifted children in every region*	HS7 11.2.2024	https://www.hs.fi/mielipide/art-2000010217575.html
Painotettu opetus lisää koulun sisäistä segregaatiota *Weighted education increases internal segregation in schools*	HS8 11.2.2024	https://www.hs.fi/mielipide/art-2000010216819.html
"Katastrofaalinen", sanoo opettaja Helsingin pormestarin kouluideasta *"Catastrophical", says a teacher about the mayor of Helsinki's school proposal*	HS9 8.2.2024	https://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/art-2000010212098.html
Johtaja Järvenkallas vakuuttaa: Helsingin kouluihin ei tehdä radikaaleja muutoksia nopeasti *Leader Järvenkallas reassures: there will not be fast radical changes to schools in Helsinki*	HS11	https://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/art-2000010210484.html
Kävin kouluni musiikkiluokalla, olin siis etuoikeutettu *I studied in a music class, meaning I was privileged*	HS12 1.9.2023	https://www.hs.fi/mielipide/art-2000009822186.html
Englanninkielistä päivähoitoa ja opetusta halutaan lisää Vantaalle *There is a desire in Vantaa to increase English-language daycare and education*	HS13 15.8.2023	https://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/art-2000009784367.html
Yläastelaiset kertovat, millaisia porukoita heidän koulustaan löytyy – ja miten raha niihin vaikuttaa *Middle school students tell what types of groups there are in their schools – and how money impacts them*	Y1 11.3.2024	https://Yle.fi/a/74-20078312
Tasa-arvoista koulua ei enää ole – nämä tutkijat tietävät, millainen on todellisuus huonomaineisessa koulussa *The equal common school no longer exists – these researchers know what the reality is like in a notorious school*	Y2 11.3.2024	https://Yle.fi/a/74-20077249
	Y3	https://Yle.fi/a/74-20074756

Helsinki maksaa parempaa palkkaa tiettyjen koulujen opettajille *Helsinki pays a higher salary to the teachers at certain schools*	21.2.2024	
Aleksis Sasusjärven kolumni: Suomalaista koulua ei tarvitse uudistaa – riittää, kun palataan vanhaan *A column by Aleksis Salusjärvi: There is no need to update Finnish schools – it is sufficient to return to the old*	Y4 20.2.2024	https://*Yle*.fi/a/74-20065994
Kouluun ilmoittautuminen alkaa Vaasassa: tarjolla on myös musiikkipainotteista opetusta, ruotsin kielikylpyä sekä suomi-englanti ja englanninkielistä opetusta *School enrolment begins in Vaasa: on offer there are music-oriented education, Swedish language showering as well as Finnish-English and English-language education*	Y5 8.1.2024	https://*Yle*.fi/a/74-20068227
Kaupunki hakee Riihimäen lukiolle erityisasemaa – opiskelijoilla mahdollisuus keskittyä paremmin robotiikan opintoihin *The city applies for a special status for Riihimäki's upper secondary school – the students have an opportunity to better focus on robotics studies*	Y6 8.6.2024	https://*Yle*.fi/a/74-20035790

Table 2: List of the studied articles

4 NAVIGATING OPPORTUNITY AND EQUALITY

4.1 Equality and inequality in WCE discourses

4.1.1 Introduction to the analysis

The structure of the analysis section follows the order of research questions in three stages. First, the term 'equality' and 'inequality' will be explored in terms of values, presuppositions, and use. Second, this study will look at various WCE discourses and argue how they may be interrelated with adjacent equality discourses. This second stage also includes comparing WCE-related discourses to educational equality discourses in general as described by researchers. Finally, I will explore my own biases and shortcomings to mitigate their influence before offering an overall analysis of the power and narrative within WCE-related discourses as well as the role of English in the discourse.

4.1.2 Equality in WCE discourses

One presupposition becomes evident when studying the research material: educational equality is presented as universally good and desirable. In fact, there were no articles that even alluded to equality being undesirable either directly or indirectly. The universal appeal of equality as a "good" seems to continue the trend in wider political discourse on education where appealing to equality is a universally effective way of advocating for various other political goals – even political goals that are contradictory to equality depending on the point of view. Equality as a desirable virtue holds such a hegemonic position within WCE discourse that discussions on the possible negative aspects of equality could likely cause notable criticism. In case some forms of equality are found to be undesirable, it may take some convincing to change

the public narrative. In fact, only the methods with which equality is *pursued* receive critical discourse, such as abolishing class-based WCE in the name of promoting equality.

Regardless of the approach on WCE and educational equality, three ideas seem to be permanently attached to 'equality' within WCE discourses: equality *requires work* to achieve or maintain, the *power to influence* equality is not equal, and the *state of equality can change* and is now different than before. The notable amount of work required to influence the state of equality is often mentioned in educational policy debates. During the examined timeframe, one of the most publicly discussed policies to improve equality was the elimination or restriction of WCE classes, proposed by the mayor of Helsinki, Juhana Vartiainen. Likewise, in article Y3, the interviewed official says that work towards reducing segregation is done "continuously and purposefully" without further specific details. These discourses are often paired with criticism for the lack of funding and calls for further funding (IL1, HS4, Y2, Y6). All these discourse threads point to one seemingly inevitable aspect of equality in WCE discourses: achieving equality requires active work to achieve or to maintain.

According WCE-related equality discourses, the agency to influence equality is not distributed evenly. Some articles recognize municipalities and the state as institutions with power and resources to influence equality (IL1, Y3). Article Y2 also mentions how teachers and rectors have power to "either increase or decrease the spread of segregation". However, a perhaps surprisingly large agency and responsibility is placed on the middle to upper class families (HS3, HS4, HS9, HS10). The WCE narrative suggests that wealth is tied to a family's ability to benefit from schools offering WCE. Correspondingly, some discourse elements place partial responsibility on wealthy families for choosing to utilize educational opportunities, such as WCE, to ensure academic success to their children even when the broader impact is an increase in inequality and disadvantages for others. This variant of WCE discourses is named in this study as the *individual responsibility discourse*, and it will be explored further in section 4.2.2 on page 39. To summarize, the discourse around agency places emphasis on certain groups and institutions; the state, municipalities as institutions and teachers and rectors as professionals of education have influence over the development of inequality while also acknowledging that wealthy families have greater agency in shaping how far WCE drives segregation through their own choices, which are not afforded to other groups to the same extent.

Finally, a key piece of understanding of equality within the WCE discourse is that the state of equality can change and that it is different now than before. Sometimes this discourse can show up as a recalibration of the reader's assumed understanding of educational equality in Finland. For example, article Y2 renegotiates with the reader

what the current state of equality is in Finland compared to what the author sees as the prior view on educational equality (with added emphasis on bold):

> (Y2:1) "Suomessa **on haluttu uskoa mahdollisuuksien tasa-arvoon** eli siihen, että kaikilla on taustastaan riippumatta yhtäläiset mahdollisuudet esimerkiksi koulutukseen. **Näin ei enää ole**."
> *"People in Finland **have wanted to believe in equality,** meaning that everybody, regardless of their background, has equal opportunities to, for example, get an education. **This is no longer the case**."*

These types of discourses describe equality as something changing and something that can be compared to other versions of itself. In other words, WCE discourses claim that it is possible for equality to increase or decrease or change in some other observable way.

In conclusion, the term 'equality' in WCE-related discourses holds three descriptive values: it is understood and utilized as a universal good and a desirable outcome, also equality can change over time and has changed from previous versions of it, equality requires work and effort to achieve or maintain, and that not everyone has the same agency to influence equality. However, in order to fully understand how equality is valued and discussed, it is worthwhile to examine how discourse is constructed around the lack of equality.

4.1.3 Inequality in WCE discourses

Inequality ("eriarvoisuus") is painted overwhelmingly as a negative thing within the WCE discourse. Whenever inequality is mentioned in the discourse, it is often paired with verbs and word choices that clearly outline inequality as undesirable. For example, words connected with inequality include "vähentäminen" (decreasing), "ehkäisy" (prevention), "huoli" (concern), and "torjuminen" (repelling). There is only one positive term connected to inequality in article HS9: "edistäminen" (furthering / promoting). However, the wider context paints the act of promoting inequality as a negative action (See HS9:4 on page 41). In addition to negative sentiments, inequality is fairly frequently associated with "being visible or observable" and a "part of everyday, daily life". However, it is worth noting that these last two connection are made mostly when reporting about a research paper. It is possible that the research paper has made "being observable" and being a "part of daily life" central themes to the study, which are then mirrored in published articles. Nonetheless, whether written by the article author or cited from a study, these characterizations of inequality participate in the construction of a cohesive narrative regarding the nature of educational inequality.

