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Author(s): Tian, Meng; Rautiainen, Matti

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Academies in England and Independent Schools in Finland: A Distributed Leadership Perspective

Meng Tian ^{1,*}  and Matti Rautiainen ²

¹ Department of Teacher Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK

² Department of Teacher Education, University of Jyväskylä, 40014 Jyväskylä, Finland; matti.a.rautiainen@jyu.fi

* Correspondence: m.tian@bham.ac.uk

Abstract: Many education systems adopt neoliberal privatisation and marketisation approaches to diversify education provision and improve quality. England is a leading example, transforming local authority-maintained schools into academies. In contrast, Finland resists neoliberalism and maintains a small number of independent schools. This paper examines how resources and leadership are distributed in academies and independent schools to explain the different educational paths taken by England and Finland. This study uses a scoping review approach to explore and contrast academies and independent schools. The comparison covers aspects such as history, education administration, local governance, accountability, curriculum and performance, teacher professional development and home-school-community relationships. The findings reveal that academies in England often concentrate leadership roles and resources among a privileged few, including large Multi-Academy Trusts, technocratic trustees and curriculum experts. This concentration tends to marginalise local communities and parents, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Finland, independent schools serve a supplementary role within the education system, catering to specific cultural, linguistic and religious groups while adhering to the national core curriculum and regulations. While existing studies critique the academisation movement in England and commend the high-performing public school system in Finland, a direct comparison between academies in England and independent schools in Finland has been lacking. This systematic review offers original insights into these two types of schools and clarifies why neoliberal approaches often exacerbate rather than mitigate disparities in education access and equity.

Keywords: education privatisation; neoliberalism; academy; independent school; England; Finland



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1. Introduction

The debates surrounding John Maynard Keynes' government intervention approach and Milton Friedman's free-market approach have persisted for over half a century [1]. Within these debates, whether education should be considered a 'public good' provided by the government to its citizens has been a central point of contention. One major criticism of the Keynesian welfare state ideal is that public services, such as education provided by the public sector, tend to be more costly and less effective [2]. Consequently, many governments decide to leverage tools from the free market such as privatisation and marketisation to revitalise education systems [3].

One country that has spearheaded public education reform using neoliberal approaches is England. In the early 2000s, the Labour government introduced academies as a new form of state-funded private sector-sponsored independent schools, free from local authorities' control. After the implementation of the *Academies Act 2010*, local authority-maintained schools, particularly those consistently judged below 'Good' by the inspectorate, Ofsted, were either encouraged or mandated to convert to academies [4–6]. This process is known as academisation. As of 2023, there have been 10,254 academies in England, comprising 6822 primary schools, which accounted for 41% of all primary schools, and

2808 secondary schools, representing 81% of all secondary schools. Additionally, there were 624 Special and Alternative Provision academies. All these academies collectively provide education for 54% of pupils in England [7,8].

Unlike fee-paying private schools, academies do not charge for admission or attendance, thereby upholding their function as providers of a public good [9]. Unlike local authority-maintained schools, academies operate under a direct funding agreement signed between the academy sponsor and the Department for Education (DfE), suggesting a centralised model of education in England [10,11].

In Finland, the neoliberal approach is less prevalent. The education system is deeply grounded in the welfare society model that strives to ensure equal opportunities for all [12]. The Finnish comprehensive school system, established in the 1960s and implemented nationwide in the 1970s, introduced a unified nine-year compulsory education for all, replacing the previous parallel system. The reform aimed to ensure every child could pursue education according to their desires and abilities, regardless of socio-economic background. Teacher education was reformed to require a Master's degree for both class and subject teachers, ensuring that schools are equipped with highly qualified committed teachers. The comprehensive school system is divided into primary school and lower secondary school, guided by the principle that children attend their nearest school. All schools follow the national core curriculum and implement it locally. School leaders and teachers have great autonomy. Schools are funded by municipalities, whilst the state of Finland finances municipalities [13,14].

Unlike the increasing number of academies in England, Finland has a very small number of independent schools as alternatives to public schools. According to Statistics Finland [15], there were only 71 independent schools in 2023. Among these, 38 were basic education schools, 6 were special schools at the basic education level and 27 offered both basic education and general upper secondary education. The total number of students in these institutions was 23,285. Approximately 15,000 of these students were enrolled in basic education, accounting for just over 2% of the entire primary school student population [15]. Most independent schools do not significantly differ from public schools. During the comprehensive school reform in the 1970s, Helsinki decided to allow certain schools to remain as independent comprehensive schools, often referred to as 'contract schools'. These schools closely resemble public schools and have their own student enrolment areas. Many independent schools are small, with student populations of fewer than 200. Some follow specific pedagogical approaches, such as Steiner, Freinet or Montessori pedagogy, while others have religious affiliations, primarily as Christian schools. Funding for independent schools is based on public financing. Similarly to academies in England, independent schools in Finland are not permitted to make profits or collect tuition fees. An independent school can be established by a registered organisation or foundation, and the licence is granted by the Finnish Government.

