Education politics and contingency: Belief, status and trust behind the Finnish PISA miracle

Politique de l'éducation et contingence : croyance, statut et confiance dans le miracle finlandais de PISA

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ree/7735>

DOI: 10.4000/ree.7735

ISSN: 1954-3077

Publisher

Université de Nantes

Electronic reference

Hannu Simola and Risto Rinne, "Education politics and contingency: Belief, status and trust behind the Finnish PISA miracle", *Recherches en éducation* [Online], 16 | 2013, Online since 01 June 2020, connection on 25 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ree/7735> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ree.7735>

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Education politics and contingency : Belief, status and trust behind the Finnish PISA miracle¹

Hannu Simola & Risto Rinne²

Résumé

De nombreux concepts non historiques et décontextualisés tels que efficacité, responsabilité et qualité sont en train d'envahir le monde éducatif sans être remis en question, du fait de leur utilisation généralisée à travers le monde. L'éducation comparative continue à souffrir de certains déficits méthodologiques et d'une sous-théorisation prononcée. Dans cet article, nous tentons d'enrichir cette recherche à partir des concepts prometteurs de contingence, coïncidence et Spielraum. Ces concepts nous serviront à présenter le succès finlandais dans les études PISA en illustrant trois croyances largement ancrées dans les débats nationaux en Finlande. Ces croyances paraissent uniques si on les compare à d'autres nations, et elles proviennent certainement de l'histoire nationale finlandaise. La première concerne la confiance forte des Finlandais en l'éducation ; la deuxième veut que le métier d'enseignant soit un métier très respecté dans ce pays ; et la troisième que les parents, autorités et hommes politiques ont confiance en l'école compréhensive finlandaise. Ces trois « vérités » nationales sont largement acceptées même si l'on trouve peu de preuves empiriques pour les justifier. Elles peuvent constituer sans aucun doute des éléments clés de l'auto-perception nationale en relation à l'éducation. Dans cette contribution, nous questionnons les explications traditionnelles de type fonctionnaliste ou rationaliste de la recherche comparative en éducation.

Media visibility and the political use of global rankings as well as the standardizing activities of supranational organisations like the OECD and the EU have highlighted the topicality and relevance of comparative studies in education. This popularity has not entailed the development of theoretical instruments in the field, however. Conversely, non-historical and decontextualised concepts such as *efficiency*, *accountability* and *quality* are colonising the educational world undisputed and uncontested, largely due to the fact that they have been internationally advocated. Comparative education is still suffering from certain methodological deficits and serious under-theorisation (See, e.g., Cowen, 2009; Dale, 2009; Kivinen & Rinne, 1995; Marginson & Mollis, 2001; Rinne & Kivinen, 2003; Rinne, Kallo & Hokka, 2004; Rinne, 2008; Simola, 2009; Schriewer, 2006).

António Nóvoa and Tali Yariv-Mashal's observation of a few years ago seems still to be valid: *"The problem is that the term comparison is being mainly used as a flag of convenience, intended to attract international interest and money and to entail the need to assess national policies with reference to world scales and hierarchies. The result is a 'soft comparison' lacking any solid theoretical or methodological grounds."* (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003, p.425)

The problem is not restricted to the field of comparative education, of course. Susan Strange (1997), a prominent representative of the approach known as international political economy, sharply criticised 'neo-institutionalists' and 'comparativists' for reiterating policy agendas aiming at national success in the global struggle for competitiveness. This 'unbearable narrowness of the national view' (Kettunen, 2008) could be seen as a professional illness emanating from the comparative policy studies of our times.

¹ The article is the elaborated revision of the article: Simola, H. & Rinne, R. (in press) Education Politics and Contingency: Belief, Status and Trust behind the Finnish PISA Miracle in Pereyra, M. (Ed.) PISA under Examination: Changing Knowledge, Changing Tests, and Changing Schools. Amsterdam: Sense Publisher.

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Roger Dale (2009, p.123; cf. Beck, 2006) refers to three fundamental problems in comparative studies in education: methodological nationalism, methodological statism and methodological educationalism. The nation and the nation-state are still seen as the only real and final policy unit, and the very concept of education is taken for granted. Instead of 'models' and the convergence or divergence among them, we should be more interested "in the webs of structural power operating throughout the world system than in comparative analysis of discrete parts of it, bounded by territorial frontiers dividing states" (Strange, 1997, p.182). Education is still most often seen only as a question of increasing competences and qualifications among nation-state citizens in the face of global competition among knowledge-based economies. Decades ago John W. Meyer (1986, p.345-346) warned about 'functional blinders' that permit us to take schooling as a self-evident rational system and create a moralist discourse - among not only educationalists but also sociologists of education.