From the point of view of CDA, particular interest is placed on the power structure emerging from WCE-related discourse. In particular, who is affected by inequality in what way, and who has power to influence inequality in a meaningful way. In order to have a preliminary understanding of these power relations, the following diagram has attached actors (referring to individual people or groups of people affected by or capable of influencing inequality, according to the discourse) to the previously mentioned frequent verbs paired with inequality in accordance with the material's narrative.

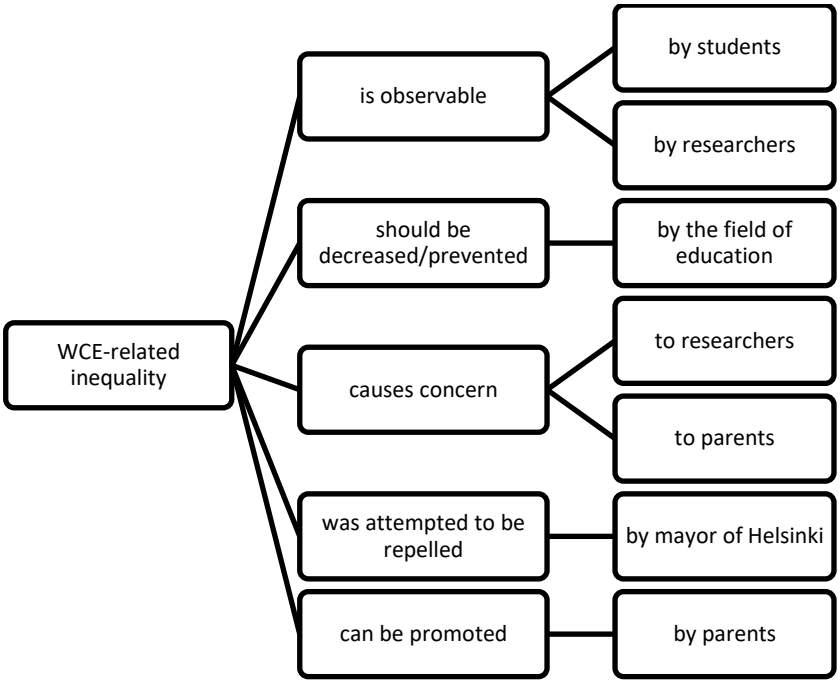

Figure 1: Inequality and relevant actors

Some interesting observations emerge from the table above. Notably, parents are simultaneously given power to promote/further WCE-related inequality through their choices, such as choosing to perform "school shopping", but also, they are characterized as being concerned about the consequences of educational inequality. It is perhaps this duality combined with the readership profile of HS that explains why the discourse spends a relatively sizeable amount of time discussing parental role, responsibility, and culpability in WCE-related inequality. In comparison, the role of political institutions, such as the field of education, is relatively unexplored. For further analysis of agency and power, see section 4.2.3 The role of agency in WCE-related inequalities on page 46.

To conclude, the way inequality is characterized by the text supports how equality is portrayed in reverse. Just as equality is portrayed as an inherently good and desirable feature of education, inequality is universally painted as a negative and undesirable feature within the WCE discourse. In this sense the discourse is congruent

and consistent. Next, the following section combines understanding of equality and inequality is with context from various identified WCE discourses.

4.2 Identifying WCE discourses

4.2.1 Comparing WCE-related discourses with previous Finnish equality discourses

This study begins by looking at discourse topics and their connections found in the examined articles. First, the discourse elements are compared to those identified by Siekkinen (2017) in their study on educational equality discourse in Finland. Siekkinen (2017) identified 6 distinct forms of equality discourses: common school, differentiation, freedom, state control, legal, and internationality discourse. As this study looks at educational equality regarding specifically weighted-class education (WCE), it is interesting to compare how the discourse types identified by Siekkinen (2017) are represented in this material. In fact, it appears that most topics are well represented with two exceptions.

The least represented of the discourses identified by (Siekkinen (2017) are the legal and internationality discourses. None of the articles appear to specifically address the general legal right for equality as a central point of contention or interest. Mainly, combatting segregation and inequality are universally depicted as desirable outcomes whether the author supports the elimination of WCE or not. For example, the following excerpts depict combatting inequality and segregation as either explicitly or inherently good:

> (HS2:1) "Razmyar uskoo, että tätä eriytymistä pitää vähentää."
> "*Razmyar believes that segregation should be decreased*"

> (HS3:1) " — eriarvoistumisen torjumiseksi – "
> " *– in order to combat that inequality –*"

> (Y3:1) " — koulutuksen toimialalla tehdään jatkuvasti määrätietoista työtä alueellisen ariarvoisuuden ehkäisemiseksi."
> " *– the field of education works continuously and purposefully to prevent regional inequality*"

It is possible the authors include legal arguments and civic rights as part of their calls to address equality. However, the legal arguments are not explicitly mentioned.

Therefore, it seems that as far as the discourses regarding WCE are concerned, any issues or points of interest are not viewed through a legal narrative.

Internationality discourse is also notably absent in WCE discourses. According to Siekkinen (2017), an internationality discourse focuses on equality as an instrument to achieve secondary goals, such as international prestige through high rankings. The lack of internationality discourse with WCE discourse is especially interesting knowing that Finland's international brand as a top country in education has been recently contrasted against falling PISA scores. In fact, there is only one article (Y4) out of 19, which ties WCE-influenced inequality as a co-factor to the decreasing international status of Finland's educational system. In this article by Salusjärvi (Y4), the first paragraph of the column addresses the PISA scores as a meaningful source of data:

> (Y4:1) "Viidentoista vuoden aikana lasten osaamiserot ovat kasvaneet ja koulujen ongelmista on tullut kestopuheenaihe. Pisa-tutkimus on kartoittanut tätä alamäkeä säntillisesti."
> *"Over the last 15 years, differences in academic achievement have grown and schools' problems have become a recurring topic. Pisa research has documented this deterioration punctually."*

Here, the column outlines concerns regarding Finnish schools, such as growing academic disparities and numerous problems with schools. So far, the focus of the column remains within Finland and the international PISA scores are used as a metric to discuss issues with Finnish education. However, the next sentence recontextualizes the metrics of educational well-being to an international comparison:

> (Y4:2) "Ikävä totuus on, että peruskoululaitosta alettiin muuttaa määrätietoisesti silloin, kun se oli maailman parhaita."
> *"The inconvenient truth is that the common school began to be changed intentionally when it was one of the best in the world."*

Salusjärvi's column employs the internationality discourse as one central aspect of its message. In fact, the column mentions "the world's best" in reference to the Finnish educational system five times.

In addition to an international discourse, the column also seems to employ an *intra*national discourse component as well. This manifests in how recent PISA results are compared with previous ones from Finland. Instead of comparing Finland to other countries, the comparison is between current and past results from Finland. The author's point of view on this intranational comparison is to argue that the previous iteration of the education system was superior, and that the modern education system produces worse results in comparison to the old system. The decreasing PISA results

are explained by deterioration in the quality of educational methods. This discourse is supported with phrases, such as:

(Y4:3) "Vanha viisaus sanoo: älä korjaa sellaista, joka ei ole Rikki."
"An old piece of wisdom says: don't fix what isn't broken."

(Y4:4) "Voisivatko vanhat keinot olla paremmat kuin pussillinen uusia."
"Could old methods be better than a bag of new ones."

Overall, through unflattering inter- and intranational comparison, the author assigns blame for the perceived deterioration of quality in education to recent changes in education. The author chooses decreasing PISA scores and increased talk of problems in schools as indicators of systemic failures. In addition, the author argues that the method through which the Finnish education system is becoming worse at providing education is with the introduction of modern changes. In this sense, the column displays the opposite type of discourse to what Hansen et al. (2021: 292) describe. In their study, Hansen et al. (2021: 292) describe a recurring discourse type around the future of school that can be characterized by fearmongering about clinging on to the "old" and, instead, persuading to adopt the inevitable "new" in education.