Overall, the role of independent schools is relatively small, with very limited visibility in public discourses and academic publications. The few existing studies on independent schools in Finland have primarily approached the phenomenon from a historical perspective [16] or through case studies [17]. This indicates a research gap and calls for more investigation, particularly comparative studies, to shed light on the different ideologies behind various education models. Key findings from these studies highlight that Finnish teachers chose to work in independent schools because of the unique atmosphere, collegial culture and ethos these schools embrace. Although the existing evidence is limited, a common theme is that teachers' job satisfaction was higher than that of public school teachers, and there appears to be a more closely knit community based on shared religion, ethnicity or culture, in addition to education [16,17].

Sahlberg [18,19] wrote extensively about the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM), which includes education privatisation, corporate management, heightened competition, increased school choice, high-stakes accountability and test-oriented standardised curricula. As two contrasting examples, England has embraced GERM, influenced by mar-

ket ideologies and reduced education provision from local authorities [20], while Finland has actively endeavoured to resist its influence. A comparison between these countries provides valuable lessons for scholars, policymakers and school practitioners to re-evaluate the purpose of education—particularly whether a neoliberal approach to education offers a more cost-effective and ethical solution for improving education quality and diversifying education provision. In this paper, we will address the following questions:

- What types of leadership are distributed in academies in England and independent schools in Finland, to whom and why?
- Why does England increase the number of academies, while Finland keeps the number of independent schools small?
- How do the English and Finnish models, respectively, address education equity and quality?

2. Research Method

Given the significant disparity in the number of studies on academies in England and independent schools in Finland, this study employed a scoping review as a method to identify the nature, range and quantity—or lack thereof—of existing research evidence on this topic [21]. A scoping review aims to identify, map and synthesise relevant research evidence on the examined topic, providing a foundation for further in-depth empirical investigations and theoretical inquiries [22]. This approach is considered appropriate for this paper, as very few studies have explored these two types of schools in the two countries from a comparative perspective.

Following the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) [21], the authors conducted two separate searches using combinations of the following keywords in the ERIC database, where educational research is best archived and indexed.

Regarding the eligibility check, duplicates were excluded. Both authors further screened the search results and excluded studies that did not directly investigate the two types of schools or whose primary focus fell outside the scope of school leadership, administration, governance or management. As a result, a total of 47 studies on academies in England and 14 studies on independent schools in Finland were included in the scoping review (see Figure 1).

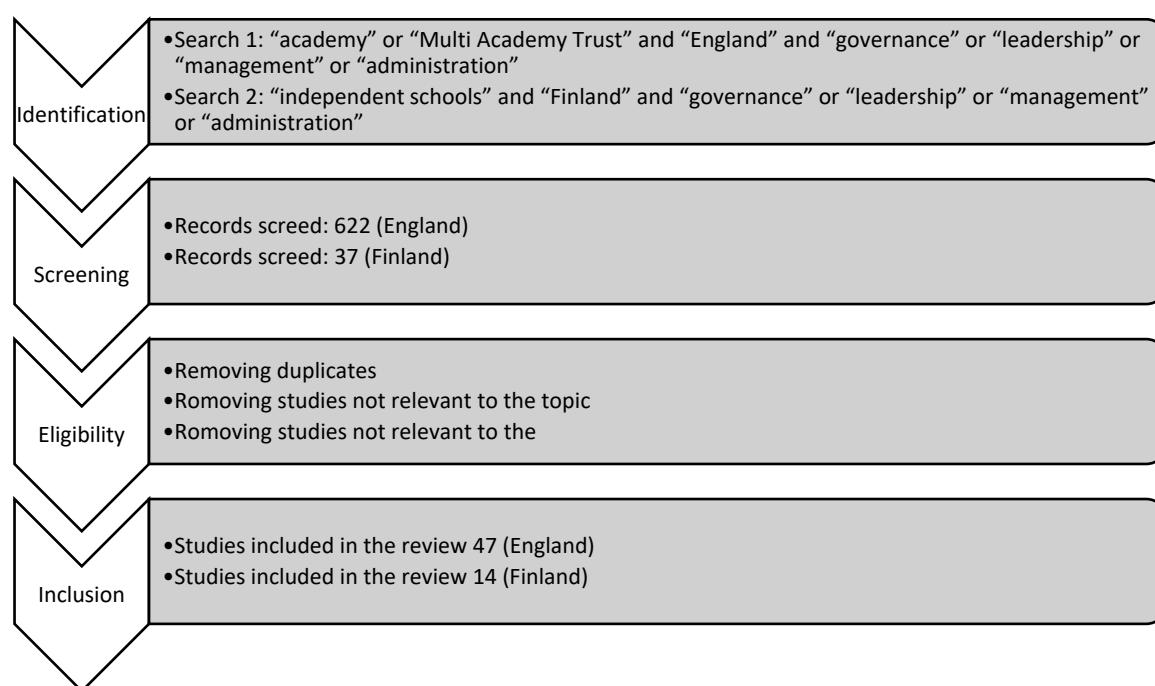


Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR flow diagram of the literature selection.

