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*Abstract:*

This article examines the nature of neoliberal influences upon educational policy making in the Finnish education system in recent times. The article draws upon key policy documents, government reports, journal articles and media articles about reforms in the early childhood, basic/compulsory school and vocational education and training sectors to evidence these processes. Analytically, these reforms are understood as instances of what Peck and Theodore (2015) refer to as 'fast policy'. Methodologically, we draw upon principles of zeitgeist analysis to reveal the features and effects of these fast policy influences as they relate to educational provision in Finland. These features and effects include: intensification and fragmentation of educational reform processes; increased individualisation and decontextualization of the educational reform agenda, and; a trend towards increased instability, privatisation and reduction in funding for educational provision. The article foregrounds the features and effects as reflective of the 'spirit of the times' in which such reforms are undertaken, and cautions against these fast policy effects for the problematic consequences they appear to be having upon policy making processes, educational outcomes in Finland and the 'spirits' of Finnish educators.

**Keywords:** fast policy; educational reform; neoliberalism; zeitgeist analysis

**Introduction**

Much has been written about the 'Finnish miracle' in education. Pasi Sahlberg repeatedly claims that one of the key reasons for Finland's success is that it has not been 'rushing' to reform; indeed, 'to rush it is to ruin it' (Sahlberg, 2011; 2014; 2017). This may have been true some years ago but is this the case any more in the Finnish context? In this article, we question whether educational policy is still characterized by thoughtful, slow processes of consideration of the nature and effects of reform, or whether the pace of educational reform in Finland has become faster and more neoliberal in outlook. This evolution seems even more of a paradox considering that Finland has been an ostensibly social-democratic state with a long history of progressive and substantive reform. Therefore, we might anticipate that some of the 'quicker' policy solutions to complex problems might be resisted.

In making our argument, we draw upon Peck and Theodore's (2015) notion of 'fast policy' to help explain how states (in this case, Finland) seek to foster reform within the context, and as an expression, of more neoliberal practices and principles. We analyse cases of educational

reform in early childhood, basic/compulsory education and vocational education (in schools) as part of recent national government policy processes. Methodologically, we also utilise a ‘zeitgeist analysis’ approach (Moisio & Suoranta, 2005) to analyse whether and how more neoliberal practices and principles seem apparent in the Finnish educational context. In this way, we claim that fast policy reflects something of the ‘spirit’ of our times in Finland, across multiple education sectors.

Our research is informed by the following key question: How do we understand the characteristics and effects of recent, significant reforms in educational policymaking in Finland, and how might Peck and Theodore’s notion of fast policy assist in such understanding? In answering this question, we also seek to use what can we learn from the Finnish context to help extend current theorising and understandings about the characteristics and effects of fast policy, and understandings of such reforms in relation to education more broadly.

## **Understanding and theorising the current policy moment**

### ***Setting the scene***

We pursue these insights in a broader global context characterised by what appears sometimes as increased homogenisation, particularly in relation to educational policy-making. In the schooling context, this is perhaps most obviously expressed in policy reflecting the influence of various international large-scale assessments (ILSAs), particularly the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The production of various PISA ‘national reports’ ensures a constant comparative policy focus upon schooling practices and processes, with attendant implications for the extent to which context is taken into account (Sellar, Thompson & Rutkowski, 2017).

An interesting aspect about the current policy moment is not only the seeming dominance of such practices, but the way in which these and other neoliberal reforms are taken up by governments, regardless of their espoused political persuasion; even more ‘labor-oriented’ or ‘left-wing’ governments seem to adopt neoliberal approaches. In the Finnish context, despite a change from a right-wing government (29.5.2015 – 5.6.2019; PM Juha Sipilä) to a left-green coalition government (6.6.2019 – 3.12.2019; PM Antti Rinne, and since 10.12.2019, PM Sanna Marin), it seems many of the same sorts of policy approaches continue. How can this be, and how are these policies manifest?

### ***Neoliberalism and human capital development***

Peck (2010) refers to processes of ‘neoliberalization’ to capture the seemingly mundane, everyday practices that are enacted and expressed by those influenced by more neoliberal ideas and ideals. What is important to recognise is not that neoliberalism is ‘out there’ in the world as a seemingly virulent virus infecting all who fall under its spell, but is instead a set of grounded, material practices (cf. Connell, 2013; Kemmis et al., 2014; Sahlberg 2011) that actually manifest in specific reforms. These practices are also embodied by those upon whom they exert influence, and who are engaged in such practices.