Educational equality is not explicitly mentioned in Salusjärvi's column (Y4), but inequalities are mentioned in conjunction with WCE. The author attributes growing systemic inequalities to the backgrounds of pupils becoming increasingly polarized and from societal pressure to distinguish well-performing pupils from the rest. Against this context, WCE classes and private education become methods for wealthy families to achieve a competitive advantage for their children, according to Salusjärvi. This seems to describe a hyper-individualized worldview where individuals have the right to stand out for their own benefit, even if it may come at the expense of others. Polarization, worse family backgrounds, and WCE are all tied together, indicating a negative disposition towards WCE, or, at the very least, a correlation with negatively perceived aspects of education.

The four remaining discourse types identified by Siekkinen (2017) – common school, differentiation, freedom, and state control – are all prominently featured in discourse regarding WCE. For example, *common school discourse* centers around equality that is guaranteed to everyone regardless of their socioeconomic background. Accordingly, several articles raise socioeconomic factors such as wealth and place of residence as a factor in academic opportunities and educational equality. For example:

(HS9:1) "Vanhemman mukaan suurin osa hyväosaisten naapuruston lapsista menee maineeltaan parempaan kouluun tai aikoo "koulushoppailla" hakeutumalla painotusluokille."
"According to the parent, most of the children from wealthier neighborhoods go to a more prestigious school or will apply to WCE as a form of "school shopping"."

(HS4:1) "Ne, joilla on varaa valita, väistävät tiettyjä kaupunginosia ja tiettyjä kouluja."
"Those who can afford it, avoid certain urban areas and certain schools."

The *differentiation* and *state control discourses* are heavily aligned with elements of equity. Both types of discourses include ideas of "leveling the playing field" by distributing resources or services based on need. According to Siekkinen (2017), the difference between differentiation and state control discourses is in what actors are emphasized: differentiation discourse focuses on marginalized students and how to allocate resources to aid their academic journey to equality while state control discourse focuses on the state as an institution with a role to ensure equality between different actors within education. Some key elements in these discourses are fairness in terms of allocating resources based on need. Both of these discourses can be identified from the examined articles, respectively:

(HS3:2) "Jos ostan kirjoja kaikille, onko se oikein? Koska koulussa on Kalle, joka asuu äitinsä ja isänsä kanssa miljoonatalossa ja saa saman kirjan kuin hänen kaverinsa, joka asuu 11 sisaruksensa kanssa vuokra-asunnossa…"
"If I buy books to everybody, is it right? Because there's Kalle at school who lives with his mother and father in a million-euro house and receives the same book as his friend who lives with 11 siblings in a rented apartment…"

(IL1:1) "Vantaan kaupungin perusopetuksen johtajan Ilkka Kalon mielestä valtion tulisi tukea enemmän kuntia, joissa on paljon vieraskielisiä lapsia."
"The leader of comprehensive education in the city of Vantaa, Ilkka Kalo, thinks the government should increase support for municipalities with a lot of foreign-language children."

In contrast, the *freedom discourse* is ideologically closer aligned with equality. Freedom discourse regarding educational equality emphasizes freedom of choice as a right, making applying for WCE an expression of that right, which is offered equally to everyone. Correspondingly, a freedom discourse argument could appeal to the specialization of WCE better matching the student's individual interests. Likewise, the

solution to better learning outcomes, and potentially equality, would be to increase the amount of individual choice instead of limiting it.

> (HS5:1) "Musaluokalla pääsee tekemään sitä, mitä osaa ja mitä tykkää tehdä."
> *"In a music-oriented class you can do what you are good at and like to do."*

> (HS7:1) "—näin voitaisiin sekoittaa oppilaaksiottoalueita ja mahdollistaa entistä omannäköisempi opinpolku jokaiselle oppijalle."
> *"– this way it would be possible to mix the school enrollment areas and enable an increasingly personalized educational path to every learner."*

Interestingly, the focus tends to be on the middle class and the wealthy when discussing the driving factors behind WCE-based segregation. As shown in previous studies, it is true that students from wealthier and more educated parents tend to utilize educational opportunities, such as WCE (Seppänen et al. 2018: 75; Kalalahti et al. 2015: 382—383). In this sense, the equality discourse around WCE seems to reflect what can be observed.

In fact, the WCE discourse often describes students from disadvantaged backgrounds as the ones most hurt by WCE. For example, the lack of access to knowledge comes up in a few articles. In article HS4, an interviewed teacher describes how they council immigrant families how and when to apply to WCE while some articles describe the lack of information about WCE processes to be a general problem for everyone:

> (HS4:2) "On paljon, mitä he eivät tiedä."
> *"There is a lot that they do not know")*

> (HS9:2) "Hänestä ongelma ei pile siinä, että painotusluokille hakeutuisivat vain varakkaiden perheiden lapset, vaan siinä, ettei niistä tiedoteta tarpeeksi laajasti"
> *"She thinks the problem does not lie in only the children of rich families applying for WCE but that there is not enough public information about it."*

These ideas point to a nuanced differentiation between students in privileged and non-privileged positions when it comes to WCE. The systemic issues highlighted in these excerpts are matters of strategic knowledge about education and the potential opportunities available.

Being someone who applies to WCE is therefore somewhat conditional on a background with access to educational knowledge, the time to utilize that knowledge, and a placement of value on education. In other words, that person must have access to *cultural capital*. Based on Bourdien's term, cultural capital refers to attitudes, beliefs,

and strategic knowledge regarding studying and educational choices (Rytkönen 2016: 26—31). Strategic knowledge (expertise to weigh and navigate educational options) is especially pronounced in a market-driven education full of individualized choices (Rytkönen 2016: 32). Cultural capital is accumulated within a family and can be viewed as a social cofactor in heredity along with social capital and economic capital. Along with economic and social advantages, cultural capital is one potential form how a student's background could provide them with advantages that others do not have.

The narrative inequalities are better highlighted using Van Leeuwen's (2008) elements of performed social practices. According to Van Leeuwen (2008: 7—12), one can observe a social action by observing both the participants of that activity and the participant eligibility conditions, which look at the "qualifications" deemed necessary to be participant in the social act, such as applying for WCE. The narratives within the WCE discourse indicates that at least two conditions are important to be a participant in this category: a positive disposition toward education (for example, seeing education as inherently valuable, wanting to give the best to one's child, or viewing education as a tool to achieve other goals) and access to information or strategic knowledge about educational opportunities. These two eligibility conditions are tied to wealth and privilege within the WCE discourses, making WCE participation an educational opportunity that is unequally accessible due to unequal distribution of advantages.

4.2.2 Emerging discourses specific to WCE

Drawing on discussions on wealth, privilege, and unequal access to WCE, a new type of discourse emerges: *the discourse of individual responsibility*. A few articles (HS1, HS3, HS4, HS9), bring up responsibility on part of the parents for participating in WCE-driven segregation and inequality. This discourse concerns parents enrolling their children to WCE. Those views that agree with parents' choice to enroll may empathize with the desire to offer the best possible life to one's child even to the point of defending the parents from blame. However, even in this context, the statement indicates potential reasons for blame even if the speaker positions themselves against blaming. On the other hand, there are some arguments that more explicitly place agency and blame on wealthier families to think about the greater repercussions on equality, and to individually choose to resist WCE enrollment or at least to be mindful of the consequences for less privileged families. Below are examples of the discourse of individual responsibility. The first one shows placing blame, the second one defending from blame, and the final one is a combination of both of them:

> (HS9:3) "Toivoisin vanhemmilta kauaskantoisempaa ajattelua. Jos kaikki koulushoppailevat, ajatus eri alueiden erojen tasapainottamisesta jää toteutumatta."

"I wish for a more sustainable form of thinking from parents. If everybody is school shopping, the thought of balancing differences between areas will be incompleted."

(HS3:3) "Tutkijat muistuttavat, että perheet toki toimivat niissä rajoissa, joita kaupunkien koulutuspolitiikka heille tarjoaa. Vain hyväosaisia ei siis voi syyttää."
"Researchers go on to remind that of course families act within the boundaries the city's educational policy offers them. Therefore, you cannot solely blame the wealthy."

(HS4:3) "Syy siihen on ennen kaikkea keskiluokassa ja hyvätuloisissa. -- Huilla ei silti syyllistä keskiluokkaisia vanhempia näiden valinnoista."
"The reason lies first and foremost with the middle class and the wealthy. -- Still, Huilla does not blame middle class parents for their choices."