3. Resource and Leadership Distribution

To understand and compare the rationale behind and the practices of academies in England and independent schools in Finland, distributed leadership theory provides a useful framework. In particular, it explicates how resources are distributed to enable different agents to exercise their agency in various leadership, teaching and administrative roles, as well as how socio-cultural and political contexts shape the distribution of organisational resources [23]. Below we present a comparison.

3.1. Education Administration

3.1.1. England

The DfE [24] uses the National Funding Formula to calculate revenue funding for academy and local authority-maintained schools that educate pupils from age 5 to 16. For 2023–2024, the average per-pupil funding was GBP 7460, while the 2024–2025 academic year will witness an increase in funding to GBP 60.7 billion to cover teacher pension and pay awards, making the UK one of the top spenders on education among OECD countries. Nevertheless, the increased teachers' salaries and pensions do not fully offset the rising living costs and inflation. Since 2021, six city councils, including Birmingham and Nottingham, have declared bankruptcy, and more local authorities are expected to follow in their footsteps [25]. One dire result of city councils' bankruptcy is the reduction in educational spending on local authority-maintained schools, such as transportation for special needs children and teacher professional development.

A 2014 EDSK report, *20 years of Muddling Through*, highlights that the incoherence between local authority-maintained schools and academies has further exacerbated education access and equity [8]. While local authorities still have statutory duties to provide education to pupils, they are losing financial resources to support their maintained schools and lacking decision-making power over academies because the latter are directly funded and overseen by the DfE [26].

On the one hand, power is more upwardly centralised in the hands of nine Regional Directors who act on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education, making decisions on academies, free schools, children's social care and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) services. On the other hand, more autonomy is given to academy Trusts to decide on their own curricula, with some even choosing to shorten the length of study years [8]. Despite overall budget cuts in education, some resource-rich MATs continue to pay handsome salaries to CEOs. The highest-paying CEO earned between GBP 455,000 and GBP 460,000 in 2021–22 for leading a large MAT with 51 schools [27]. Considerable salary variation and a gender pay gap exist among Trust CEOs, making their profiles more akin to their corporate counterparts rather than headteachers in maintained schools [28,29].

3.1.2. Finland

Autonomy and trust are key features of the Finnish education system, which are built upon guidance-based principles rather than top-down control. In practice, the Ministry of Education and Culture issues the curriculum distribution decree, and the Finnish National Agency for Education prepares the national core curriculum for basic education in accordance with this decree. The curriculum is then implemented locally by autonomous municipalities and schools. Independent schools are also required to adhere to the national core curriculum for basic education. The licence for independent schools is granted based on educational or cultural needs and is issued by the Finnish Government in accordance with the *Basic Education Law*.

The government may authorise a registered association or a foundation to provide education referred to in this Act. Such an authorisation shall be conditional on a specific educational or cultural need for the provision and on an agreement between the education provider and the local authority in whose area the education is provided. An authorisation may be granted to provide education by the medium of a foreign language, special-needs education, education according to a particular ideology or education for students other

than children of compulsory school age on the grounds of regional or national educational and cultural needs [30].

Depending on the nature of the independent school, they may either operate in close relationship with municipalities, such as the independent contract schools in Helsinki, or correspond with similar schools elsewhere in Finland, such as Steiner schools and Christian schools, each having their own national associations. Licences for private schools can be revoked if they fail to deliver high-quality education or breach education regulations or laws. Although education in Finland is not actively monitored through means such as inspections, complaints can be filed with Regional State Administrative Agencies or the highest legal authorities, including the Parliamentary Ombudsman or the Chancellor of Justice. In practice, the number of complaints has been small and have typically made by parents.

3.2. School Strategic Development

3.2.1. England

Following free-market ideologies, many academy Trusts can afford to hire former Her Majesty's Inspectors or Ofsted Inspectors as consultants or in-house experts to prepare staff for inspection [31]. Their inspectorate-certified education excellence enables the Trusts to take over other maintained schools or smaller academies, similar to the 'big fish eating small fish' dynamic in the business world. Some MAT CEOs argue that having more smaller MATs and standalone academies can add agility to the system and diversify specialisms in different academies [32]. Nevertheless, the DfE seems to stand firmly behind their academisation commitment. In the DfE's 2022 White Paper, *Opportunity for all: Strong schools with great teachers for your child*, they set the following goal: "By 2030, all children will benefit from being taught in a family of schools, with their school in a strong Multi Academy Trust or with plans to join or form one" [9]. According to Plaister [33], the DfE's definition of a strong MAT consists of at least 10 schools. As of 2022, approximately 20% of schools are part of a strong MAT with 10 or more schools, while 55% of academies are below this threshold. Influenced by 'the bigger the stronger' mindset, the overall trend is for schools to join small- or medium-sized Trusts, which then gradually expand into larger and even mega MATs.