What distinguishes neoliberal approaches from their earlier liberal origins is the way in which there has been a shift from limitations of governmental reason to develop what Peters and

Bulut (2011) refer to as ‘the global exercise of political power on the principles of a market economy’ (p. xxviii). This entails:

the generalization of the model of *homo economicus* to all forms of behaviour representing an extension of economic analysis to domains previously considered to be non-economic and the redefinition of *homo economicus* as entrepreneur of himself with an emphasis on acquired elements and the problem of the formation of human capital in education (p. xxviii).

This acquisition entails alteration to the very ways we think, and emphasises human capital formation, rather than issues of materiality alone, such that notions of knowledge or even human cognition come to be seen as important forms of capital – ‘knowledge capital’ (Burton-Jones, 2003) or ‘cognitive capital’ (Peters & Bulut, 2011). However, while these conceptual resources shed light upon the nature of neoliberal practices *in situ*, they are less explicit about issues of temporality in relation to policy development and effects. It is the pace of reform, we would argue, that gives current policy reforms their peculiar character, and that require further investigation.

### ***Fast policy***

Peck and Theodore (2015) argue that various processes of reading ‘best-practice literature’, borrowing particular models, and importing specific expertise and approaches for reform are all utilised to inform policy-making processes in multiple and varied jurisdictions around the world. These processes are ‘speeding up’ the nature of responses to particular policy issues and dilemmas. Consequently, ‘[i]t is a widely acknowledged feature of policymaking common sense, in many parts of the world today, that shorthand processes like these, and the various forms of “speed-up” they imply, have become normalized’ (p. xvi).

However, and importantly, this is not to suggest that processes of policymaking have become homogeneous and that the content of such policies are somehow similarly homogeneous:

None of this is to stake the questionable claim, it must be emphasized, that policymaking worlds are racing toward convergence—unilaterally driven by steamroller models of best practice, or “flattened” into a neoliberalized monoculture—but it is to make the more subtle point that those policymaking worlds are becoming more intimately and deeply interconnected than ever before. (xvi)

By analogy with globalization processes more broadly, Pieterse (1994), in an early but seminal work, made the point that various kinds of globalization processes do not simply result in homogenisation, but instead in various kinds of hybridisation. Instances of ‘structural’ hybridisation are evident in the form of various mixed kinds of cooperation, and ‘cultural’ hybridisation involving translocal and blended cultures. As Pieterse (1994) pointed out, the result can range from superficial mimicry to deeply counter-hegemonic position-taking.

Nevertheless, even as we may be suspicious of transcultural convergence as intimated by more performative accounts of globalization, processes of interconnection and interconnectivity between various actors and ideas have been key to policy making processes under current conditions. Peck and Theodore (2015) are explicit on this point:

Furthermore, a related proposition is that this condition of interconnectivity is itself subject to historically distinctive forms of acceleration and intensification. Continuous monitoring and learning, continuous promotion of best-practice models, continuous inter-referencing of policies, especially at moments of path-altering “reform”—all these are features of reconstituted policy worlds. And in the terms we are exploring here, they are reconstituted fast policy worlds. (p. xvi).

Consequently, ‘fast policy’ approaches are characterized by processes of acceleration and intensification of practices, ongoing monitoring and learning, incessant focus upon best-practice approaches, and cross-referencing of approaches undertaken elsewhere, even as such processes do not simply foster homogenization and convergence.

### **Methods and methodology: Zeitgeist analysis**

In many ways, notions of fast policy might be considered an approach or model ‘for our times’. Consequently, methodologically, we utilise notions of ‘zeitgeist analysis’ (Moisio & Suoranta, 2005) to help make sense of this moment – the ‘zeitgeist’ or ‘spirit’ of the times. The concept of ‘Zeitgeist’ (originally capitalized in German) refers to the cultural, religious, or intellectual ideas and practices of a certain period; such an approach implies that certain trends are period-specific, and that historical conditions shape the way things are analysed, understood and seen as valuable or self-evident (cf. Krause, 2019). Such an approach aims at understanding the relevant features of the given age and how phenomena are governed in this age and with what effects (Noro, 2000). This includes insights into the affective qualities of such processes. In the educational context, this requires looking at educational policy decisions and the effects these decisions have on educational practices and practitioners. Critical observations about the present state of educational policy are deepened by the use of theories about how politics works and how social imaginaries of self and others in the educational context are framed by new ways of educational policy-making. While most obviously influenced by Peck and Theodore’s notion of fast policy, and zeitgeist analysis, our theoretical insights are also informed by research traditions of educational policy and sociology of education (e.g. Simola, 2013), as well as analyses and critiques of neoliberalism in educational contexts (Connell 2013; Rowe, Lubienski, Skourdoumbis, Gerrard & Hursh, 2019) more broadly.