The discourse of shared responsibility seems to be a part of values based on individualization. In general, the 90s saw the educational equality discourse shift somewhat from the right to belong to a right to stand out (Meriläinen 2008: 71—72; Silvennoinen et al. 2018: 95—96; Jalava, Simola, Varjo 2012: 87; Siekkinen 2017: 9—12). Some traits of this trend include seeing education as an extension of one's career advancement and defending the right of individuals to pursue their own strengths with their own choices. These values are still present in the education discourse as well as within the articles examined here. That being said, individual freedom to choose inevitably invites individual responsibility. One argument put forth in this paper is that this discourse of individual responsibility is a continuation of trends of individualization in education that simply adopts a critical point of view. If the positive discourse regarding individual choice focuses on the right to choose an option with the best outcomes, the critical version of the individual choice discourse (discourse of individual responsibility) assigns culpability on individuals for choosing options that result in bad outcomes. In this case, the bad outcome is increased educational inequality through WCE enrollment by individual parents who had the freedom choose a less harmful option for general equality.

Notably, I had some contention about whether the discourse of individual responsibility should be named 'discourse of shared responsibility' instead. The name 'individual responsibility' was chosen due to the discourse mostly addressing individuals as the ones with assumed agency to choose otherwise. However, it is possible to also read a rejection of individuality within this discourse. After all, the criticism directed toward individuals utilizing available tools to further personal goals could also partially be a rejection of hyper individualism and a call to return common values and collective well-being. In fact, calls for the elimination of WCE might have features of wanting to turn education from an individual's path to success to a collective project for everyone's well-being. This would indicate that the responsibility discourse is

better characterized as a shared responsibility discourse. However, this study settles on the name 'individual responsibility' due to the distinct form of assigning responsibility as well as connecting to the trend of education becoming more individualized in practice and in discourse starting from 90s to the present day.

The responsibility dynamic is further highlighted by some value-infused comments. Some elements of the individual responsibility discourse characterize WCE enrollment as short-sighted ways to gain personal advantages while simultaneously characterizing the refusal to participate in WCE on grounds of the greater good as virtuous in some sense. Interestingly, there is an element of sacrifice included in the latter characterization; by refusing WCE options, families sacrifice their personal advancement opportunities for 'the greater good'. In this instance, the greater good refers to educational equality and fairness. In the following example, the characterization of sacrifice as part of a virtuous choice is evident:

> (HS9:4) "Ajattelen kuitenkin rakentavani tulevaisuuden Helsinkiä. Jos koulushoppailisin, osallistuisin itse eriarvoisuuden edistämiseen. Kyllä tämä silti pistää ajattelemaan, että kuinka paljon olen valmis uhraamaan omaa lastani."
> *"Fundamentally, I think I am building the Helsinki of the future. If I began school shopping, I would participate in promoting inequality. However, yes, this still makes me think how much I am ready to sacrifice my own child."*

Another type of discourse based on individualization present in WCE-related reporting is *the discourse of capability*. This type of discourse focuses on the inherent capabilities of students (deserving to be) in WCE as well as the possibility of WCE to significantly increase student achievement and other capabilities. When considering the eligibility conditions of being a student in WCE, the capability discourse implies several inherent characteristics for these students, such as high internal motivation and talent regarding their WCE subject. This type of discourse presents talent as an inherent quality within the student that is appropriately challenged and nurtured by the WCE environment. Here are two examples where talent is mostly viewed as an inherent trait instead of something learned or taught:

> (HS1:1) "Keskusteluissa painotetuista koululuokista näyttää nousevan esiin kaksi pääasiallista näkökulmaa: osa säilyttäisi ne lahjakkaiden lasten mahdollisuuksien tukemisen muotona –- "
> *"Discussions about weighted-education classes seem to showcase two main points of view: some would keep them to support the opportunities of gifted children –- "*

(HS7:2) "Lahjakkaita ja motivoituneita lapsia löytyy kaikenlaisista perheistä, kaikilta alueista."
"Gifted and motivated children are found from all types of families, from all regions."

However, sometimes *the capability discourse* portrays WCE as a way to successfully make children talented and motivated. While this argument does not rule out the possibility that children may already be talented and motivated before enrolling in WCE, it does claim that there is something about WCE that can positively influence and cultivate that motivation and talent compared to regular classes. Arguments that view WCE as a way to improve motivation, sometimes propose that the problem with WCE is that there is not enough WCE. In other words, the wider problem may not be that WCE offers more personalized and exclusive educational paths but that only a relatively small portion of students can access it.

(HS1:2) "Painotuksella voisi lisätä koulumotivaatiota ja oppimisintoa."
"It would be possible to increase school motivation and learning with weighted education."

(HS1:3) "Entä jos painotettuja luokkia lisättäisiin, jotta mahdollisimman moni voisi niihin pyrkimisen sijaan vain ilmoittautua?"
"What if we increased the number of WCE classes so that as many as possible could just enroll in them instead of applying?"

(HS12:1) "Miten kaikista luokista tehtäisiin musiikkiluokkia?"
"How do we turn every class into a music class?" (referring to music-based WCE classes)

(HS6:1) "Tässä järjestelmässä eri taustoista tulevat oppilaat sekoittuvat paremmin ja koulun omissa juhlissa voidaan antaa esiintymismahdollisuus kaikenlaisille oppilaille."
"In this system (referring to an idea where every class would be a WCE class), students from different backgrounds would mix better and in school festivals there would be opportunities for every type of student to perform."

Talk of talent and motivation being an inherent quality within the person is not a new type of discourse but may be more pronounced in an increasingly individualized era. For example, in 1989 the industrial educational committee proposed adding more educational choices and to bring back ability levels (tasokurssi) in order to let "the gifted students advance according to their talents and the slower students would get basic skills without a series of failures" (Kettunen et al. 2012: 48). Likewise, in a 1990 preliminary plenum, a conservative MP redefines educational equality as

"individual's right to education according to one's talent" (Ahonen 2001: 188). Within this idea of inherent talent and bespoke education is a debate between quality and equality in education. There is an underlying concern for lost potential paired with a belief that common education may not be adequate in providing challenge to those who possess inherent talent. In the 90s, the conclusion of the neoliberal political actors was that quality and equality were not compatible and implementing affirmative education would lead to a decline (Ahonen 2001: 179). However, there is some reason to doubt the extent to which equality in education truly excludes high-quality results (Helkama 2015: 188—196). Nonetheless, talent as an inherent quality deserving of special treatment is still present in WCE-related discourses.

Finally, the WCE-related articles reveal the next emerging discourse identified in this paper: *the discourse of identities*. This discourse characterizes students in WCE as distinct from regular classes in various ways, such as through status, motivation, talent, belonging, and prospects. There is some overlap with capability discourse, especially regarding motivation and talent. The difference between identity discourse and capability discourse is that in identity discourse, traits, such as talent and motivation, are framed through belonging to a group, whereas the capability discourse is focused more on the individual. In other words, talent and motivation along with potential for future greatness are qualities that WCE students possess as a group identity. Here are a few excerpts from the studied articles addressing WCE students as a single group, therefore, suggesting a group identity:

> (HS8:1) "Koulussamme huomasi, että musiikkiluokat oli tosiaan nimetty osuvasti koulun sisällä A-luokiksi. Oppilaiden taso oli kova, ja heille valikoitui pedagogisesti kunnianhimoisia opettajia."
> *"In our school you noticed that music classes were in fact aptly named internally as A-classes. The level of the students was high and pedagogically ambitious teachers got selected for them."*

> (HS3:4) "Erottelu näkyy painotettujen ja *Yle*isluokkia käyvien oppilaiden välillä."
> *"The separation shows between students who attend WCE and common classes."*

> (Y2:2) "—- syntyy jakoja "meihin" ja "niihin". Painotusluokasta voi tulla eräänlainen kultahippuryhmä, jonka potentiaaliin uskotaan enemmän kuin muiden."
> *"—divisions into "us" and "them" will emerge. WCE students can become a sort of gilded group whose potential is believed in more than others."*

Additionally, the high status as a group identity for WCE students inevitably reveals the class-conscious side of the comparison: students in common classes belong to a group not associated with WCE qualities. For example, students in common

classes are referred to in some interviews as (HS3) "massalissu"[5] and "wannabe-tyyppi" ("*a wannabe*"). Conversely, students in WCE are often described as coming from affluent backgrounds (HS3, HS4, HS9, HS12) and in one article described as exhibiting fake stylishness through expensive clothing brands (HS3). This type of language points towards a class distinction between WCE and common class students where wealth is a key factor in determining group identity. The identities of individuals are here formulated through association with group belonging. In fact, belonging is a key aspect of the identity discourse.