This narrowness of the national view easily creates a blind spot in terms of how interactions and comparisons reconstruct the national or the local: how transnational interactions and crossings constitute the national parties of these relationships, and here we come to the crucial role of comparative practices as a mode of reflexivity that (re)shapes individual and collective agency (Strange, 1997). In pursuance of an understanding of such a complex phenomenon as the relationship between the global, the regional, the national and the local in education policy formation it is vital to consider the theoretical conceptualisations from a both/and rather than an either/or point of view. A good and illuminating example here is the controversy among researchers of nationalism and the frequently observed confrontation between understanding nationalism as 'the invention of traditions' by the elite (e.g., Hobsbawm, 1990) or as creating prerequisites and limits for ethnic identities (e.g., Smith, 1995). From the perspective of comparative research, nationalism as an elite strategy and nationalism as a socio-cultural frame are both valid approaches. Comparative actions (such as the PISA studies) should be analysed *both* as economic, political and cultural practices (see, e.g., Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003; Simola & al., 2011) *and* as international exhibitions of national competitiveness in the global educational market place.

A Finnish researcher of modern history, Pauli Kettunen (2011) emphasises that criticism of the nation-state-centred view on globalisation should not just declare it outdated, but should rather take it seriously as an influential mode of thought and action, and recognise how it is embedded in the structures of globalised economic competition. Such a critical ambition means getting beyond the train of thought that contrasts the profound internal permanence of national agency with the drastic change in the external environment. Historicity means the temporal multi-layeredness of institutions and discourses that constrain and enable agency. It also means the contingency of each action situation, in which the actors must handle the tension between experiences and expectations. Making comparisons and making histories are crucial modes of reflexivity in social action, and this also applies to constructions of collective agency, not least those evolving in the framework of the nation-state society and influencing the making of the welfare state.

What we are trying to illustrate are three rather common beliefs emanating from the recent national discussion in Finland. All of these beliefs seem to be rather distinctive compared to other nations' beliefs and discussions, and they certainly have at least some generative roots in Finnish national history. The first is that the Finns share a strong belief in schooling, the second that teaching is rather highly appreciated as a profession in Finland, and the third that the Finnish comprehensive school enjoys rather high trust on the part of parents, authorities and politicians. All three are national 'truths' in a way (e.g., Heikkinen & al., 1999; Simola, 1998; Simola & al., 1998), widely accepted even though there is not too much empirical research evidence behind them. They are definitely constituent parts of the national self-understanding in terms of education. In this article we address the question of why these beliefs exist rather than whether they are true or not. Finally, we also impugn traditional functionalist and rationalist explanations of comparative research in education.

1. Promising theoretical concepts for comparison

One of the most promising remedies for theoretical deficit in research appears to lie in emphasising *historicity* (cf. Kettunen, 2011) or the *socio-historical analysis of complexity* (Charle & al., 2004; Schriewer, 2006, 2009). This rich domain of knowledge could also be characterised as a history of the transnational (*transnationale Geschichte*, Conrad, 2006) or entangled history (*histoire croisée*, Werner & Zimmermann, 2006). To put it simply, the point is that it is not enough to study dependencies and interactions among national states, or the border-crossing transfer of ideas and concepts.

What, then, are the most promising theoretical concepts from the perspective outlined above? In what follows, three promising analytical dimensions are very briefly outlined: first, bringing the theoretical concepts of path dependency, convergence and contingency together; second, tracing the history of *problématiques* or asking what is the problem the new education policy is meant to solve; and finally, analysing national and local interpretations and translations as hybrids.

First, path dependency and convergence have often been seen as simplistic dualism in comparative studies: the former covers major national specificities and the latter refers to international tendencies. The approach essentially underestimates both the insecurity and openness of the horizon of expectations and the relative freedom of more or less conscious and informed actors. This deficit is even more assuredly fatal in these global and late-modern times characterised as the 'Era of Contingency' (Joas, 2008; Joas & Knöbl, 2009), in which the difference between the already-done and the yet-to-be-done is vital and things are increasingly not necessary or impossible. At the crossing of these two dimensions – path dependency and contingency on the one hand, and path dependency and convergence on the other – we might find histories and comparisons as forms of reflexivity in social practices. Contingency is one essential element in creating *Spielraum* for 'politicking' (Palonen 1993; see also 2003). Relating the past, the present and the future, or experience and expectation, and recognising and interpreting differences and similarities are inherent aspects in human agency (Kettunen, 2011).