In this paper, we draw upon empirical evidence in a variety of formats – policy documents, government reports, journal articles, media articles/posts – to develop and evidence our claims to the nature of ‘these times’. We do not follow an inductive logic, whereby one samples individual cases and infers conclusions from these. We instead take a more abductive approach, or empirical-philosophical approach (Kemmis et al, 2014), whereby we take a specific case/data and explain this case by drawing upon specific theorizing to help make sense of these experiences/data (Niiniluoto, 1999). In our case, we look at particular cases in Finnish educational policy, namely reforms in early childhood education, basic education and vocational education (in-school), and claim that these reforms can be better understood and put into a wider context by drawing upon the notion of fast policy, in conjunction with zeitgeist analysis.

Such an approach also entails the capacity to contribute to theorising. While the data are essential for making any judgements about the value or otherwise of the concept of fast policy, within a more zeitgeist analysis approach ‘[t]he function of the data is to orient oneself in the realm of theory’ (Moisio & Suoranta, 2005, p. 251). New light can be shed upon theorising about the Finnish educational system, and notions of fast policy, through such careful empirical dialectical interleaving. After Moisio and Suoranta (2005), this also constitutes a form of ideology critique as zeitgeist analysis, and falls within the broader remit of critical pedagogical studies. Such an approach entails zeitgeist analysis as a tool for social, cultural and political critique (cf. Kellner, 1995).

Finally, by reflecting on broader global processes, particularly those associated with various kinds of neoliberal reforms, we also seek to go beyond methodological nationalism in our research approach (Amelina, Nergiz, Faist & Schiller, 2012). Such an approach does not simply give free licence to various kinds of broader ‘global’ analyses, but instead seeks to identify the ruptures and ructions associated with global-local imbrications of actual practice. To this end we are sympathetic to Pieterse’s (1994) interpretation of globalization as hybridised, and seek to reveal this hybridity through our analyses. This is very much in keeping with Kellner’s (2002) argument for understanding globalization as ‘as a highly complex, contradictory, and thus ambiguous set of institutions and social relations, as well as one involving flows of goods, services, ideas, technologies, cultural forms, and people’ (p. 285). This also seems particularly pertinent in the current era, characterised by challenges to broader global processes, including in the form of reactionary nationalism and populism.

## **The Finnish experience**

### ***Contextualising education policymaking***

One of the key claims of this article is that recent governments seem to have accelerated the pace of educational reform and policy making more broadly in Finland in recent years. A clear shift towards faster policy took place when the right-wing-nationalist government, led by Juha Sipilä, took office in May 2015. Sipilä’s background in business was evident in the streamlined business-like decision-making processes he adopted as PM. Sipilä was subsequently criticised for his reluctance to deliberate in the preparation of policy decisions through traditional parliamentary planning procedures. In the Finnish tradition, this includes deliberation with trade unions in the political process (Tamminen, 2015). He considered such decision-making to be outdated and too slow.

The Sipilä government embraced a multitude of changes, including a nationwide attempt to reform the health and social welfare sectors. The government also renewed and deconstructed the educational infrastructure while simultaneously cutting funding. There was little co-ordination amongst a myriad of reforms occurring simultaneously (Tervasmäki & Tomperi, 2018). As a result, some reforms ‘hit the wall’ of the political opposition and of the Constitution of Finland itself.

Consequently, support for Juha Sipilä’s government plummeted. The 2019 elections resulted in a new green-left coalition led by Antti Rinne. However, while the policies changed, this new government also seemed to believe that change needed to be made quickly within one parliamentary term. This was the case even as the new government sought to reinstate committee work that extended beyond the government term, and which was typical of

seminal reforms during the 1970s (when comprehensive school reform, for example, was implemented). Researchers have suggested that such an approach should be reinstated (Heikkinen, Kiilakoski & Rautopuro, 2019).

### ***Educational policy reform in Finland***

The educational policy implementation process in Finland in recent times is of special interest, because the educational reforms have previously been characterized by being thoughtful, evolutionary and steady – even slow and conservative. The educational culture is built on a trinity of trust, cooperation, and responsibility, and has typically been less responsive to global influences and processes associated with standardization, accountability, national tests, and privatization (Mundy, Green, Lingard, Verger, 2016). Further, reforms implemented since the 1970s have been characterised by strong professional confidence in teachers and principals, schools and municipalities, within a system based on decentralized governance, enabling educators to attend to local needs and conditions. Both the levels of institutional and professional trust are high (Aho, Pitkänen & Sahlberg, 2006; Hargreaves, Halász & Pont, 2007; Sahlberg, 2007; Salo & Sandén, 2016).