The *discourse of identities* also includes belonging to a future – in other words, being able to see a future for oneself. This discourse addresses the future opportunities afforded to students and how students themselves see belonging to different futures. The general trend seems to be that students from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle more to envision a future for themselves and make plans in accordance. Middle- and upper-class families on the other hand are afforded career dreams, educational goals, and belonging to a future with prospects and hope. Here are some examples where the discourse addresses how students feel about belonging to a future with them as an integral part of it:

> (HS3:5) "Huono-osaisten nuorten tulevaisuudenhorisontti saattoi yltää seuraavaan päivään siinä missä keskiluokkaiset ja työväenluokkaiset nuoret pohtivat monipuolisesti esimerkiksi lukioon menemistä ja sen hyötyjä tulevaisuuden työn kannalta."
> *"The future plans of youth from low socio-economic backgrounds might only reach the next day whereas middle-class and working class young people consider going to high school in a broad manner and its benefits for future employment."*

> (Y1:1) "—yhteiskuntaluokkaerot näkyvät siinä, miten eri oppilaat ajattelevat tulevaisuudestaan."
> *"—class differences show in how different students think about their future."*

> (Y2:3) "Huono-osainen nuori ei välttämättä usko, että hänellä on valinnanmahdollisuuksia oman tulevaisuuden suhteen."
> *"A young person from a disadvantage background does not necessarily believe they have options for their future."*

[5] 'Massalissu' is a derogatory slang term often describing a teenage girl. There is no direct English translation for 'massalissu'. 'Massa' here refers to a mass of something, as in a large gathering of something. 'Lissu' is likely the diminutive spoken version of the girl's name Liisa from the word 'pissaliisa', which refers to a superficial teenage girl who often dresses provocatively. Therefore, massalissu could mean a person who is "one of an endless stream of completely unoriginal and superficial teenage girls". Perhaps the closest existing English term to 'massalissu' would be 'basic bitch'.

While the discourse of identities is present within WCE-related discourses, the ability to see oneself belonging to an envisioned future is more tied to wealth within the discourse than specifically WCE. Nonetheless, it is a distinct discourse that appears within WCE-related material. There are also crucial overlaps between previous arguments as well as research on the disproportionate use of WCE. Research showing how families from disadvantaged backgrounds use disproportionately less educational options, such as WCE, aligns with the WCE-related discourse depositing that wealth is a factor in WCE enrollment. In addition, there is not enough access to knowledge regarding the subject as well as students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not feel the same belonging to a prosperous future. Within the identity discourse, belonging forms a group identity, which includes believing in and envisioning a future to which they belong.

Finally, the articles also include some amount of meta commentary about WCE discourses as well as invitations to either begin new conversations or deepen others. The meta commentary directs the attention to the discourse itself by, for example, characterizing features of the debate or renegotiating the focus of the conversation. Regarding the discourse on WCE policy, the most prominent meta commentary feature of the examined articles is an expression of how heated or frustrating the conversation is perceived. For example, these excerpts show meta commentary regarding the emotional weight and strong opinions about WCE discourse itself:

> (Y2:4) "Painotusluokista, -- , on käyty kiivasta keskustelua –-"
> *"There has been fierce debate, -- , over weighted-curriculum classes –-"*

> (HS12:2) "Suunnitelmasta luovuttiin, kun asiasta nousi kohu –-"
> *"The plan was forfeited after there was a commotion about it –-"*

> (HS4:4) "Linda Okoron mielestä julkinen keskustelu koulujen eriytymisestä on turhauttavaa, koska äänessä ovat ääripäät."
> *"Linda Okoro views the public discussion about school segregation as frustrating because the extreme ends of opinions are at display."*

Another form of meta commentary is the renegotiation of attention to either begin new conversations or to redirect existing ones. One somewhat common form of redirecting is a call to action by emphasizing that mere discussion is not sufficient to cause change (Y2, HS3). This appeal to action might be directed toward passive or indecisive portions of the population to become more engaged in the matter, or maybe as a call for co-operation in general. In addition to calls to action, the meta commentary highlights concern regarding increased inequality (Y1, HS4, HS9) and redirecting the

focus to other aspects of the conversation. Some examples of redirecting the discourse include:

> (HS2:2) " —enemmän pitäisi kuitenkin puhua yhteiskuntaluokasta."
> *" — there should be more discussion about social classes nonetheless."*

> (HS3:6) "Eriytymisessä yhden koulun sisällä on julkisuudessa puhuttu vähemmän kuin koulujen välisestä eriytymisestä."
> *"Segregation within a school has been publicly discussed less than segregation between schools."*

These meta comments about WCE-related equality discourses likely seek to recalibrate the discourse from its current sets of emphases to a newer one. Some reasons for this could be a desire to deepen the general understanding of the topic by introducing more dependent factors into the discourse. Likewise, some may seek to redirect the focus so that understanding is wholistically re-evaluated, such as in HS1, where there is a call to redirect the conversation to our collective understanding of WCE and its purpose:

> (HS1:4) "Haluaisin nostaa esiin kysymyksen siitä, mihin painotuksella lopulta pitäisi pyrkiä."
> *"I would like to question what we should strive for with weighted education, at the end of the day."*

4.2.3 The role of agency in WCE-related equality discourse

Agency and ownership within WCE-related equality discourses points to a certain understanding of what inequality means, how it is recognized, and what types of causations area linguistically afforded. Perhaps the most notable patterns within the examined sample are the pairing of negative verb structures with disadvantage as well as vocabulary-related choices. In other words, when texts address people from disadvantaged backgrounds, they are more likely to describe what these people cannot do or do not have. On the other hand, this same pairing does not appear when the text addresses advantaged people. On the contrary, the text often pairs people from advantaged backgrounds with positive verb structures, expressing various things advantage affords them. For this study, the instances where agency can be derived from the text are divided into two categories: *agency over oneself* and *agency over others*. These forms of agency will be explored with example excerpts below.

Agency over oneself is one of the ways agency is expressed in the examined text. Agency over oneself often appears when expressing the capabilities that students have in planning and acting on educational goals. The pairing of positive and negative verb constructs with dis/advantage is especially apparent with this category. For example, the following extracts cover skills and attributes students from different background either have or do not have:

> (Y2:5) ”Hyväosaiset nuoret **voivat unelmoida**, huono-osaiset **eivät näe** tulevaisuuteen.”
> *”Priveleged young people **can dream**, disadvantaged **cannot see** into the future.”*

> (IL:1) “Korkeasti koulutettujen lapset **saavat** jopa vuoden etumatkaa koulussa.”
> *“Children from highly educated backgrounds **get** up to a year of head-start in school.”*

> (HS3:7) ”Korkeasti koulutetuilla **on** tietoa ja taitoa tehdä aktiivista valintaa koulujen suhteen.”
> *”Highly-educated individuals **have** knowledge and skills to make active choices between schools.”*

> (Y2:3) “Huono-osainen nuori **ei** välttämättä **usko**, että hänellä on valinnanmahdollisuuksia oman tulevaisuutensa suhteen.”
> *”A young person from a disadvantaged background **does not** necessarily **believe** that he/she has options for his/her own future.”*

As the WCE discourse revolves around advantage and disadvantage, it is understandable that the verb constructs would also highlight this difference. Through negative and positive verb constructs, the authors create two distinct groups of actors within the WCE discourse: those who have and can as well as those who do not have and cannot. This form of categorization may create an idea of dis/advantage and their adjacent features as almost innate qualifiers for the impacted individuals. The language of either having or not having something does not extend to whether the presence or lack of agency can fluctuate and be influenced by the actors themselves. Rather, agency is presented as a static binary feature that either exists or not.

However, the pairing of negative verb constructs with disadvantage is not a universal rule. For example, in article HS5 the author uses a negative verb construct to highlight the skills that advantaged students possess. In article HS5, the author observes students of a music-based WCE class during a music lesson where the author admits to not understanding the theoretical terms used during the lesson, adding: “The students **do not seem to have** problems with understanding” (emphasis added). Therefore, while negative verb constructs are mostly used in WCE-related equality

discourses to distinguish disadvantage from advantage, it is necessary to examine the context of the sentence, and the meaning created by it.