Secondly, Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003, p.436-437) propose in their seminal paper that the very focus of comparative research in education should be on *problématiques* rather than on 'facts' and 'realities' that, by definition, are incomparable in a strong sense. They can be contrasted in order to highlight differences and similarities, but it is hard to go further. Therefore, they claim, only problematisations can constitute the basis for complex comparison. Problems are anchored in the present but possess a history and anticipate different possible futures. They are also located and relocated in places and times, through processes of transfer, circulation and appropriation. Furthermore, they can only be elucidated through the adoption of new zones of observation that are inscribed in a space delimited by frontiers of meaning, and not only by physical boundaries.

Finally, the concept of hybridisation could be suggested to cover different, more and less conscious interpretations and translations of travelling, borrowed and learned policies in education. The concept is used here as introduced by two U.S. historians of educational reform, David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995). They emphasised the underrated influence of teachers, or as they put it of 'street-level bureaucrats', in educational reforms. In this sense they concluded that there should be much more research on how schools change reforms rather than vice versa. Another conclusion was that school reforms in the U.S. have always brought about change, but rarely the change that was intended.

This fits well with Stephen J. Ball's semi-classic characterisation of the distance and controversies between policy writing and its implementation: "*National policy-making is inevitably a process of bricolage; a matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere, drawing upon and amending locally tried-and-tested approaches, cannibalising theories, research, trends and fashions, and not infrequently a flailing around for anything at all*

that looks as though it might work. Most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence, text production, dissemination and ultimately recreation in contexts of practice. [...] In short, national policies need to be understood as the product of a nexus of influences and interdependencies, resulting in 'interconnectedness, multiplexity and hybridisation' [...] that is, 'the intermingling of global, distant and local logics'. (Ball, 2001, p.xxvii-xliii)

In the very same spirit, Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak (2008, p.112) felicitously characterise the processes to be studied as: *"[...] a complex and interrelated series of relationships between strategies and their contingent implementation in structures, imaginaries and their contingent operationalisation in practices and institutions, and implemented /operationalised strategies/imaginaries and ideologies and legitimations."*

By way of simplification one could state that path dependency, convergence and contingency belong to the structural dimension of action whereas problematisation and hybridisation are connected to its agency/strategic and actor/tactical dimensions. Along this trident distinction one could argue for connecting theory-rich discoveries such as travelling and embedded policies, vernacular or indigenous globalisation (Ozga & Jones, 2006; Ozga & Lingard, 2007 ; Rinne & Grek, 2011) and commonality within difference and exogenous trends (Marques Cardoso, 1998; Sweeting & Morris, 1993) as structural, whereas level-specific policy technologies, techniques and mechanisms (Simola, 2009) could be seen from the agency/strategic perspective, and externalisations (Schriewer & Martinez, 2004 ; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004) and indigenous foreigners (Popkewitz, 2009) as part of the actor/tactical dimension.

Here we concentrate on contingency as one promising conceptualisation of the historical approach to comparative studies in education.

2. Contingency as uncertainty and freedom, coincidence and Spielraum

The German sociologist Hans Joas (2008) has characterised our time as an "Age of Contingency". It seems plausible that the concept of contingency is able to capture something essential in our society in that it carries attributes such as post-traditional (Giddens), postmodern (Bauman) and the risk society (Beck). Following Niklas Luhmann's definition, Joas defines contingency as follows: *"A fact is contingent if it is neither necessary nor impossible – something that is but does not have to be. I think this definition is useful because it makes clear at the outset that the best way to understand the meaning of contingency is to see it as a counter-notion to another idea, namely 'necessity'. Thus the precise meaning of the term 'contingency' depends on the precise meaning of the term 'necessity' that it presupposes. If 'necessity' referred, as in pre-modern philosophy, to the idea of a 'well-ordered cosmos', 'contingency' referred to the incompleteness and imperfection of the merely sensual and material world on the one hand, and to the liberty and creativity of God's unrestrained will on the other."* (Joas, 2004, p.394)

The concept of contingency carries a double meaning: on the one hand it signifies *coincidence* or *conjunction*, and on the other it is *free will* or *volition* (Joas, 2008, p.209). In the former sense it refers to the uncertainty and ambivalence and in the latter sense to possibilities and the *Spielraum* of the actor.