Many larger MATs operate in multiple regions, requiring school leaders and staff to commit to their branding and organisational culture, even though these schools have little in common. CEOs can employ different strategies to further advance their organisational agenda in this business model. For instance, some opt to take over and turn around failing schools, while others prefer to join forces with schools that share similar values and profiles. Many of these leadership decisions are less education-focused but more business-focused.

3.2.2. Finland

The need to invest in strategic development varies significantly depending on the type of independent school. Contract schools, primarily located in Helsinki with their own student enrolment areas, work closely with municipality's strategic education development. Other independent schools place more emphasis on their own strategic development and communication endeavours. For small independent schools, their public image and unique offerings compared to local public schools are crucial factors in strategic development and student recruitment.

The biggest concern for the future of independent schools is recruiting a sufficient number of students to financially sustain the school. However, in terms of profiles, independent schools are distinct, representing a variety of types, such as Christian schools and alternative pedagogical schools. One of the best-known independent schools is the Anna Tapio School, the only religiously and politically unaffiliated boarding school for lower secondary students in Finland. Established in 1940, Anna Tapio School teaches craft skills and rural work. Their strategic focus is primarily on student recruitment and highlighting

the school's uniqueness [34]. In terms of strategic development, independent schools also receive various forms of support from founding organisations and parents.

3.3. Local Governance

3.3.1. England

In local authority-maintained schools, strategic decisions are made by the local governing bodies. A local governing body consists of a minimum of seven governors, including at least two elected parent governors, the headteacher, one elected staff governor, one nominated local authority governor and other co-opted governors [9]. Governors are volunteers who “have the skills required to contribute to effective governance and the success of the school” [9].

In academies, similar functions are carried out by the Board of Trustees. Trustees are legally accountable for the decisions made in all academies within a MAT, and they can delegate decision-making power and operations to committees and school senior leadership teams. When a MAT grows larger and more geographically dispersed, local governance at the school level becomes necessary to ensure that academies meet agreed targets, operate within MAT policies, manage finances and scrutinise daily operations more thoroughly [35]. Some academies, and even the DfE, refer to these entities as local governing bodies, although they do not serve the same function or hold the same legal accountability as the local governing bodies in maintained schools. To avoid confusion in terminology, the National Governance Association refers to them as academy committees instead of local governing bodies [36].

Because academy Trustees are both the charity Trustees and company directors, they have three core functions: ensuring clarity of the vision, ethos and strategic direction; holding the executive leaders to account; and overseeing the financial performance [9]. Two criticisms are raised surrounding the transparency of this local governance model. First, because many Trusts operate like companies, some members who play similar roles as shareholders can exercise power above the Board of Trustees and influence decision-making. There is a lack of platforms for parents and local authorities to challenge these decisions made by the Board. For example, the DfE stipulates that “teachers’ pay and conditions of service at the academies are the responsibility of the Academy Trust” [9]. This means that the Board of Trustees can exercise their discretion in deciding how to use the general annual grant allocated by the Secretary of State to pay school leader and staff salaries, pensions, related costs and professional development [9]. If academy Trusts want to make transactions beyond the usual planned range and above the threshold as specified in the financial handbook, such as offering special payments, they must give the Secretary of State 30 days’ notice [9]. This implies that the central government holds all academies and their local governance to account, with little to no middle management between them and no involvement of the local authorities whatsoever [4].

Furthermore, academy Trusts sign contracts directly with the DfE and can pool all the funding into a central pot, which makes it more challenging to track money allocated to each academy and each pupil [11]. According to the DfE’s *Master Academy and Free School Funding Agreement* [11], academy Trusts are not required to publish information on the agreement if there is a risk of breaching data protection legislation. While local authorities publish their funding allocation to each maintained school, the DfE-academy contracts are deemed commercially sensitive and thus often evade public scrutiny [8].

3.3.2. Finland

In Finland, the administration of independent schools is defined by the *Act on the Administration of Private and State Schools* 634/1998 [37]. Each independent school must have a Board, which is responsible for delivering education and managing the school. The Board must consist of at least three members and is appointed by the registered organisation or foundation responsible for the school. The Board can also serve as the governing body of the organisation or foundation, and it may govern other independent schools within

the same organisation or foundation. Members of the Board can include students (min. 15-year-old), teachers and other staff members [37].

The practical management and daily operation of the school are the responsibility of the headteacher, who is selected by the education provider [37]. Detailed school administration is defined in the service regulations prepared by the educational provider. According to the *Act on the Administration of Private and State Schools* [37], these regulations determine “the general principles of organising education, administration, the authority and tasks of institutions and staff and other necessary matters”. In practice, schools aim to keep administration as flexible and simple as possible. Many independent schools are small units where resources are directed toward teaching and its development, while administration is kept as unburdened as possible. Parents and their support play a crucial role, especially in schools where family priorities, such as language or worldview, determine the choice of school for their children.