Finnish educational policy has been built on flexibility and loose standards, giving teachers and principals the mandate to decide on timetables, curriculum content, teaching methods and learning materials, as well as internal policies related to school rules and evaluation. Supervision of schools, monitoring teachers and principals' work and results have been almost non-existent. Teaching has been a popular profession in Finland. Teachers have been trusted, well-prepared professionals, receiving respect and status in society, practicing their profession in quite a traditional, knowledge-centred school, with teacher-centred practices and classroom culture (Simola, 2007; Välijärvi, 2005).

### **The data**

Within this context, the theoretical insights outlined above are used to analyse and understand recent changes in educational policy in Finland. We mention major events in educational policy in the 2010s, but focus particularly on reforms implemented by the Sipilä government from May 2015, through to the demise of the Rinne government in December 2019. Our primary data are outlined in the Appendix. Our list of sources is not 'definitive' but reflective of our zeitgeist analytical approach of seeking to capture 'the spirit of the times'. We focus on the public media (including newspapers and broadcast media) and administrative documents, including government programs and reports and associated legislation.

As reflexive practitioners, we actively acknowledge our positionality. As a scholar living in the Anglo-world, the first author is something of an external, critical friend, to the broader project. The second, third, fourth and fifth authors are expert Finnish scholars in relation to these reforms, and involved to different degrees in the discourses to which they refer. Having worked in their respective fields for a considerable period (more than a decade each), the selection of materials also reflects these experiences, and are not simply 'random'. The researchers have contributed to the broader public debate to which they refer. Therefore, we can see some features in our approach that somewhat resemble autoethnography – a method that foregrounds researchers' own experiences conducting qualitative work to understand the values, social practices, and belief systems in the world around us (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2016).

## **Findings: Educational reform in Finland**

### ***Early childhood education***

Early childhood education has been part of the Finnish education system since the 1970s. Legislation was first formulated in 1973, around the same time the basic/compulsory education system in Finland was introduced. As with other welfare structures in Finland, the role of the state was elemental in building early education services. Since 1996, parents have had the right to receive early childhood education, regardless of their place of residence, income or job. Since the 1990s, the state-led model has been supplemented with private early-years education (Alila et al., 2014). In 2015, legislation was renewed, and focused upon the subjective right of the child instead of the parent to receive early childhood education (HE 34/2019). Despite the changes in the policy making, there has been a gradual process of development. However, early childhood education has undergone significant changes in recent years, which challenges the expansion and professionalization of the field.

As part of budgetary cuts, the Sipilä government (2015-2019) decided to limit the right to early childhood education. In 2015, it proposed cutting down the weekly time spent in early education to 20 hours per week if parents were not working, studying or starting a business. The reasoning was purely economic, and the government evaluated that this would save €62 million (HE, 80/2015). The legislation was seen as a rupture in the educational narrative in Finland, and was criticized for not paying sufficient attention to the societal consequences of changing the system in such a profound manner. Critics thought that early childhood education would face major changes, and that this could lead to instability in the development of children (STT, 2015). Despite reservations, the reform was executed quickly and the evaluations of the reform at the time did not capture its unintended consequences. The regulation was instituted at the national level, and the national government allocated resources accordingly. Some municipalities decided to implement the governmental proposition, and others did not. For example, the capital, Helsinki, chose not to implement the decision and continued to respect the subjective right to education (City of Helsinki, 2019). This led to an unequal situation where Finnish parents in some cities could get early childhood education full-time, and some could not. Later, the government started emphasising the importance of early education, and was criticized by the trade unions for being incoherent in its policy agenda (Karvala, 2017). The reform, which was initially supported by employers, was later even criticised by the Confederation of Finnish Industries (Häkämies, 2019) which had been supportive of the austerity measures of the government; early childhood education was seen as the right of every child and to be respected as such. Ironically, the rapid policy reform created a condition whereby the value of early childhood education was spelt out more clearly than in the past.

To combat such rapid and problematic decision-making, the subsequent government (PM Antti Rinne; since June 2019) undertook the task of restoring the original conditions. Implementing the decisions undertaken by the Sipilä government was then postponed, and the subjective right to early childhood education restored in August 2020 (HE 34/2019). The changing legislation has also subsequently created a condition whereby the environment is harder to control and predict. During the cut-backs, the right to early education was reduced and resources were cut down. Consequently, in many cities, such as Oulu, even though the situation has changed, there are insufficient facilities and workers, and the town needs to



open up new childcare places and hire workers (MTV, 2019.) Since some municipalities are already struggling to attract a professional work force, they fear that they will face even more difficulties into the future. This is an example of how the disturbance of existing ecologies of practice brings about instabilities which are hard to change afterwards.