The former dimension, the uncertainty side of contingency, so to say, emphasises the fact that our history and living are essentially haphazard and random: things often happen by accident. Nevertheless, as the US sociologist Howard S. Becker states: *"[...] social science theory looks for determinate causal relationships, which do not give an adequate account of this thing that 'everyone knows'. If we take the idea of 'it happened by chance' seriously, we need a quite different kind of research and theory than we are accustomed to."* (Becker, 1994, p.183)

In this latter sense, the freedom side of contingency could be seen as an ability to handle and face the contingent characteristics of reality; as “the art of playing with the contingency” as the Finnish political scientist Kari Palonen puts it: *“Polity and policy refer to attempts to regiment (polity) or to regulate (policy) the contingency characteristic of politics as action. As opposed to them, politicization refers to opening new aspects of contingency in the situation and thus expanding the presence of the political in it. Politicking may be interpreted as the art of playing with the contingency, using it both as an inescapable moment of the situation to be considered in any case and as an instrument against opponents less ready to tolerate or make use of the presence of the contingency.”* (Palonen, 1993, p.13)

The concept of contingency is put forward in at least a few Finnish texts as an explanation for the Finnish PISA success. For example, Simola (2005, p.465-466) concluded his historical and sociological remarks on this success as follows: *“The Finnish ‘secret’ of top-ranking may [...] be seen as the curious contingency of traditional and post-traditional tendencies in the context of the modern welfare state and its comprehensive schooling.”*

Similarly, Jarkko Hautamäki, the head of the Finnish PISA 2006 Team, recently stated: *“The major point to know [for understanding the Finnish comprehensive school] is that the new system was indeed comprehensive. This was both a necessity [...] and a chance encounter, a lucky constellation of political, economical and social conditions.”* (Hautamäki & al. 2008, p.197; cf. Kupiainen & al., 2009)

We elaborate the analysis a little further in this article: what might be that “curious contingency of traditional and post-traditional tendencies”, or the “chance encounter, a lucky constellation” that would make the Finnish PISA success understandable, at least to some extent?

Our aim here is to develop and even to test contingency as a theoretical instrument for comparative understanding. Only theoretical conceptualisations can constitute a basis for complex comparisons. Therefore, our main objective is to see whether the concept of contingency could shed new light on and promote a deeper as well as a broader understanding of the national phenomenon known as the ‘Finnish PISA success’, rather than to try to explain it in comparative terms.

3. A high belief in schooling

There are astonishingly few comparative studies on Finnish education, even related to the other Nordic countries. Nevertheless there is a strong national consensus that, on the international level, Finns appreciate education, or schooling to be more precise, very much. Therefore, the belief in schooling as an agent for social equality and as a cornerstone of continuity and consensus in Finnish education policy has remained stronger than in many other advanced liberal countries.

Our hypothesis is that the high belief in schooling is an outgrowth from the contingent conjunction of three social changes that all came exceptionally late in Finland: the expansion of schooling, the modernisation of the occupational structure and the construction of the welfare state.

Finland was among the last countries in Europe to establish compulsory education. Six-year elementary education was made compulsory by law only in 1921, in the same year as in Thailand, whereas the relevant legislation was in force in Denmark in 1814, in Sweden in 1842 and in Norway in 1848. Moreover, primary-school expansion was slow even after the law, and compulsory education was not fully functional and did not cover all children across the whole country and among all social groups until just before WW2. (Ramirez & Boli-Bennett, 1982 ; Rinne, 1984 ; Rinne & Salmi, 1998, p.27)

All this is indicative of the fact that the Finnish success story in education is historically very recent: whereas almost 70 per cent of the younger generation nowadays aspire to a higher-education degree, among their grandparents about the same proportion obtained the full elementary-school certificate. Table 1 clearly illustrates the late blooming of Finnish education.

Table 1 - The expansion of schooling in Finland 1880-1970

Sources: Kerr, forthcoming, Kivinen, 1988, p.48; Kivinen, Rinne & Ahola, 1989, p.62. Nb. The figures in other forms of education than that of the Primary and Lower Secondary Schools are very low and near to each other.

The late development of the educational system at the secondary level in Finland and the low percentage of participation in secondary education compared to the other Nordic countries are clearly visible in the following Table 2. In 2001 only about half of 55-65-year-olds had a certificate of secondary education (51%) compared to 65-72% in the other Nordic countries. The differences were still remarkable - well over ten percents in 2005 - compared to the other Nordic countries. Because of the late historical formation and widening of the educational system, the educational gaps between older and younger generations in their educational levels are among the widest in Europe.

