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Title: Municipal Governance of Comprehensive Education : The Emergence of Local Universalisms

Year: 2023

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Kalalahti, M., & Varjo, J. (2023). Municipal Governance of Comprehensive Education : The Emergence of Local Universalisms. In M. Thrupp, P. Seppänen, J. Kauko, & S. Kosunen (Eds.), *Finland's Famous Education System : Unvarnished Insights into Finnish Schooling* (pp. 19-34). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-8241-5_2

Chapter 2

Municipal Governance of Comprehensive Education: The Emergence of Local Universalisms



Mira Kalalahti and Janne Varjo

Abstract The governance of Finland’s comprehensive school system has historically evolved from centralised governance into a blend of national and local (municipal) decision-making authority. The two-fold model of governance was launched in the 1970s according to the planning economy logic, where the national education policies were enacted and regulated through strict and detailed legislation, a redistributive and ‘earmarked’ state subsidy system and a uniform national core curriculum. At an ideological level, comprehensive reform was tied firmly to the principle of equal opportunities. However, changes in administrative thinking since the 1990s have created a new balance between governmental and local governance of the education system. In this chapter we portray key changes occurring in the relationship between central and local administration as well as the most significant changes in the education system by comparing three case municipalities. We compile various register and document data about the education systems of these municipalities and assess whether we should talk about diverse municipal basic education in Finland instead of a single, uniform basic education system. We conclude that the national, previously more uniform basic education system is transforming into diverse, local basic education systems. We argue that local self-government and varying service accessibility pose a challenge to the equality of the service system at the national level.

In this chapter, the ideology of Finland’s comprehensive school system is contextualised as part of the idea of universalism. In the Nordic welfare state, the idea of universalism has generally been associated with a strong commitment to the objectives of equality and social integration. It has also been characterised by the redistribution of economic resources undertaken at a high level, extensive investment in

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M. Thrupp et al. (eds.), *Finland’s Famous Education System*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-8241-5_2

education, and active labour market policy.¹ In Finland's education policy, universalism has been enacted through regional accessibility, a progressive financing basis, a distribution of resources, the levelling out of conditions, and detailed regulation. Universalism has manifested as the uniformity of schools, moderate differences in learning outcomes between schools, neighbourhoods and socio-economic groups, and the inclusion of pupils in special needs and general education.² Finland's universalist comprehensive school system has been constructed on a nationally extensive network of schools that ensures provision in proximity to students' homes in cities and safeguards tax-funded school transport for pupils living in sparsely populated areas.

Although public education may be the oldest welfare state system that is based on universalist principles,³ universal systems are not static or permanent. They involve constant balancing between the efficient and fair redistribution of resources, and the sufficiency of resources.⁴ The governance of Finland's comprehensive school system has historically evolved into a blend of national and local (municipal) decision-making authority. As a result of a national basic education reform carried out in the 1960s, Finland's municipalities became tasked with carrying out reform at the local level during the following decade. This involved carrying out education policy with the help of centralised and highly detailed legislation, an 'earmarked' system of central government transfers to local government, and a uniform national core curriculum for basic education.⁵ In the context of the basic education reform in the 1970s, most of Finland's private schools were transferred to municipal ownership to safeguard equality and uniformity in education in accordance with the agenda of the political left.⁶

Since the 1990s, however, the rearrangement of the relationship between central and local government has resulted in transforming the cohesive universalism of the welfare state into several local universalisms, which are increasingly sensitive to financial and population-related preconditions.⁷ The universalism principle has been re-theorised using terms such as 'decentralised universalism', 'local universalism' or 'neo-universalism'. These new concepts have been used to analyse the consequences of the decentralisation of national welfare state systems for local systems.⁸ Universalism has also been interpreted to be weaker or stronger according to the extent to which the criteria of public (tax-based) funding, statutory basis and equal accessibility of services are in place.⁹ The diversification at the local level measures the ability of local decision-makers to respond to changes in resources and population base.¹⁰ However, these decision-makers tend to respond to local changes in a uniform manner.¹¹ Local practices for the provision of basic education have formed within the uniform basic education system, simultaneously reflecting both cohesive local solutions and conditions as well as the priority areas of national education policy.