Early childhood is also an interesting domain in relation to issues of privatisation. There has been a considerable increase in the proportion of private companies in early education, with privatisation seen as a solution to demographic changes occurring in Finland. In 2017, 10 percent of all the children in early childhood education received services from the private sector. This relatively modest proportion hides the rate of growth that occurred; the number of service vouchers given by municipalities to families rose from roughly 15000 in 2015 to approximately 23 500 by 2017 (Säkkinen & Kuoppala, 2018)!

With the increase in privatisation of early childhood services, there have been public concerns about the buildings used in early education. In the capital region of Helsinki, there has been a growing concern that some kindergarten buildings are not licensed. It was found that 12 private kindergartens lacked permission to operate altogether, and 15 had not completed the licensing process. In addition to this, 17 kindergartens lack the end-of-program examination of buildings to ensure they are safe for children. The representatives of the city commented that the interaction between the city and the providers of education had not worked properly (Parikka, 2019).

### ***Basic/compulsory education (Grades 1-9)***

There have also been several successive reforms that have profoundly changed practices in schools during the last ten years. One of the most important reforms that has increased the workload of teachers is the introduction of the 3-stage support for pupils, especially students with special educational needs. In short, this means inclusion of pupils with special needs to mainstream education. While the idea of inclusion is supported, there have been problems in implementation of the inclusion reform, especially because schools are not adequately resourced to meet the challenges of inclusion. At the time when the 3-stage pedagogical support was introduced, the global financial crisis hit the public sector in Finland. Children with special needs were not supported by an adequate number of support staff, and the size of the groups of children remained too large. Therefore, many teachers found the inclusion reform particularly difficult to implement (Pulkkinen, 2019).

Another related reform was the renewal of the national curriculum (2012-15). It was originally constructed in an 'open' fashion, involving all stakeholders, including teachers, in the development process. However, it then appeared to be more 'closed' as decisions were made at more senior levels without adequate consultation, or without taking outcomes of consultation adequately into account. As a consequence, teachers felt that their voices had not been properly heard, and their professional skills and potential were not acknowledged (Hardy & Uljens, 2018). While there is recognition of concerns about curriculum coherence in the new curriculum (Pietarinen, Pyhältö & Soini, 2017), and of comparative autonomy and empowerment of Finnish teachers (Erss, Kalmus & Autio, 2016) there is also evidence of teachers struggling with organisational barriers at the local/municipal level, resource constraints and inertia to change (Saarinen et al., 2019). Furthermore, the content of the basic curriculum also reflects a focus upon generic skill development – competencies. The 7 transversal competences, advocated as 21<sup>st</sup> Century competencies, within the basic

curriculum – thinking and learning to learn; cultural competence; taking care of oneself; multiliteracy; ICT; working life and entrepreneurship; building sustainable futures – reflect advocacy for more generic capacities that are seen as somehow more immediately relevant, including work relevant, within broader social political and particularly economic contexts.

Furthermore, even though the previously planned reforms to implement the 3-stage pedagogical support and the ambitious reform of the national curriculum had not been sufficiently consolidated, and teachers had not had sufficient time for local school curriculum development, the Sipilä government introduced new projects from 2015. This included the idea of the ‘digi-leap’ of Finland which focused on rapid engagement with processes of digitalisation in all areas of society, with education being one of the key areas. This occurred alongside the ‘New comprehensive education’ key project coordinated by the Ministry of Culture and Education, which allocated €120 million to hundreds of temporary projects, focusing on the new curriculum implementation, digitalisation of teaching, collaborative school culture, promotion of physical activity during the school day, and experimental language teaching and learning.

In this context of constant change, while many teachers were able to reformulate their work circumstances, many others felt a sense of loss in relation to their professional expertise and autonomy (see Appendix: Basic Education), which had been regarded up to this point as part of the ‘Finnish success’ (Simola, 2013; Sahlberg, 2012). According to a recent survey about the development of attractiveness of teacher education in Finland, the professional autonomy of teachers is one of the key factors that attracts young people to teacher education (Heikkinen, Markkanen, Utriainen, Pennanen, Taajamo & Tynjälä 2020). Therefore, the government has been criticized for eroding the foundations of Finnish education through these reforms.

### ***Vocational education (secondary schooling)***

Since its inception, vocational education and training (VET) at secondary level in Finland has been school-based, with relatively weak links to working life/industry. Enhancing lifelong human growth and development, and caring for students’ welfare has been characteristic of VET (Maunu, 2018; Nissilä, Karjalainen, Koukkari & Kepanen, 2015; Stenström & Virolainen, 2016). A VET-reform implemented at the turn of the millennium aimed at extending on-the-job learning, and establishing a competence-based variant of VET for adults. This reform was implemented gradually and systematically, and was supported by offering teachers possibilities for professional development in order to better understand and engage with reformed VET-practices.