Another form of assigning agency is related to word choice. More specifically it is related to the types of verbs used and how much agency they afford to their subject. Whereas the pairing of positive and negative verb constructs with dis/advantage is often more overt, this second type of meaning-making with verb and vocabulary choices can be less direct but nonetheless crucial. The excerpt below contrasts two verb structures: to have something and to speak of something. In this example, the more advantaged actors are described as having far-reading dreams with the use of the verb 'to have'. This indicates a level of static immovableness and universality in this possession of dreams among more advantaged actors. In other words, the advantaged actors have ownership of the ability to dream. Contrarily, the disadvantaged actors do not have a similar level of ownership over dreams and future as they only speak of their future, but do not necessarily own it. In addition, the strength of ownership and connection to one's own future for the disadvantaged is further diminished by adding the qualifier "with less certain words and phrases". Not only is the future something the disadvantaged actors may only speak of but even that speech is imbued with uncertainty.

It is also noteworthy that the advantaged actors in these phrases either "get" or "have" skills and affordances as adjacent features of their privilege. There is no agency presented that reward advantaged actors for acquiring these skills through work, for example. This is at the heart of the discourse on agency over oneself: is dis/advantage merited or even possible to chance through one's own actions?

> (Y2:6) "Keskiluokkaisilla nuorilla **on** kauas ulottuvia ammatillisia haaveita ja käsitys siitä, mihin he hakeutuvat opiskelemaan - - Työväenluokkaiset nuoret **puhuvat** tulevaisuudestaan **epävarmemmin sanakäänteinen** - - "
> *"Middle class youth **have** far-reaching professional dreams and an idea of where they will apply to study - - Working class youth **speak** of their future with **less certain words and phrases** - - "*

The following excerpt provides an interesting example of the word choices around verbs informing the narrative. In the excerpt, the 'future horizon' (referring to dreams and goals for the future) of disadvantaged actors is described as something that 'might have extended to the next day'. The framing adds an element of uncertainty to the form and extent of plans of the disadvantaged. The word choice does not clarify whether the future horizon extending to the next day is common or uncommon among the disadvantaged – simply that it is possible. This is contrasted with the more

advantaged actors who, according to the article, 'ponder diversely' questions regarding their future.

> (HS3:5, on page 44) "Huono-osaisten nuorten tulevaisuushorisontti **saattoi yltää** seuraavaan päivään siinä missä keskiluokkaiset ja työväenluokkaisetkin nuoret **pohtivat monipuolisesti** esimerkiksi lukioon menemistä ja sen hyötyjä tulevaisuuden työn kannalta."
> *"The future horizon for disadvantaged youth **might have extended** to the next day whereas middle and working class youth **ponder diversely**, for example, about going to high school and its benefits for future work."*

The excerpt above also includes a grammatical choice that illustrates the difference in agency between advantaged and disadvantaged actors. The grammatical choice here is a question of subject: who or what acts in the sentence. For the disadvantaged, it is the future horizon itself that extends to the next day rather than the actors themselves extending their horizon. This grammatical choice makes it seem as if the relatively short future horizon is something that the disadvantaged actors encounter almost as an external fact or event. In contrast, the advantaged actors are themselves the acting subjects regarding their future: they 'ponder' about it. Here, the future is actively being negotiated in the thoughts of the more advantaged actors.

Finally, the discourse of agency over oneself affords little opportunity for students to influence how their environment is shaped to either increase or decrease their agency. This does not mean that there are no means by which students can influence their environment but that the discourse narrative does not offer pathways for students to achieve changes in their institutions regarding their own agency in it. For example, the excerpt below refers to students in WCE classes.

> (HS8) "Oppilaiden taso oli kova, ja heille **valikoitui** pedagogisesti kunnianhimoisia opettajia."
> *"The quality of students was high, and pedagogically ambitious teachers **got selected** for them."*
>
> See also Y2:2 on page 43.

The language in these examples characterizes the accumulation of advantage as a systemic feature in school where the relevant factor in accessing that advantage is the class the students are attending. The students are characterized as passive recipients of their circumstances. The use of passive ("got selected") obfuscates agency and causation behind why ambitious teachers ended up teaching WCE classes. Did ambitious teachers seek out WCE classes? Or perhaps did the WCE class environment draw

out pedagogical ambitiousness out of their teacher? Whatever the mechanism of selection for educational advantage may be, it is presented as an institutional feature with no obvious methods for the students to influence it. In order for a student to change the institutional structures that are no longer serving their interests, they would likely need to have influence over key events that create disadvantages, such as school shopping and class formation. While students are not afforded agency over this matter in the examined discourses, there are groups of people who are.

Agency over others refers to the ability to change or navigate environmental and institutional circumstances for others. In other words, who is given power to change or navigate circumstances that determine the level of agency people are afforded in text. The actors included in this category are teachers and school staff as well as parents. The excerpts below bring up teachers and rectors as actors with power over the formation of hierarchical structures within schools as well as parents' important role in segregation. Notably, HS3 uses the phrase "muuttoliike" (migration/mass relocation) to describe the phenomenon that is creating inequality in schools. Using this phrasing, the cause of increased inequality can be expressed in a somewhat depersonalized manner, although the context of the sentence reveals that advantaged parents are at the heart of this "migration". Finally, the third quote narrates how divisions within a school are formed. Note the use of passive voice, which builds on the idea that a certain type of segregation and inequality is structurally caused, almost by default. This makes the division between those who can impact or navigate environmental or institutional circumstances and those who cannot even more pronounced.

> (Y2:7) "Opettajat ja rehtorit voivat vahvistaa tai purkaa hierarkioiden syntymistä koulujen sisällä."
> *"Teachers and rectors can strengthen or weaken the creation of hierarchies within schools."*

> (HS3:8) "Korkeasti kouluttautuneet perheet näyttävät nimittäin olevan tärkeimmässä asemassa kouluja eriytyvässä **muuttoliikkeessä**."
> *"Highly-educated families appear to have the most important position in the **migration** that is segregating schools."*

> (HS2:3) "TÄMÄ jakolinja **piirtyy** usein koulujen sisällä tavallisen luokan ja painotetun luokan väliin."
> *"THIS line of division in school **is** often **drawn** between a regular class and a weighted-curriculum education class."*

There are two significant actors missing from the discourse of *agency over others*: policy makers and the students themselves. Educational policy is central to the

examined equality discourse as most of the articles can be seen as a journalistic interest in the opposition of unpopular policies regarding WCE. Many articles express views on whether they support the dismantling of class-based WCE. The proposed policy to end class-based WCE is explicitly tied to a desire to increase equality within education. From this perspective, policy and response to policy is at the heart of the discourse. In addition, several of the opinion pieces present their own policy proposals, such as increasing WCE education to be all-encompassing. However, the actual policy making positions that enabled class-based WCE to become what it is today as well as what it could become later are left vaguer. A clear exception of naming a political position in power to influence education equality development is the mayor of Helsinki whose proposal to end class-based WCE sparked most of the articles. However, the mayor of Helsinki is likely not the only political actor to have power over such policies. Especially, if one considers policies on a national rather than regional level. In conclusion, very few politically influential positions are named in and linked to the WCE equality discourse even though the importance of practical policymaking is widely recognized and even exercised by the discourse participants.

Finally, students themselves are missing in the agency over others discourse. This seems to indicate that class-forming and changing one's environment to give advantages to the student is not within the student's power, or agency, to do. Students are subjects from whom it is possible to "observe" disadvantage that happens in the "mundane everyday life" of the students. The lack of afforded agency for students to shape their own circumstances in school is significant when contrasted with the ideal of equality. After all, equality posits that everyone has an opportunity to achieve success regardless of wealth, residence, religion or other background factors. This being said, as seen in the *agency over oneself* discourse, class-based advantages are narrativized as systemic and inherent to hierarchical structures within school. There is an implication of these advantages compounding over years that could create divisions between WCE classes and regular classes. Crucially, this narrative of systemic influence on students is also paired with nonexistent agency for the students themselves to change their circumstances. Thus, the window for equality becomes narrower.