The idea of local universalisms is highly significant for understanding the Finnish comprehensive school system because it challenges our understanding of Finland's municipalities as a cohesive whole, in which all have the same, actual opportunities for the provision of basic education for children and young people of compulsory education age, and in which everyone is provided with the same education opportunities in practice. Finnish municipalities (N = 309) all have, *de jure*, the same

obligations to provide basic education to all children of compulsory school age in their jurisdiction. Yet in practice, as we illustrate here, they differ substantially in terms of size and population, and the influence of this can not be overlooked.

Municipal education policies have become increasingly separate from national education policy from the early 2000s, but few studies have explored the provision of basic education at the municipal level. This chapter aims to breach the gap through multiple case studies.¹² We use three case municipalities in Finland to describe the local preconditions for the provision of basic education and interpret the cases based on the universalist principles of uniform basic education. We begin by presenting the general changes implemented in the governing system for education from the 1980s to the present. We highlight key changes occurring in the relationship between central and local administration related to governance as well as the most significant changes in the education system. The three municipalities we have selected, Espoo, Tornio and Keitele, serve as examples of these changes. The municipalities are not intended to be typical, but instead, to represent the variety of municipalities. The municipalities were carefully selected based on their regional and demographic features as well as indicators describing the basic education provision and needs for change in the school network. The case municipalities illustrate large cities as well as urban and rural municipalities located in Southern, Central and Northern Finland. We draw on various data concerning different municipalities and their education systems particularly utilising the registers of *Statistics Finland*, the *Finnish National Agency for Education* and the *Association of Finnish Municipalities*.

By comparing the three municipalities, we assess whether we should talk about diverse municipal basic education instead of a single, uniform basic education system in Finland. As a whole, our study seeks an answer to the question of whether the municipal basic education systems continue to be based on a uniform, universalist principle, and whether they offer equal education opportunities. We start our description by drawing on the work of Ulf P. Lundgren¹³ to present four sets of instruments used to govern education (legal, economic, ideological and evaluatory). Subsequently, we will examine overall development in the municipalities, and use the three case municipalities to focus on comparing municipal basic education systems set apart by changes that have occurred at the national level. Finally, we summarise the changes that have taken place in municipal basic education systems and discuss whether these continue to be guided by an ideology following the universalism principle.

Decentralised and Diversified Instruments to Govern the Basic Education System

The relationship between central and local administration began to change in Finland in the mid-1980s: government authority was reduced at the same time as the autonomy of municipalities was increased in line with the administrative decentralisation

ideology prevailing at the time. During the 1990s a transition was made to a new, increasingly decentralised governing system for basic education as a result of the adoption of the new Basic Education Act, a calculus-based system of central government transfers to local government and the national core curriculum providing more leeway for local application.¹⁴

Lundgren¹⁵ has presented an analysis of the approaches that governments can use in governing and managing their education system which we draw on here. In this model, instruments of legal governance—the most traditional and binding instrument of governance for public services—include the acts, decrees, provisions and guidelines used by public administration to ensure the uniform implementation of services provided as subjective rights, including basic education, across the nation. Highly detailed normative governance has been particularly characteristic of the post-World War II reconstruction period in the welfare regimes described by Gøsta Esping-Andersen.¹⁶ In turn, the development trends of decentralisation and deregulation in administration that started in the 1980s have resulted in reducing the rights of government officials to issue regulations, and the consolidation and harmonisation of legislation.

In the late 1990s, abundant and fragmented legislation based on different educational institution types was replaced by more concise and centralised legislation based on learning objectives and content.¹⁷ The Basic Education Act (628/1998) entered into force at the start of 1999, and has significantly affected the opportunities of municipalities to serve as education providers. The reduced regulation provided particularly large cities with an opportunity to profile their schools based on various emphases. Similarly, municipalities were left to make decisions on the number and location of educational institutions in their area in practice.¹⁸ Providing municipalities with the freedom to independently modify their school networks resulted in extensive closure of small schools: on average, 80 comprehensive schools have been closed down each year in Finland since the recession of the early 1990s. In some places, the closed schools have been replaced with larger comprehensive schools covering years 1–9 of basic education.¹⁹