In 2015, the transition to a full-scale competence-based VET was initiated by the Sipilä government, and realized legislatively in 2018. When combined with massive cutbacks in resources (€190 million), many VET- teachers were dismissed. The reform implied a total makeover of the VET-system, affecting funding, governance, organizational structures, operational processes and VET qualifications. VET was turned into a demand-driven, competence-based and customer-oriented initiative, with a focus on individual study paths, validation of prior learning and emphasis on workplace learning; a new, ongoing system of continuous student recruitment was also implemented (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019a). The new performance- and effectiveness-based VET was to be realized by VET-organizations working in conjunction with VET teachers. The reform was supported by an

extensive network of projects, established after the introduction of the new legislation, and with a total budget of €60 million (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019b).

VET soon became an object of widespread public debate and concern. In an inquiry into the reform conducted by the Finnish Teachers Unions, various grievances arose. The overall steering and guidance of the reform has been perceived as fragmented and contradictory, as has the introduction of associated national administrative systems (The Trade Union of Education in Finland, 2018a; 2018d). On the one hand, working life/industry representatives felt they lacked the pedagogical skills needed for valid and reliable guidance and evaluation of workplace-learning. Industry organisations also seemed to be uninformed about the reform. Collaboration and sharing of responsibilities between schools and work places, regarding the competence-based practice, has been described as inadequate. From the perspective of VET teachers, the introduction of various digital tools to be used for the development of personal study plans of students were felt to be highly inadequate. VET teachers were also very hesitant about young students' readiness for self-directed learning. The strong focus on individual study paths resulted in deficiencies amongst students in forming and functioning in groups, and the ability to become engaged in professional communities of practice at work places; legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) was under threat. And the strong individual focus risked leading to increased marginalization, especially among students with special needs and those from migrant backgrounds.

The makeover of VET received much public attention, and resulted in intensive, mainly critical, dialogue in the public media (see Appendix: Vocational education). In the beginning of the reform, the criticism focused on a severe lack of systematic information and guidance regarding the new VET-practices and their impacts within schools, and especially for working life organizations (YLE, 2018c). The reform resulted in a sudden change in teachers' working conditions, a quest for a new professional orientation, yet was insufficiently supported by adequate professional development in competence-based VET. In contrast with earlier, much slower reforms, the responsibility for the establishment of competence-based VET has been on teachers, and there has been inadequate attention to the needs of those in industry where students undertake their actual work-practices. With good reason, VET-teachers have been concerned about the adequacy of learning possibilities for students in working life/industry organizations (Helsingin Sanomat, 2018a). Reduced resources for teaching raised concerns about students' basic skill development – both regarding their social and vocational capabilities for workplace learning, and their professional competences more broadly. In summary, the reform diminished a broad conception of VET-teachers' identity based on social interaction with students, and professional care for their growth as both human beings and representatives of their vocation (Maunu, 2018). This has led to concerns about students' wellbeing, polarization and marginalization of students, particularly the most disadvantaged, and those with special needs (Hufvudstadsbladet, 2018a; YLE, 2018a).

### **Discussion & analysis: Fast policy and the 'zeitgeist' of Finnish educational reform**

What can we learn from these experiences of recent, substantive educational reform in the Finnish context? The specific cases of reform within the contexts of early childhood education, general education, and vocational education reveal evidence of aspects of fast policy, and associated processes, expressed in multiple and context-specific ways. However,

these fast policy effects are not only characterized by particular practices, but also a broader ‘spirit’ of concern and angst in relation to these practices with subsequent effects on the ‘spirits’ of Finnish educators, and their students. Consequently, the characteristic effects and affective qualities of fast policy in education policy making in the Finnish context may be summarised as concerns about: intensification of reform processes, as well as fragmentation; individualisation and decontextualisation; and instability, privatisation and reductions in public funding. Theoretically and methodologically, a fast policy-zeitgeist approach to the Finnish context helps elaborate the more affective qualities of fast policy processes. These processes are facilitated by intensification of communication, given information is so easily shared via modern communications media, giving the subsequent impression that complex problems can and somehow should be solved in similarly brief timeframes. When fast policy is made, it has the capacity to strengthen these processes. However, there is also evidence of a ‘spirit’ of resistance to such foci, and efforts on the part of educators to challenge the more reductive effects of such policies and practices, even as they exert influence.

### ***Intensification and fragmentation***

Processes of intensification and fragmentation were manifest in different ways in each of the sectors. Teachers in compulsory schooling (basic education) were not only grappling with the implementation of the new basic curriculum around the mid-2010s, but were also struggling to teach inclusively. The 3-stage process, while laudable for its focus upon teachers striving to address the needs of all the students in their class (and an example of efforts to foster the development of more ‘irregular’ schools that actually actively strive for inclusive practices (Slee, 2011)), proved challenging for teachers. Added to this, the Sipilä government’s raft of reforms, and strident advocacy for rapid change on so many fronts, together with a relative lack of input of teachers in the latter stages of curriculum development processes, diminished teachers’ capacity to embrace and engage substantively with these reforms.