3.4. Curriculum and Performance

3.4.1. England

The rationale behind academisation in England lies in the belief that academies can swiftly enhance pupils’ learning outcomes and school inspection grades [4]. Ofsted’s 2019 *Education Inspection Framework* places the curriculum at the centre of inspection. How well school leaders articulate the intent, implementation and impact of their curricula can significantly influence the inspection outcome, subsequently impacting the school’s reputation and recruitment. Although academies are not obligated to implement the national curriculum, academy Trusts have to ensure that the curriculum includes English, mathematics, science and religious education and the content of the curriculum and its approach have to be published on school websites [9]. Evolution should be taught as “a comprehensive, coherent and extensively evidenced theory” and any view or theory “contrary to established scientific or historical evidence and explanations” must not be taught [9].

Schools with a religious character, such as church or faith schools, have to obtain the Secretary of State’s consent before gaining the academy status [9]. Interestingly, because academies’ curriculum responsibilities are outlined in their funding agreement with the Secretary of State, there is a lack of statutory backing for pupils to receive religious education and collective worship in accordance with the religious designation of the school [9]. To amend this, the DfE published *Statutory Faith Protections for Academies with a Religious Character* [38], which provides equivalent statutory protection for academies to “safeguard the religious character of faith schools through governance arrangements and the provision of religious education and collective worship to pupils”. Upgrading the contractual protections to statutory protections is intended to instil confidence in religious bodies to convert their schools to academies, thereby contributing to the UK government’s 2030 goal of all schools joining MATs. As of 2022, 38% of faith schools are academies, and 58% of these faith academies belong to large MATs with 10 or more schools [33,39]. To further incentivise the creation of larger MATs, the DfE exempts the Catholic Church from paying the 10% capital if the Catholic MATs have over 3000 pupils [40].

Since 2020, all primary schools in England have been mandated to deliver Relationships Education. Secondary schools are obligated to provide Relationships Education and Sex Education. Academies with a religious character do not have to deliver the national curriculum and have a degree of autonomy to design and deliver these subjects in accordance with their faiths and beliefs. For instance, the Church of England sets out principles for their school curriculum, which differentiates factual teaching based on biology, medicine and law from moral teaching concerning relationships and religious values [41]. Catholic schools adopt a similar curriculum approach by integrating relationships education and sex education with the Catholic curriculum and teachings of the Catholic Church. These faith schools are not required to endorse a secular worldview or civil marriage. The curriculum content is designed in consultation with parents and approved by the Diocesan Bishop [42].

With greater autonomy to design and deliver curriculum, it remains a question whether academies deliver better pupil learning outcomes and inspection grades. The 2023 average Progress 8 score shows that sponsored academies (previously underperforming local authority-maintained schools) still perform below the national average at -0.19 , while converter academies (schools that chose to obtain academy status) perform slightly better than the average at 0.08 [43,44]. This finding echoes previous studies, which indicate that pupil performance varies dramatically across different types of academies [4]. School context still plays a significant role, and transforming an underperforming school into an academy does not seem to offer a quick solution for improving academic performance.

The inspection results, however, seem to suggest that being part of a large MAT can increase the likelihood of receiving an ‘Outstanding’ or ‘Good’ grade, especially for primary schools [45]. A recent study on school leaders’ experiences with the 2019 Ofsted *Education Inspection Framework* offers an explanation for this phenomenon [46]. *The Education Inspection Framework* was designed to reflect the secondary subject curriculum model, which places small primary schools at a disadvantage. Therefore, being part of a large MAT helps primary schools draw on curriculum expertise and share inspection intelligence across the MAT. However, for secondary schools, the benefits of being part of a large MAT are less obvious in terms of their inspection grades [45].

3.4.2. Finland

Independent schools must follow the national core curriculum like public schools, but they have pedagogical freedom in implementing it. For example, schools committed to alternative pedagogy, such as Steiner schools or those with a religious background, differ most significantly from public comprehensive schools. In Finland, Steiner schools are the most common type of alternative pedagogical schools. The first Steiner school was established in Helsinki in 1955. Currently, there are 24 Steiner schools providing basic education to approximately 6000 students, forming a close-knit community. Steiner schools also have their own college—Snellman College—where one can study to become a Steiner class teacher. However, teacher education at Snellman College does not qualify graduates to work as class teachers in other Finnish schools [47].

Another group of independent schools in Finland comprises Christian schools, with 16 establishments across the country. The guiding principle of these schools is to integrate a Christian worldview into their school culture and teaching. Similarly to Steiner schools, Christian schools also have a national association that supports cross-school collaboration. Additionally, the Association of Independent Schools in Finland provides networking opportunities and various forms of advocacy and education for its member independent schools.