The second set of instruments to govern education presented in Lundgren's²⁰ analysis—the *instruments of economic governance*—was subject to major changes in the early 1990s. The system of central government transfers to local government introduced in 1993²¹ was calculus-based instead of task- and cost-based like its predecessor. The grounds for the reform included the need to provide municipalities with an opportunity to allocate their resources appropriately in order to achieve stated goals. The reform also required increasingly unrestrained abandonment of regulations preventing resource use; in fact, provisions limiting the use of central government transfers to local government for a specific purpose were removed from the relevant acts.²²

As a whole, the resources used in education in Finland can be characterised as moderate: while Finland's student-specific costs of education are above the OECD average, they are the lowest in the Nordic countries. Nevertheless, the most recent statistics indicate an exceptional reduction occurring over the period 2012–2017 (1.5% on average) even though the number of students has remained nearly

unchanged.²³ Moreover, the costs of pre-primary and basic education increased moderately in the period 2010–2018.²⁴ At the municipal level, the transition to the system of central government transfers to local government based on imputed unit prices has led to increased disparity in the financial opportunities for providing basic education. A report by the Ministry of Finance²⁵ indicates that the cost of basic education per student is highest in municipalities with under 2000 inhabitants and lowest in municipalities with between 20,000 and 40,000 inhabitants.

As a result of disparities in financial opportunities, there are considerable differences in basic education provision practices. A regional comparison reveals that the average size of a group for instruction in Grades 1 and 2 varied by up to 4.8 pupils (national average: 18.3). On average, the largest instruction groups were located in the Uusimaa region (20.0) and smallest in the Central Ostrobothnia region (15.2). In sparsely populated regions, the average size of instruction groups is smaller compared to densely populated areas. In 2019, the largest instruction groups were located in urban municipalities (19.7) and the smallest in rural ones (14.1).²⁶ The number of available lesson hours was another indicator that can be used to assess segregation caused by financial conditions. There are growing disparities in organising education and providing instruction. One fifth of education providers had reduced the amount of instruction provided during basic education when the school year 2010–11 was compared to 2015–16.²⁷ During the 2016–17 school year, 9% of education providers offered only the minimum amount of instruction.

A third instrument in Lundgren's model,²⁸ is that curricula are part of *ideological governance* enacted based on learning objectives and content. In Finland, the Finnish National Agency for Education prepares the national core curricula based on the distribution of lesson hours issued by the Government. The core curricula guide education providers in making arrangements on education and the preparation of school-specific curricula. The level of detail in the national core curricula has varied. For instance, the 1970 national core curriculum for basic education was highly detailed, while the 1994 curriculum tended to outline key objectives and content without more detailed definitions.²⁹

In the early 1990s, increasing the number of study options was considered to produce significant positive effects. The idea was that the national 'talent reserve' would be increasingly well utilised through this approach as "pupils are likely to select subjects that they are personally interested in or assume that they will succeed in". Meanwhile, the opportunities for raising the overall level of education were also expected to improve as providing pupils with more freedom of choice was considered to "help pupils have a more positive regard of studying and exerting themselves for accomplishing learning objectives they consider meaningful".³⁰

Today, a decree on the distribution of lesson hours determines the minimum number of hours for basic education. Education providers are left to decide how education is provided under the valid legislation. In practice, there is variation in the number of hours of basic education provided by municipalities due to issues such as the available opportunities for language studies. There may also be variation between the schools in a municipality, as the number of lesson hours may be greater, for instance, in schools offering weighted-curriculum education.³¹

The joint effect of the decentralisation of administration and increasingly lax regulation has resulted in putting more weight on collecting, analysing and publishing assessment data on education. According to Lundgren,³² the *quality assessment of education* has evolved into the fourth instrument to govern education from the 1980s. In addition to legislation and central government transfers to local government and national core curricula, the public authorities also use evaluation data as the basis for governing basic education providers. This has made detailed governance of day to day operations redundant, as focusing on results and impacts is considered sufficient.³³

Finland's Basic Education Act requires education providers to evaluate the education they provide and its impacts, and to participate in external assessment of their operations.³⁴ Education providers do have the freedom to select evaluation methods and targets. In the 2000s, the evaluation of education occurring at the local level in Finland was largely described as unplanned and inconsistent, and criticised as lacking versatility and transparency.³⁵ For instance, a survey by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre about the self-evaluation and quality assurance practices in basic education and general upper secondary education in the period 2015–2016 indicated that many education providers had not introduced a well-functioning self-evaluation system or a systematic evaluation culture as part of their quality assessment activities.³⁶