The focus upon more ‘project-based’ approaches is also reflective of these intensification and fragmentation processes. The emphasis upon initiatives such as the ‘digi-leap’ was presented as a new project, which while laudable for its determination to try to enhance students’ digital literacies, simply did not take into account the work conditions of teachers more broadly in this context. The introduction of new parallel projects created a more intensified and fragmented work environment, which clearly upsets the ‘Finnish success’ criteria of stable and sustainable educational development (Simola, 2013; Sahlberg, 2012).

In the VET sector, intensification was manifest through teachers’ efforts to try to support the holistic needs of their students, even as work-based educational needs were reduced. VET teachers, while hesitant about young students’ readiness for self-directed learning, were left to try to address the shortcomings of a program that emphasised individualization processes in relation to students’ learning pathways. Such individualization and cost-cutting were reflective of more ‘efficient’ approaches to public sector reform more broadly, and which constituted forms of ‘best practice’ in other (often Anglo) contexts (Peck & Theodore, 2015). The concomitant effect of this intensification for teachers was a simultaneous process of fragmentation of these students’ learning experiences as they sought to make sense of reforms in this more disjointed environment.

Such fragmentation was similarly evident in the early childhood sector. At the same time early childhood was being lauded as important by the Sipilä government, major cuts in the

weekly time spent in education for the children of parents not deemed to be working studying or developing new businesses was seen as deeply problematic. However, importantly, such processes were also heavily criticised, and reflective of how broader policy prerogatives do not go unchallenged. That some municipalities did not implement the government cuts in the way intended also reveals something of the complexity of policy enactment processes, including how actors exercise agency and act as critics in spite of such circumstances. Such an approach exemplifies the sorts of counter-hegemonic position-taking that can occur under such circumstances (Pieterse, 1994).

### ***Individualisation & decontextualisation***

Fast policy can also be understood as manifest in the form or processes of individualisation and decontextualization of educational practices. Such processes and practices were evident within and across these sectors. In relation to compulsory education and VET, individualism was also manifest not only in the intensification processes, but also in the content of reforms, such as increasing focus on notions of competence development. Reflecting simultaneous processes of decontextualisation of fast policy effects, such reforms can be deployed almost anywhere (Peck & Theodore, 2015).

In basic education, this context-free approach was expressed in support for 21<sup>st</sup> century competences through the 7 competences of comprehensive school in the Finnish curriculum, as well as advocacy for competencies in vocational education and youth services. Such content serve as ‘solutions’ that individualise those engaged in their learning, and in ways that are construed as existing beyond the immediate. In a working environment in which work is becoming more and more focused on intellectual labour as a form of ‘cognitive capitalism’ (Peters & Bulut, 2011), there is an emphasis upon various kinds of ‘added value’ generated through human thought. This occurs even as generic notions of competence sit uneasily with various conceptions of learning as engaged in communities of practice in working life/industry groups, and in collaborative groups in school settings.

In the VET sector, the strong focus on individual study paths was also a manifestation of these individualisation processes, and created deficiencies amongst students in operating in functional groups. This strong individual focus, reflective of the rise of economic logics in domains previously free of such influence (Peters & Bulut, 2011), was most risky for marginalized students, especially those with special needs and from migrant backgrounds. VET teachers sought to try to respond to this individualisation, but at considerable cost; and in the context of severe cuts to VET teachers, this process was a clear instance of the intensification of remaining teachers’ work as they tried to redress the lack of coherence for students in their study programs, and as they sought to provide the ‘connective tissue’ between students school experiences, and their experiences in industry/working life.

However, again, even as it seems the ‘spirit of the times’ is dominated by such processes of individualisation and decontextualisation, the decision of some municipalities not to reduce and fragment educational provision in the early childhood sector reveals alternative practices, enhancing of the ‘spirits’ of those involved. Fast policies are not simply unidirectional and uncontested (Peck & Theodore, 2015). That the peak industry body, the Finnish Confederation of Industries, was critical of the reduction in services for early childhood reveals how such challenges may also arise from what may seem like unlikely sources.