Independent schools have received relatively little attention mainly due to their small number and the requirement to follow the guidelines of the national curriculum. Occasionally, public discussions highlight cases of individual schools, primarily Steiner schools and Christian schools, when the school’s practices misalign with the national curriculum objectives. One such conflict arises from the national curriculum’s focus on gender-aware education, which is based on the understanding of gender diversity [48]. Another problem small independent schools face is limited resources, which affect school’s daily operations. In 2024, the Ministry of Education and Culture revoked the licence of a Steiner school in Orivesi because the school lacked qualified teachers and had very few students. There had also been conflicts concerning, for example, assessment and the allocation of hours between the national core curriculum and the school’s implementation of it [49].

Unlike in England, where Ofsted inspects all education providers and rates their performance, Finland abolished school inspection in the 1990s. In terms of learning outcomes and their comparability between public schools and independent schools in Finland, there is insufficient data during the basic education period. This is due to the lack of compulsory nationwide standardised testing at the basic education level, although sample-based standardised tests are used to quality assure teaching and learning in schools. Regarding

basic education, it is known that differences between schools and even within classes have increased [17], influenced not only by the autonomous education system but also by social and regional differentiation within the country [50]. At the general upper secondary school level, students take part in the national matriculation exams at the end of their studies [51]. Results from this national standardised test are comparable across schools. Notably, there is no significant difference in students' test performance between public and independent schools [50].

3.5. Teacher Professional Development

3.5.1. England

The quality of classroom teaching has the most significant and direct impact on student learning. Following the neoliberal ideology of enhancing education quality through competition and corporate management, both the UK government and many academies use professional development opportunities to attract high-quality teachers. In line with the government's academisation agenda, the National Institute of Teaching (NlOT) was launched in 2022 to provide pre-service and in-service training, catering from early career teachers, subject leaders, special education coordinators to executive headteachers and MATs CEOs, awarding 1000 National Professional Qualifications annually [9,52]. Initial teacher education, formerly provided by universities, has now been renamed initial teacher training by the DfE, suggesting teaching is more akin to a vocation than a profession. Some large resource-rich MATs also organise in-house training. For example, the Windsor Trust established a Talent Institute to provide professional development for teaching staff, leaders and professional service staff within the MAT [53]. These MATs function like corporations with their own career advancement pipelines and scaffolded professional development programmes to enhance teachers' organisational commitment to the MAT branding and culture. In contrast, universities' involvement in teacher education seems further diminished. Teacher professional development is less concerned with transforming teachers into critical thinkers, close-to-practice researchers and education equity advocates. Instead, policy compliance and pedagogical skills have become the focal points.

3.5.2. Finland

In Finland, teacher education focuses on preparing qualified teachers through initial teacher education, with an emphasis on lifelong learning and professional development. A Master's degree is required for general education teachers, along with sufficient subject-specific studies that vary depending on whether the teacher is a class teacher, special education teacher or subject teacher [13]. The main objective of university-level studies is to develop teachers' reflective competence, enabling them to understand the responsibilities of their autonomous work. After initial teacher education, teachers must work in a context exercising broad professional autonomy and pedagogical freedom. Additionally, teacher education aims to educate professionals, who develop themselves based on the principles of lifelong learning. Initial teacher education has been emphasised in Finland for decades, because schools are not hierarchical units, but a community of practice [13,54].

Universities invest in teacher education and foster collaboration among different institutions. To promote this collaboration, Finland established the Teacher Education Forum in 2016, funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The forum sets guidelines for teacher education and professional development by creating future development programmes [55]. The goals set for the next few years emphasise teachers' innovative expertise and agency, as well as community building. Most teachers working in independent schools complete their teacher education at Finnish universities. One exception is Rudolf Steiner schools, which have their own teacher education programme at Snellman College, where teachers obtain qualifications specific to Steiner schools.

In-service teacher training remains somewhat unsystematic, largely depending on individual teachers' interest in pursuing professional development opportunities. Teachers are required to participate in three planning and training days per year. Practical

implementation of these training days varies from individualised training sessions to whole-municipality training [56]. Independent schools, which have a pedagogical or ideological background, pay special attention to their school's uniqueness and its in-service teacher training. These schools, such as Rudolf Steiner schools and Christian schools, have their own national organisations that promote teachers' professional development and integration into the community.

3.6. Home–School–Community Collaboration

3.6.1. England

Despite the government's strong endorsement for academisation, parents have changed their attitudes towards academies in recent years. Key reasons include a lack of transparency in information sharing and the exclusion of parents from consultation and decision-making processes. Across England, parents and carers are protesting against school governors and regional directors' hasty decisions to convert maintained schools to academies with little to no consultation with parents [57]. The nuances lie in the fact that if maintained schools voluntarily choose to acquire academy status, they are obliged to consult parents. However, if these schools receive two consecutive less-than-'Good' inspection results and are forced to convert, parents are less likely to be consulted or involved in the decision-making process.