Several sample-based studies have indicated that, overall, the learning outcomes of young people have declined in Finland. Despite the fact that the PISA studies indicate minor differences in learning outcomes between Finland's regions, there is greater variation in the PISA results in the Helsinki metropolitan area compared to other parts of the country.³⁷ This can be interpreted to reflect segregation between neighbourhoods and schools, which is known to occur in large cities (see Bernelius and Kosunen; Lobato and Bernelius; and Seppänen, Pasu and Kosunen chapters in this book). In addition, the impact of pupils' socio-economic backgrounds on their learning outcomes gained prominence in the most recent PISA study.³⁸

Population, Regions and the Segregation of Municipalities

Finland's municipalities have been growing increasingly different in terms of their demographic developments, and conditions for service provision and vitality for some time now. According to population projections, this development will also continue in the future. Over the coming decades, the number of people over 65-years of age will continue to grow in all Finland's municipalities, and the share of those over 85-years-old will climb especially. At the same time, the number of children has taken a dramatic downward turn in nearly all of the country's municipalities. In 2019, around 15,400 children were born in Finland; this is nearly a quarter less than in 2010. According to the population projection, the share of under 15-year-old children will continue to decline in all regions, on average by slightly over 20% by 2040.³⁹

The increasing density of the school network resulting from declining population development and a crisis of local government finances is a key issue to consider from the perspective of accessing basic education. According to an assessment of basic services, around 90% of children aged between seven and 12 live within a five-kilometre radius from a school, but the range was between 65 and 94%. Accessibility has declined somewhat at the national level when compared to the situation in 2017. Of pupils aged between 13 and 15 in comprehensive education, around 80% live within a five-kilometre radius from a school. The range was between 65 and 90%. At the national level, there is a small (2%) change in accessibility compared to 2017.⁴⁰

According to a classification based on the 2018 statistics by the Ministry of Finance,⁴¹ Finnish municipalities can be divided into *large cities* (21), *urban* (36), *semi-urban* (65) and *rural* (172). Over half of Finland's population lives in the large municipalities with over 50,000 inhabitants; 12–18% of the population live in the other types. Even though the majority of Finland's municipalities are rural, only around 13% of the country's total population live in them.⁴²

The three case municipalities in our study, Espoo, Tornio and Keitele, respectively represent a large city, an urban and a rural one under the Ministry of Finance. Information about the municipalities are presented in Table 2.1, with overall figures for Finland also provided for comparison, and then we look at each municipality in turn.

Espoo: Diverse Education Opportunities in Finland's Metropolitan Area

As a case municipality, Espoo represents one of the populous cities in the south of Finland, which are among the country's few regions with positive net migration. Espoo is a large city in the Uusimaa region located in the Helsinki metropolitan area in Southern Finland. It has 289,731 inhabitants, which makes it Finland's second largest city. Compared to the previous year, the city's population grew by + 2.2%. Espoo has an exceptionally favourable dependency ratio: the share of under-15-year-old residents is 19%, while only 17% are pensioners. The city's social and healthcare costs are clearly under the national average. Espoo is known as the hometown of enterprises such as Nokia, the Fortum energy company, the Rovio video game company that developed Angry Birds, and several other technology companies. Thanks to the local business structure, the share of inhabitants aged 15 and over with a higher education degree is at a record-high level at 47% and employment is at 75%. The share of foreign citizens is also considerably high at 12%.