### ***Instability, privatisation and reduction in public provision***

Processes of privatisation and reduction in public provision of funding were also apparent within these educational arenas, leading to considerable instability. The privatisation of the early childhood industry, and the deployment of privatisation practices in VET reveal the cogency of business-models in educational contexts. In early childhood, the significant increase in the proportion of private companies delivering services is perhaps the clearest example of privatisation practices. The passing of legislation to enable these new players is part of the specific practices that enable more neoliberal approaches (Connell, 2013; Kemmis et al., 2014). The poor quality of building provision for early childhood education, and how to adequately respond to concerns about maintenance of such buildings over the longer term, was a manifestation of such practices. Similarly, at the same time, the emphasis upon provision of education services by private companies as opposed to the state is evidence of privatisation processes in the VET field, with subsequent effects of intensification of educators' work, and increased isolation for students.

The reduction in funding in the years following the global financial crisis also contributed to the rearticulation of the public sector with problematic effects. Such reductions in public provision often go hand in hand with these privatisation processes (Connell, 2013), but may simply be manifest as cut-backs more broadly. In basic education, the 3-stage support was never resourced properly in the first place with the result that this initiative was started but never brought to fruition. The timing was not good because of the economic crisis, with municipalities reducing revenue provided for education; cost-cutting became an imperative, and new investments were not made. Teachers and schools were consequently disadvantaged. The dismissal of VET teachers in schools was another manifestation of tight resourcing conditions. However, again, these processes are not uniform, and the expression of concern about early childhood provision by not only the unions but the Finnish Confederation of Industries reveals that funding cuts associated with rapid reform and as a manifestation of global processes of fiscal tightening, can be challenged (cf. Pieterse, 1994; Kellner, 2000).

### **Conclusion**

This research has examined the nature and effects of recent policy reform in the context of education provision in Finland. While zeitgeist analysis is not a 'mainstream' approach, and may be criticized by some for not seeming to be sufficiently 'rigorous', we would argue that in order to study dramatic reform – 'fast policy' – as it happens, zeitgeist analysis is particularly effectively for capturing the nature of the times. Zeitgeist analyses seem well-suited to analysing current policy conditions, and for augmenting and articulating the nature of the effects of fast policy processes that characterize current and recent educational reforms. However, such analyses are dependent on the nature of policy documents available, as well as public/media debate and discussion. It is also dependent on being able to publish relatively quickly to 'capture' and convey the nature of this zeitgeist. While 'slow science' approaches (Salo & Heikkinen 2018), based on in-depth research, are absolutely essential, zeitgeist analysis provides us with interesting outlines of the trends of our time, the nature and effects of which can be examined further through subsequent research.

This research reveals that fast policy has not only been manifest in specific ways in relation to education in the Finnish context, but has also become something of a reflection of the 'spirit of the times' in which it has occurred. Processes of intensification and fragmentation,

individualization and decontextualization, and increased privatisation and reduction in public provision of funding are not simply specific practices of neoliberalization (Peck, 2010), but also reflect a sense of the affective in action – the ‘feeling’ or zeitgeist – of the current moment.

Theoretically, a zeitgeist approach makes it possible to focus greater attention upon the more affective qualities of ‘fast policy’ as these relate to the processes of intensification and fragmentation, individualization and decontextualization, and the destabilising effects of increased privatisation and reduction in public provision of funding. Perhaps most significantly, in relation to the Finnish context, such approaches are revelatory for how more neoliberal processes play out in an environment that has not been typically associated with such processes, and which are perhaps more readily associated with more Anglo-American settings. However, these processes are not uniform, and the Finnish case also reveals how the intensity of feeling around rapid reform, and how more neoliberalization processes associated with fast policy effects, can be challenged, even as such effects exert considerable influence.

Importantly, a zeitgeist approach reveals that such fast policy processes are not only associated with particular parties, but may exert influence across the political spectrum (including the current green-left coalition in Finland) and adversely affect the ‘spirits’ of those affected. Robust knowledges and capacities are needed to foster social, political, environmental and economic sustainability, even as these may seem inconsistent with the sorts of fast policy effects that are manifest in institutionalised educational settings, as outlined in this paper. We suggest a reduction in the range of reforms, increased orchestration and cohesion across different initiatives/projects, increased collaboration, reforms that are more socially, ecologically and historically-aware, and that ensure adequate provision of funding and advocacy for public education. While seeking to foster alternative approaches is a difficult task, given the seeming dominance of more reductive processes of neoliberalization (Peck, 2010), the Finnish educational system also possesses a broader cultural context and capacities grounded in more social democratic and bildung-oriented traditions that can serve as resources to challenge more fast policy effects. It is within this context that the spirits of Finnish educators can be simultaneously uplifted and serve as a resource for more educative approaches and foci. It remains a subject for further study whether the latest government, led by PM Sanna Marin from December 2019, ‘slows down’ and takes a more reflective approach to educational reform, or whether fast policy reforms continue to exert significant influence, even as they are resisted.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Primary sources on the public debate of the reform of early childhood education

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