In the end, the discourse over agency in general underlines the conflict between equality and class-based WCE. Unless students are able to pass through the few selection moments into class-based WCE, they risk resigning their educational circumstances to having less advantages at disposal – something the students have little means of influencing to their benefit. One of the central educational ideological questions at hand is whether schools should try to lift everyone to the same level in terms of prospects for future success or to offer bespoke content according to the skills and interests of students. Accordingly, class-based WCE leans towards a more individualized bespoke view of education as a service for advancing one's own interests. A part

of the ideal of bespoke education is that the tailored classes are based on inherent individual strengths and interests of students. However, a major point of criticism reflected both in literature on the topic as well as the discourse studied in this paper is that access to limited advantages, such as WCE classes, is often more related to outside factors, such as socioeconomic status. In conclusion, not only is the window of opportunity narrow for those seeking a better life, but it is also reliant on resources beyond the control of the individual, such as social status and wealth.

4.2.4 Combining WCE-related equality discourses

All the various discourse threads mentioned in section 4.2 exist in the public WCE-related discourse in the examined publications. Each discourse carries with it their own goals, claims, values, and premises (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012: 88—89), which have been identified and examined in this section via CDA. These discourses interact with each other to scaffold our understanding of equality and WCE in terms of their narrative content. That same narrative can position discourse participants into various roles within that discourse and create communal narratives where the values within a discourse are linked with the values of the reader and the reader's culture (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2009: 106). By analyzing WCE-related discourses, this paper has hopefully provided new insight into the values of a highly publicized portion of Finnish educational culture as well as the arguments within that space.

The following figure presents all the examined discourse threads in one place. This includes both the new discourses identified in this study as well as discourses previously identified relating to educational equality by Siekkinen (2017). Legal discourse is not connected to WCE as it was not found to be a component in WCE discourse. In addition, internationality discourse is connected to WCE via a dotted line as it was found that only one article connected WCE to internationality discourse. All other discourses are found in the examined material and are thus a part of negotiating meaning for educational equality in WCE-related discourses.

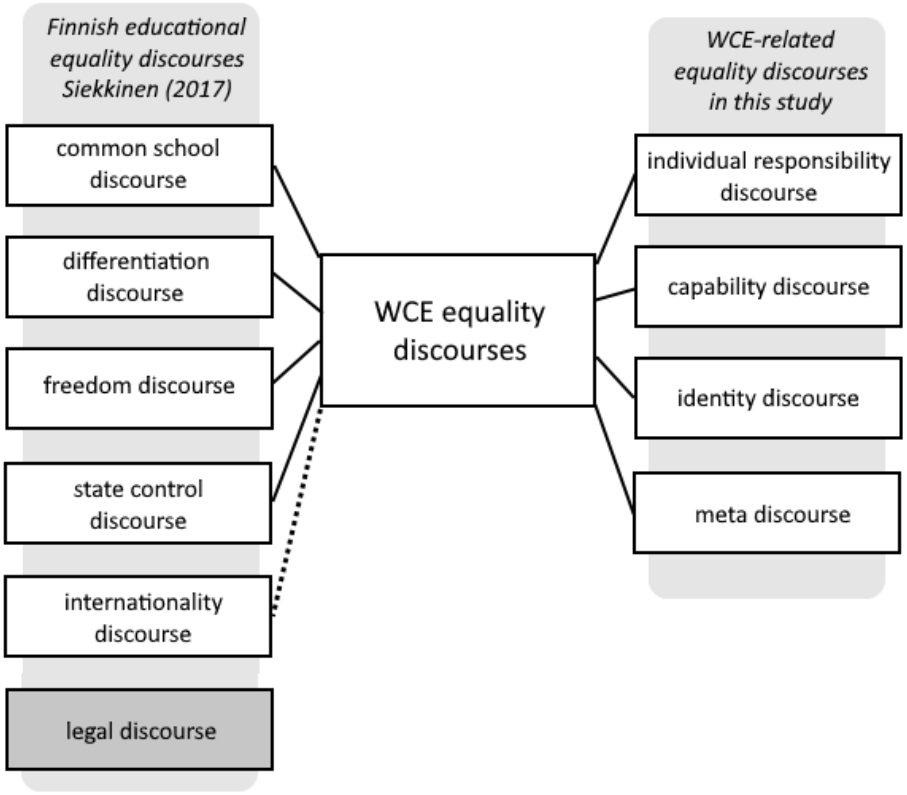

Figure 2: Identified WCE equality discourses in Finnish media.

4.3 Concluding analysis

4.3.1 Scientific accuracy and accounting for researcher bias

Before committing to analysis conclusions, it is worthwhile to examine biases I may have as a thesis author. The goal of this paper is to further common understanding on a specific topic using critical discourse analysis as a scientific framework. However, some of the issues I have contended with during the writing process relate to scientific rigor: what counts as a scientifically accurate observation and description? What base level of evidence do I need to ensure that the thesis conclusions are valid? Is the nature of scientific evidence different in linguistic studies compared to other types of sciences? The answers to these questions remain somewhat tentative even as the thesis approaches its conclusion. In the end, the thesis process (and most research processes) is limited by time, scope, and researcher expertise making it necessary to eventually proceed with the best type of knowledge afforded by the circumstances – even if that knowledge may be incomplete.

Perhaps the most prominent point of contention is the scientific validity of observations and analysis presented in this work. Much like other forms of qualitative

research, CDA does not utilize equations or software data processing to reformulate observable phenomena into the foundation of analysis. Instead, the observations and conclusions are made and explored by the researcher in dialogue with the material and context with perhaps more freedom to offer interpretation. However, this freedom to interpret the material can also create additional uncertainty about questions of scientific accuracy, such as validity and reliability (to the extent that these terms apply to linguistic studies). In the end, it is the strength of argumentation combined with sufficiently illustrative excerpts from the examined materials that provide the reader with an ability to evaluate the presented analysis. Notably, this is not to suggest that the researcher can neglect their duty to scientific accuracy by dividing some of the critical thinking to the reader. Instead, the reader's discretion should be allowed to weigh the accuracy of the arguments presented by making sure the paper includes well-written arguments combined with sufficient evidentiary material from the source. I have strived to achieve a good balance in presenting my own observations, and hopefully it allows the reader to also challenge that analysis.

Next, I intend to delve into my own biases as a researcher. As other CDA researchers have openly explored their own biases and partiality regarding their subject matter (Coffin & O'Halloran 2010: 122) and some have advised others to do the same on the grounds that CDA is by nature not fully objective (Bloor & Bloor 2007: 4), I will explore my biases before offering an analysis. Regarding this study, perhaps the greatest bias I have is a positive predisposition toward equity. This includes a belief in the duty of educational policy to care for the disadvantaged and struggling as part of valuing the common good. My ideals of education being a force for positive change in society mean that I lean toward equity more than equality. While analyzing the results, I strive to keep in mind that I may view discourse elements that favor equity as more correct or ethical. In essence, if my biases have influenced my analysis outcomes, the influence is likely in favor of increased policy around equity.

A preliminary interpretation of HS3:5 (Pages 44 and 49) provides an example of where my own biases and lack of experience potentially influenced my inferences. In excerpt HS3:5, the outlook (future horizon) between privileged and unprivileged students is highlighted in language, such as in verb constructs and agency: privileged students act on their future ("ponder diversely") whereas with unprivileged students it is the outlook of future which acts on behalf of the students ("(outlook) might have extended to the next day"). In the initial analysis, the choice to differentiate the level of agency through verb choice was deemed central to how a discourse of inequality is constructed. However, I would have likely produced the same conclusion had the verbs and their agency been reversed: *the outlook of privileged students extends extensively into the future whereas the unprivileged students ponder the next day*. In this second alternative sentence, I might have concluded that the verb choices highlight how

privileged students have a secure, guaranteed future in contrast to those who must put effort to guarantee a future. For the original excerpt I was about to conclude that privileged students were afforded agency over their future in contrast to unprivileged students. In both inferences privilege is present in the language regardless of whether the verbs are switched making it likely that, in this example, the verb itself is not a central factor in the division of privilege. Instead, the division of privilege between students is narrativized by using an explicitly comparative sentence structure that contrasts the length of time the students' outlook affords them as well as through selective use of adjectives such as "extensive".

To decrease the influence of bias, I followed three guidelines in the analysis. Firstly, I made sure that argumentation and evidence would be sufficiently robust for each conclusion. Secondly, I was mindful and careful when drawing conclusions that criticize hyper individualism and a narrow support of equality over equity. Thirdly, opposing views and challenges to my conclusions were asked from peers and mentors. With these guidelines, the next section draws on the findings of this paper so far and argues for the central conclusions of this thesis.