In 2019, Espoo had 31,422 pupils in basic education. The municipality has 89 education institutions providing basic education, of which two are private (Steiner School and Christian School), one provides education in English, and 11 in Swedish. The pupils per education institution ratio in Espoo is on average 361 (excl. private

Table 2.1 Characteristics related to the population and provision of basic education in the case municipalities and Finland as a whole

	Espoo	Tornio	Keitele	Whole Finland
Population (2019) ⁴³	289,731	21,602	2202	5,525,292
Change in population since previous year (2019, %) ⁴⁴	2.2	-1.2	-1.9	0.1
Share of under-15-year-olds in population (2019, %) ⁴⁵	18.9	17.1	11.3	15.8
Share of foreign citizens in population (2019, %) ⁴⁶	11.6	2.6	1.2	4.8
Share of people with a higher education degree of population aged 15 and older (2019, %) ⁴⁷	47.3	26.0	17.4	32.2
Social and healthcare costs €/inhabitant (2019) ⁴⁸	2156	3582	4258	3482
Share of pensioners in population (2018, %) ⁴⁹	16.8	27.4	41.8	25.9
Employment rate (2018, %) ⁵⁰	75.4	69.8	66.0	72.1
Local income tax (2020, %) ⁵¹	18.0	21.0	20.5	20.0
Basic education pupils (2019) ⁵²	32,168	2367	169	557,908
Basic education operating costs/pupil (2019) ⁵³	10,359	9038	12,663	9893
Educational institutions providing basic education (2019) ⁵⁴	89	12	1	2 279
Share of accommodation and transport costs of operating costs (2019, %) ⁵⁵	1.1	6.2	11.3	3.8
Transported pupils (2019, %) ⁵⁶	6.6	32.4	48.8	20.9
Total number of lesson hours based on the distribution of lesson hours as weekly lessons per year (Years 1–9) (2019) ⁵⁷	229–239	227–230	224–236	224

schools). The rate is clearly above the national average (243 pupils/education institution). The average size of a group of instruction for classroom teachers in the urban municipalities similar to Espoo in the Uusimaa region is higher than other regions in this comparison (21 pupils). The languages provided in Grades 1–6 in the comprehensive schools in Espoo include English, Swedish, Finnish, French, German and Spanish.⁵⁸ In Grades 1–9, Espoo provides between 229 and 239 weekly lessons per year of instruction in accordance with the distribution of lesson hours for basic education. This is at least five hours above the national minimum. As one weekly lesson per year amounts to 38 lesson hours, pupils in Espoo receive at least 190 h of instruction above the national minimum during their nine-year basic education. Offering extensive weighted-curriculum education (‘teaching with a special emphasis’) is characteristic of this municipality.⁵⁹ The municipality offers education with an emphasis on various subjects, including mathematics and natural sciences, music, dance, sports, information technology, visual arts, and performance arts. During the school year

2021–22, pupils can choose between 24 groups which begin at the start of the 7th year of basic education. Weighted curriculum education is provided in a total of 15 education institutions.⁶⁰

The basic education operating costs are €10,359 per pupil. The share of accommodation and transport costs of total education operating costs is only 1%, as just 7% of basic education pupils are transported to school in Espoo (Table 2.1.) Espoo offers plenty of opportunities for upper secondary education: 11 upper secondary schools and three vocational education and training institutions are located in the municipality. Metropolia and Laurea Universities of Applied Sciences and Aalto University campuses are located in Espoo. Several other higher education institutions are also located in the Helsinki metropolitan area.

As a result of high birth rates, and internal and external migration, the city has been required to make considerable investments in extending its school network. Arguably, it is to fulfil the expectations of its exceptionally highly educated families, that the city offers a lot of emphasised teaching⁶¹ and multiple extra lesson hours. Together, these practices have increased the operation costs of basic education. From the perspective of education paths available for young people, Espoo offers plenty of opportunities for upper secondary and higher education. There are also several education institutions in the Helsinki metropolitan area, which can be easily accessed from Espoo as well.

Tornio: Simplified School System in a Medium-Sized Regional Town

Tornio represents a regionally significant town whose key ratios concerning population, the economy and school network are relatively close to the national averages. It is an urban municipality located in the Lapland region of North Finland, in the northernmost shore of the Bay of Bothnia at the border between Finland and Sweden. Tornio has 21,602 inhabitants, which makes it Finland's 46th largest municipality. It is also a municipality with a negative net migration rate: decreasing by around 1% per annum. Tornio has an average dependency ratio: the share of under 15-year-old residents is 17%, while the share of pensioners is 27% of the population. Local social and healthcare costs are also average (Table 2.1). The local industrial structure is undergoing a transformation: tourism and related services have emerged as a significant sector alongside the traditional brewery and steel industries. Those inhabitants over 15 with a higher education degree are 26% of the population and the employment rate (70%) is slightly below the national average. The proportion of foreign citizens in Tornio is very small (3%).