One example is parents in Sheffield who accidentally found out that their last local authority-maintained secondary school would be taken over by an academy Trust, and they were given only three days to voice their views [58]. At meetings where Regional Directors discuss and decide on the establishment and conversion of academy schools, only one in ten of these meetings invite representatives from parents, local communities or local authorities. Sometimes parents' representation at advisory board meetings is restricted to sending emails with their views rather than attending the meeting in person [8]. Most parents feel excluded from these critical decision-making processes that affect their children's future, as they have little to no information about different academy Trusts to make an informed decision. Schools that are forced to become academies due to poor inspection results are particularly vulnerable in situations where leadership is highly centralised rather than distributed.

In contrast to local authority-maintained schools, where the governing body is required to include parent representatives, academy schools are only encouraged—not mandated—to have parent representatives on the Board of Trustees [8]. Many academy schools, valuing parents' knowledge, actively seek volunteers from diverse professional backgrounds to serve as Trustees on the Board. These Trustees participate in school strategic leadership and decision-making. Nevertheless, the lack of a policy mandate means that such home-school-community collaboration can vary from one academy to another. Wilkins [59] and Healey [60] argue that compared to the civic knowledge provided by parents, many academies privilege the technocratic knowledge brought by selected community Trustees, in line with the marketisation ideologies of growth and expansion in the education sector. A common saying suggests that an ideal Board includes professionals in law, HR, education, accounting and marketing. Data from the National Governance Association [36] shows that among all governors and Trustees, 88% are White, 3% are from mixed-racial groups, 5% are Asian and 3% are Black. In terms of age, 69% are above 40 years old. Despite efforts to diversify the Board of Trustees by ethnicity, age and profession, underrepresented groups are still significantly lacking in the top decision-making bodies of academies.

3.6.2. Finland

Collaboration between schools and homes primarily revolves around interactions between parents and their child's teacher. Traditionally, based on societal trust, parents have had minimal involvement in their children's schooling. This is particularly noticeable on the first day of primary school when new first graders gather in the schoolyard. At this

time, teachers take the students inside and inform the parents that they can leave, as the teachers will take care of the children throughout the school day [17].

However, there have been systematic efforts in recent years to improve regular communication between schools and homes. In addition to traditional parent–teacher meetings held twice a year, teachers now meet with each student’s parent(s) annually during an assessment discussion, which also includes the student. Schools may also have a parents’ association that supports teachers’ work. Overall, the key focus of school–home collaboration is to support students’ learning and ensure a shared understanding of educational goals [61]. In many independent schools with ideological backgrounds, some parents are highly committed to the school’s activities and actively participate in various school functions [17].

4. Discussion

Through the lens of distributed leadership, leadership is already distributed within the education systems, as no single individual is omniscient to oversee all lines of work and decision-making [62]. As for the question of what types of leadership are distributed, to whom and why, England and Finland offer different answers, as the findings above indicate. According to Tian’s [23] distributed leadership resource-agency model, MATs in England often have greater autonomy to acquire and distribute organisational resources within their Trusts. This autonomy facilitates increased local-level professional development opportunities for teachers, more decentralised decision-making at the Trust level, and enhanced local innovation in curriculum design and implementation. However, depending on the size of the MAT, the agency of individual school leaders at the school level may diminish when a school is absorbed into a larger MAT and must comply with Trust-level governance and policies. Some studies have indicated that this unequal distribution of leadership across academies makes it challenging to draw definitive conclusions about how effectively MATs are managed across England [4,32,35]. In contrast, independent schools in Finland are fewer in number and smaller in size compared to the predominant public schools. Most of these schools operate with limited organisational resources, requiring school leaders to rely on local ingenuity to activate teachers’ agency. This often involves teachers taking on multiple roles—such as teaching, administrative and pastoral responsibilities—as a form of distributed leadership. The leadership structure tends to be flatter, with the boundaries between formal and informal leaders frequently blurred [12,19].

In 2010, the coalition government decided that academies should be the dominant model for education provision in England [63]. Local authorities have gradually been transferring their responsibility for education provision to the Regional Directors and academy Trusts. The former oversee the academisation process, while the latter absorb maintained schools into the realm of academies. Financial agreements and management are conducted directly between the DfE and academy Trusts and are considered commercially sensitive information [11]. As a result, local authorities and parents feel they lack oversight on the Trusts’ financial management [64,65]. Moreover, the composition of academies’ Boards of Trustees varies across England. Technocratic knowledge from Trustees with privileged professional backgrounds is often prioritised over parents’ civic knowledge in academy’s strategic leadership and decision-making processes [60]. This confirms that distributed leadership does not necessarily enhance a school’s inclusion and equity when the knowledge hierarchy denies parents’ role as knowers and knowledge contributors. To date, academy Trusts do not seem to offer a satisfactory solution to this problem.

While academies receive more curriculum autonomy, large MATs tend to centralise curriculum development and implementation within the institution. Some large MATs encompass dozens of schools that spread across different geographic locations and serve students from diverse socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Centralising leadership at the MAT level, rather than distributing it to individual schools, may potentially limit each school’s cultural responsiveness. Additionally, MATs often use corporate leadership strategies to attract CEOs and senior leaders with exceptionally high salaries,

a practice that is not permitted in schools maintained by local authorities [28]. This has exacerbated education inequality and teacher motivation in less affluent regions.