4.3.2 Analysis conclusion

In the data examined, WCE-related equality debates were narrativized as national rather than international issues, which is likely a blind spot within WCE discourse. Except for one article (Y4), class-based WCE was not tied to international educational trends. Additionally, policy solutions were debated on a local and national level. This narrative occurred despite internationally driven competitive free markets and individualization being the economic and political background against which class-based WCE was originally instituted in the 90s (Seppänen et al. 2018: 95—96; Kettunen et al. 2012: 49—50; Silvennoinen et al. 2016: 15; Saarinen et al. 2019: 129). As those political trends continued into the 2000s and market economy further influences education (Silvennoinen et al. 2021: 258; Rinne et al. 2021: 46—47), a strong argument can be made that class-based WCE is not merely a local phenomenon within Finnish education. Thus, any substantive criticism of WCE would necessarily include acknowledging international forms of pressure. This aspect of WCE discourse is currently clearly lacking.

The individual is at the heart of WCE policy and international education trends. In fact, nearly all discourse themes emerging from WCE-related material were discourse adaptations of international individualization trends: the discourses of individual responsibility, capability, and identity. The only outlier to this group being the meta discourse, which seeks to re-evaluate the discourse itself. Individualization was taken to a certain extreme within the discourse of individual responsibility: WCE was in part introduced as a systemic right to stand out in a competition for personal

advancement and yet the burden ethical use of that right was further atomized to the individuals themselves. In other words, this dynamic asked individuals and families with de facto access to WCE to reconsider that power for the greater good. Accordingly, there was an element of rejecting individualism within the discourse of individual responsibility – a plea for common good not through systemic change but through choices of individuals.

In terms of negotiating systemic change, citizen activity was prominent. Many articles within the research material were opinion pieces in HS from members of the public weighing in on the WCE debate, and even proposing concrete solutions for policymakers to consider. This indicates perceived agency among the public commentators. After all, most of the discourse regarding WCE from the examined period was a response to a policy proposal by the Mayor of Helsinki to abolish class-based WCE, which was met with vehement opposition as well as support. WCE debate is an example of the public (or at least a section of the public) exercising their civic power to negotiate how Finland's educational policy should be seen and executed. In this sense, politics and policy is ever-present in WCE discourse even though ties to specific political actors and institutions are loose and correlations to international trends are nearly absent.

One of the clearest conflicts within WCE discourse appeared when examining student agency. A key ideal of the equality is that through determined effort each student has equal opportunity to achieve success regardless of one's circumstances. In other words, the key to success lies mostly in individual effort and work. Accordingly, one could expect students' opportunities for self-actualized success to be reflected in the discourse. However, the opposite was true. The discourse highlighted various levels of systemic advantage through class-based WCE that the students have no apparent agency or power to influence once assigned to a class. In addition, the enrollment into WCE classes was tied to parental wealth and education level with accompanying concerns for unfairness. At most stages of WCE, the agency and power that can help students achieve academic success was placed outside the students themselves, which contrasts with the idea of equality.

Finally, the role of English education in the WCE discourse was somewhat limited. In fact, only two articles connected English with WCE: Y5 and HS13. The discourse revolved generally around class-based WCE as a form of systemic advantage, which likely includes all WCE subjects, such as English. However, the two articles where English is tied to WCE were interesting for different reasons. Article Y5 is a reminder and guide for families in the Vaasa region to apply for English-language WCE in a regional school. Interestingly, it is possible that this article is a response to those WCE discourse elements that saw the lack of information about WCE as the key factor in the unequal use of WCE among the public (HS5, HS9). If that is true, this

article (Y5) serves as an example of public discourse having an impact on real world acts.

The other article (HS13) about English and WCE supported previously presented conclusions and research on market-driven schools. In the article, the city of Vantaa is looking into expanding English education specifically to attract international investment and labor. Here, the motivating factor for offering English-oriented education is competitive advantage. The competitor in this example is the city of Vantaa, which can be seen as part of market liberal forces that permeate through different layers of society: students compete for the best school and schools compete for the best students just as cities compete against other cities and nation states against each other (Silvennoinen et al. 2016: 16). To summarize, perhaps the best way to ensure a school subject would not be transformed into a WCE class would be to prove that the subject has no competitive advantage to the school, municipality, or state. However, as long as English remains a lingua franca, there will be interest in its potential for economic growth.

5 CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

5.1 Summary of the research

This thesis studied Finnish equality discourses in published print media regarding weighted-curriculum education (WCE). This study found that equality is viewed as a universally desirable feature. In fact, a presupposition within the discourse is that policy aimed at protecting or increasing educational equality is inherently good. For example, verb constructs associated with inequality often use negative constructs, sometimes mirroring the language of disease (prevent, limit, being observable, causing concern etc.). Therefore, WCE discourse involves appeals to equality even if those appeals are used to support contradictory policy aims. Correspondingly, the term equality begins to act almost as a floating signifier (Laclau 2007) supporting various (even contradictory) views of educational policy with a fluctuating role in how equality is understood. One central conflict within WCE equality discourse is between equality and equity: class-based WCE can be argued to be in favor of equality as it allows everyone an opportunity to pursue their own interests and talents (the right to stand out). In contrast, a view based on equity sees the role of the school to level out societal inequalities and offer everyone a fairer chance of success after school in which class-based WCE is often incongruent.

New discourses were identified, and connections found to previously identified equality discourses regarding educational equality. The discourse shared similarities with discourses about educational equality in general (Siekkinen 2017), such as common school, differentiation, freedom, state control, and internationality. Only legal discourse seems to be absent from the broader topic of educational equality. In addition to corroborating previously identified discourses, four more discourses were

identified: individual responsibility, capability, identity and meta discourse. Together, these discourses inform the meaning and narrative of equality regarding WCE.

The discourses identified in this research largely borrow from individualism, which can be attributed to educational trends from the 20th century. Firstly, the discourse of capabilities centers around seemingly innate talent and interest as well as how to cultivate and grow those interests through WCE. Secondly, individual responsibility discourse atomizes responsibility for combatting systemic inequalities to individual choices. Notably, there is a criticism of individualism built into the discourse of individual responsibility through calls to reject individual privileges for the greater good even if it means "sacrificing" one's own advantage. Thirdly, meta discourse aims at renegotiating the focus or topics regarding WCE and equality. This renegotiation often includes individualism in various forms, such as questioning whether the discussion around WCE is too focused on competitive advantages for individuals. Finally, the identity discourse centers around individual identity through belonging. Crucially, group identities in WCE discourse are often imbued with time: WCE group identities are afforded a future to which to belong in a greater degree compared to non-WCE related identities.

English education does not appear to have a unique position within WCE discourse. In fact, it appears that out of potential WCE school subjects, music education is much more prevalent in the discourse. The few English language WCE classes mentioned in the material are an example of global trends in education: the introduction of more English language WCE education is justified through investment into competitive economic advantages. Here, the discourse indicates that economic reasoning is a legitimate and viable argument for why public education should offer English WCE. In this sense, discourse related to English education and WCE follows larger global trends through market-liberal competition and economic reasoning. In other words, the educational value of English (especially when organized as a WCE class) is tied to investment potential within the WCE equality discourse.

5.2 Limitations and future research

There are limitations and potential concerns for accuracy in this study. One limitation is the narrow scope of the examined materials. This study examined only three publications meant for the public. However, there are other important fora where the meaning of educational equality is negotiated – for example, within litigation, government decrees, in comment sections between citizens, and scripted media, such as movies, podcasts, and music. In terms of accuracy and reliability, the reader ought to be aware that this is the first time critical discourse analysis was used in my work. While the

research process was supported by feedback and guidance, there is still a significant amount of individual consideration for the researcher to address the material in an unbiased manner and to draw conclusions and suggestions that are supported by evidence. There may be instances where a more experienced researcher would have arrived at a different conclusion compared to this paper.

For future research, it would be worthwhile to study and compare other discourses related to educational equality or equality in general. Comparisons between countries and media sources, for example, might reveal differences in how educational equality is constructed and understood within the discourse. Comparing different equality discourses to each other could also reveal with greater accuracy whether certain discourse trends are specific to WCE or not. In addition, studying published written articles is a self-imposed restriction that may not reveal all aspects of equality and equity discourses. Therefore, future research could examine other forms of discourse regarding WCE, such as comment sections and fora.

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