In 2019, Tornio had 2331 pupils in basic education. The local school network consists of 12 education institutions providing basic education. The pupils per education institution ratio in Tornio is below the national average (194/243) and the average size for an instructional group in the (urban municipalities) in the Lapland region

is close to the national average 20. English and Swedish are the foreign languages provided in Grades 1–6 of basic education.⁶² In Grades 1–9, Tornio provides between 227 and 230 weekly lessons per year of instruction in accordance with the distribution of lesson hours for basic education, at least three hours above the national minimum.

The basic education operating costs per pupil are the lowest among our case municipalities. The share of accommodation and transport costs of total education operating costs (6%), as well as the share of basic education pupils transported to school (32%) is slightly above the national average (Table 2.1.) From the perspective of local opportunities for further studies, the municipality has one upper secondary school, one vocational education and training institution, and one folk high school. One of the Lapland University of Applied Sciences units is located in Tornio, and the distance to the Universities of Lapland and Oulu is less than 150 kms.

Regardless of the municipality's negative net migration rate, the local dependency ratio in Tornio has remained reasonable. The size of the child and youth age groups has allowed the continuation of a relatively comprehensive basic education network, which has kept the need for school transport reasonable. From the viewpoint of young peoples' education paths, the municipality offers limited opportunities for obtaining upper secondary education qualifications. The long distances in North Finland mean that those who aim to study in a higher education institution will typically have to move out of Tornio.

Keitele: A Remote Municipality with a Negative Net Migration Rate and Increasingly Sparse School Network

Keitele illustrates the small rural municipalities in Central, Eastern and North Finland, which have been heavily affected by rapid post-WWII urbanisation and changes in the industrial structure. The municipality has 2202 inhabitants (2019), making it one of the smallest municipalities in Finland. Keitele is one of Finland's many municipalities with a negative net migration rate: compared to the status last year, the population changed by -2% . The local dependency ratio is exceptionally problematic from the perspective of the provision of basic services in the municipality: the share of under 15-year-old residents is 11% of the population, while the share of pensioners is as much as 42% of the population. As a result of the large share of pensioners, the municipality's social and healthcare expenditure is the highest among our case municipalities. Keitele's economy has traditionally been reliant on the industrial and primary sectors, and the local education level (percentage of inhabitants over 15-years of age with a higher education degree: 17%) and employment rate (66%) are low. The share of foreign citizens is only 1% (Table 2.1.)

In 2019, there were 243 pupils in basic education living in Keitele. The municipality's school network now includes only one comprehensive school, as three others have been shut since 2001, a major change occurring in just two decades. The number of students per educational institution is 243, which is exactly equal to the national

average. The average size for an instructional group for a classroom teacher in a rural municipality such as Keitele in the North Savo region is below the average (18/20). English is the only foreign language provided in Grades 1–6 of basic education.⁶³ In Grades 1–9, Keitele provides between 224 and 236 weekly lessons per year of instruction in accordance with the distribution of lesson hours for basic education. The national minimum is 224 weekly lessons per year.

The basic education operating costs (€12,663/pupil) in Keitele are well over the whole-country average (€9,893). The share of accommodation and transport costs as a proportion of total education operating costs is exceptionally high (11%) compared with the whole-country average (4%). These high costs can be accounted for by remote geographical conditions, indeed 49% of basic education pupils are entitled to school transport (whole-country average: 21%) (Table 2.1.) Local opportunities for further education are limited: there are no upper secondary schools, vocational education and training institutions or folk high schools located in the municipality. The distance to the nearest university of applied sciences (the Iisalmi campus of Savonia University of Applied Sciences) is 80 km and the nearest university (the Kuopio campus of the University of Eastern Finland) is 100 km away.

Many municipalities like Keitele, with low birth rates, an ageing population, and a demographic dependency ratio poses a big challenge from the perspective of providing basic services, including basic education. For instance, school transport required due to long distances results in very high costs. This, in turn, creates pressure to save costs through measures such as reducing the school network. From the perspective of the pupils, attending school in remote municipalities with negative migration is marked by long distances to school, few options related to education, and limited future prospects of finding employment.