In this education quasi-market, institutional isomorphism can be observed in academies, such as hiring former inspectors to prepare leaders and teachers for inspection, utilising in-house teacher training to enhance organisational commitment and leveraging inspection results and student academic performance for branding purposes [7]. In contrast, poor-performing maintained schools and the pupils and parents they serve have little power to influence their own future. Sometimes these schools are forced to convert to academies, and if they continue to deliver dissatisfactory results, they can be taken over by another academy Trust and re-branded [8]. In this quasi-market, education is considered less as a public good and more as a business case, measured by key performance indicators (KPIs). Many KPIs are narrowly defined and measured, such as those used in Ofsted inspection, which are themselves under public scrutiny regarding their purposes, ethics and rigour [66–68].

The Finnish comprehensive school system has a history rooted in broad political consensus and long-term educational development since the early 1970s. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several significant changes were made, including the removal of school inspection and the expansion of schools' autonomy. In a trust-based education ecosystem, developing high-quality teachers through university-based initial teacher education is paramount. Teacher education remains one of the most popular university study programmes. This contrasts with the movement towards school-based teacher training in England.

While the Finnish education system remains a subject of ongoing debate, the current government is focusing on defining the purpose of schooling and setting student learning objectives, rather than making structural changes. Periodic discussions question whether education policy should be more prescriptive, but so far, there has not been a significant need to alter the system. It would be beneficial for various stakeholders within the Finnish education ecosystem to have more opportunities to discuss and share best practices developed in schools. Currently, communication between independent and public schools is limited due to the lack of such forums. The number of independent schools has remained relatively small over time, with no indications of imminent change. However, Christian schools have seen growth in recent years, with nearly 3000 students now enrolled. This trend can be attributed not only to religiosity but also to the appeal of structured routines within the school environment and broader trends toward conservatism, both in Finland and across Europe [69].

In contrast to Finland, where independent schools are established to serve specific religious, cultural and linguistic groups or to implement a particular pedagogy, the replacement of local authority-maintained schools with academies in England is primarily driven by neoliberal marketisation. Basic education, which is one of the most important public services alongside healthcare, social services and policing, is increasingly being used as a tool for competition and branding [70]. The leadership of academies is often concentrated among a privileged few, who reinforce their dominance in local governance, financial management, curriculum development and school outcomes through corporate management strategies. The newly elected Labour government may introduce changes, including holding academy Trusts accountable for the quality of education and commitment to ensuring access and equity for all students. Another proposed change is that academy Trusts would be required to involve parents and local communities in their local governance [60].

Comparing the governance and leadership of academies in England and independent schools in Finland reveals a fundamental difference: the level of trust that the government and society place in educators and their professionalism. In England, a lack of trust in local authority-maintained schools leads to increased external accountability measures, such as Ofsted inspections, standardised testing and market-driven approaches like academisation. A neoliberal quasi-market thrives on people's fears and desires, often at the expense of

school leaders' and teachers' professional dignity and well-being. Systemic inequality is obscured as failures are attributed to individual parents' poor decision-making or to a school leader's inadequate leadership. Government externalises its responsibilities by leaving education provision and development to the market [3].

By contrast, the Finnish government and society continue to show strong trust in public schools, university-based teacher education, teacher professionalism and the national core curriculum. Independent schools in Finland are not seen as competitors to public schools but as alternative providers serving specific groups of students. Despite changes in government, education policies in Finland remain relatively stable. Autonomy and accountability are distributed to schools, while local governments and parents are holding schools accountable if they violate regulations and laws. When an education system is built on mutual trust and high professionalism, it tends to be more cost-effective, reducing the need for constant monitoring through school inspections and standardised testing. However, if the performance gap between students and schools continues to widen, Finland may face a trust crisis in the future. It remains to be seen whether popular neoliberal tools such as external accountability, marketisation and privatisation will be considered.

5. Conclusions

This paper compares academies in England with independent schools in Finland through the lens of distributed leadership. It examines their differences in various aspects, including history, education administration, local governance, external accountability, curriculum and performance, teacher professional development and home-school-community relationships. The study is significant for elucidating two distinct approaches to schooling adopted by two countries. The first approach involves transforming education system into a quasi-market, where market forces dictate the allocation of education resources and measure narrowly defined school performance. The second approach focuses on trusting and supporting independent schools to cater to specific groups of students through policy guidelines and governance principles.

It is important to highlight the dramatic growth of academies in England and the small number of independent schools in Finland. As a scoping review, we are constrained by the extremely limited number of studies and research evidence on independent schools in Finland. This limitation, in itself, is an important finding of the study, as it underscores the contrast between the English and Finnish approaches to privatising and marketising education.

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