Conclusion: From Governmental Universalism to Local Models

Changes introduced in governance in the 1990s such as decentralisation and deregulation essentially contained a message to develop local education systems based on local modifications of the principles of universalism. The case municipalities in this chapter exemplifies the ways in which the national, previously uniform basic education system in Finland has transformed into multiple diverse, local basic education models. Some municipalities have opportunities for constructing local education policy detached from national authorities, while the boundary conditions to the operations of other municipalities result in higher dependency on central government and the resources this offers.

Taekyoon Kim describes the institutional adaption of welfare states as either confirming economic constraints or political requirements.⁶⁴ The adaptation of municipalities to the changes occurring in government policies and factors concerning local conditions can also be perceived as either adaption to financial

conditions e.g., responding to a reduction in central government transfers to local government by scaling down the school network or, alternatively, as a response to the political will of the local inhabitants by offering different education alternatives based on the wishes of highly educated families.

The idea of a universalist, nationally strictly regulated, (primarily) government-funded and centrally governed and locally organised basic education continues to be prevalent in all the case municipalities examined in this chapter. However, instead of universalism determined at the national level, the case municipalities also reflect different local universalisms. These are locally separated school systems, whose education services are different in terms of aspects such as weighted-curriculum education, available language studies, and the number of weekly lessons per year.

Nevertheless, statistical data indicate that the variation in the practices for arranging basic education in municipalities is not random, but includes certain regularities. According to Kim⁶⁵ *institutional isomorphism* causes similar institutions to seek uniform solutions when faced with new conditions that collectively affect them. The case study of Keitele presented here advances the understanding of, for instance, how rural municipalities located in remote regions are particularly prone to scaling down their school networks. Changes in the population number and age structure will create a pressure for institutional isomorphism and finding new solutions related to the school network, particularly in line with the development of population under the age of 15. Similarly, large urban municipalities have a shared pressure to provide weighted-curriculum education in an effort to respond to the demand of highly educated families to select a school other than the local school that their municipality would assign to their child.⁶⁶

According to Anneli Anttonen,⁶⁷ the universalistic principle for service provision is bound to deteriorate as a result of the breakdown of the redistributive system of central government transfers to local government, highly detailed legislation and the equal accessibility of services. In the context of the basic education system, governing through the system of central government transfers to local government and legislation has reduced, and there is increasing heterogeneity in the availability of education services between regions and municipalities.

We should not, however, categorically perceive diversification of local welfare systems such as basic education as inequality or development of injustice. On the one hand, the decentralisation of the management of the welfare state could have potential for supporting local adaptation to the changes in the population structure and economic situation.⁶⁸ On the other, local self-government and varying service accessibility pose a challenge to the equality of the service system at the national level. In Finland's basic education policy, this is apparent through examining the case municipalities in areas such as the amount of basic education provided to pupils in terms of weekly lessons per year, the extent of options provided to the pupils in their studies, the size of the schools and classes in which the pupils study, and the amount of time the pupils spend on school transport each day. To paraphrase Dietmar Rauch, decentralising school administration and municipal autonomy in the provision of basic education can be—at least partly—interpreted as a means to cut funding to education and shift the responsibility for regrettable decisions onto municipalities.⁶⁹

Will the quality of Finland's basic education provided by municipalities continue to be high when the number of lesson hours is decreasing, the school network is becoming sparser, distances to school are growing, and remote education is becoming increasingly commonplace as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic? It is worth noticing that the quality assurance model for basic education used in Finland does not involve the central government collecting comprehensive, school-specific data or following systematically the diversification within municipalities. Hence, the current state of municipal differences remains rather unknown. The Ministry of Education and Culture has recognised the differentiation and diversification of learning environments and supported the provision of basic education with project-based supplementary resources. Nevertheless, the potential of these resources to respond to the diversification is yet unknown, since it favours the large municipalities and the ones engaging in active regional collaboration.⁷⁰ Arguably, the balance between national universalism and local models of provision of basic education is not set yet. Quality assurance and project-based development can be comprehended as novel tools to govern municipalities—and to 're-universalise' the central–local relations.

Notes

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