Table 2 - Two Nordic population cohorts aged 55-64 years with at least an upper-secondary education

Source: Education at a Glance, 2002, p. 37; 2007, p.37

The same is also true of the modernisation of the occupational structure. Finland belongs to the group of European nations that has most recently left behind their agrarian society and life style. The process of industrialisation and urbanisation was sluggish until the Second World War, compared with Central Europe and the other Nordic countries. In 1945, 70 per cent of the Finnish population lived in rural areas, and almost 60 per cent were employed in agriculture and forestry. Following the great migration in the 1960s, by 1970 half were living in cities and 32 per cent were employed in industry and construction (cf. e.g., Alapuro & al., 1987). Tables 3 and 4 contrast the late but rapid change in the Finnish occupational structure with the changes in other Nordic countries.

Table 3 - Change of working population in agricultural work in Nordic countries 1880-1970

Source: Pöntinen, 1983, p.46.

Nb. The change in Norway and Denmark is during the table very similar (from 1880 to 1910 exactly the same) and therefore the table in their cases is nearly unreadable.

Table 4 - Change of working population in industrial and service work in Nordic countries 1880-1970

Source: Pöntinen, 1983, p.46

Whereas the demise of agrarian labour took place over 80 years in Norway, and over 50 years in Sweden, it happened in Finland within 20 years. No wonder, then, that the construction of the welfare state began a decade later than in the other Nordic countries. Table 5 below gives a compressed view of the different lengths and timing of the changes.

Table 5 - The timing and rapidity of the changes in occupational structure in three Nordic countries: the period during which the agrarian labour force decreased in proportion from 50 to 15 per cent

Source: Karisto & al., 1998, p.64

Expansion of the welfare state after WW2 meant an upheaval in the labour markets of the Nordic countries. Public-sector employment in Finland grew from 20 to over 30 per cent between 1970 and 1985. Typical of the Finnish model was that the growth began later but also continued longer than in the other Nordic countries (Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6 - Public employment in Nordic countries 1970-1985

Source: Kosonen, 1998, p.152

Table 7 - Growth of the work force of the public sector in the Nordic countries 1963-1987

Source: Alestalo, 1991, p.8

We could therefore conclude that the high belief in schooling resulted from the contingent conjunction of its late expansion, the late modernisation of the occupational structure and the late construction of the welfare state. These social changes happened in most countries successively rather than one at a time. It may be that this rare conjunction created a strong collective experience of causality between progress in formal education and simultaneous social advancement. In fact, the Finnish sociologist of education Ari Antikainen (1990) referred to the very same phenomena when he wrote that the overall rise in student enrolment brought increasing numbers of students from the lower classes, even though their proportion of the total number remained low. This might be « a shared experience among the common people », who also have their own experience of education as a real resource in the rapid transformation of Finnish society, not least as a channel of migration from rural areas and agriculture to the cities in the period of the 'Great Migration', 1960-1975.

4. The high status of teachers in comprehensive schools

Although the belief in schooling is not well documented, the popularity of the teaching profession among Finnish students is a fact. Year after year teaching has retained its position as one of the most popular careers in terms of university entrance examinations (see e.g., Jussila & Saari, 2000; Kansanen, 2003). According to a survey among candidates for the matriculation examination (i.e. final-year students in upper-secondary school), teaching is clearly the number-one career choice and overtakes traditionally favourite professions such as medicine, law, psychology, engineering and journalism (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 11 February, 2004). It is also clear that teaching in primary schools is the most popular choice: the rate of acceptance for training is around 10 per cent.

Table 8 below shows clearly and more concretely that Finland has no shortage of students wanting to become teachers, and there are plenty of applicants for university places. During the 2000s only about every seventh, or at least less than every tenth aspiring teacher was admitted to the university teacher-training programme. In fact it has become clearly more popular than studies at university in general, and consequently it has become more difficult to get into

university for teacher training than to take almost any other academic course of study. This situation is quite unique in the world.

Table 8 - The percentages of accepted students versus applicants for teacher training and for university education in general in the 2000s

Source: Kumpulainen & Saari, 2005, p.10, p.12; Kumpulainen, 2009, p.20, p.22; OPH, 2009; OPM, 2010

One major reason for the popularity of primary-school teaching as a profession is the Master's-level qualification required of all teachers³, which is still unique in international terms. The teacher's career in Finland, even at primary-school level, is no *cul-de-sac* or second-class honour, but is on a par with all other professions requiring higher university degrees, which on an international level corresponds to the M.A. This qualifies them academically for doctoral studies, for example. It has also made teaching in primary school an accepted profession and a standard career choice among the offspring of those in the upper social strata.

Although the high level of teacher education is lauded as one of the essential factors behind the Finnish PISA success, no one has thus far and in this connection referred to the contingent coincidence and conjunction of the establishment of Master's-level teacher education.

Our second hypothesis is that Master's-level teacher education was realised due to the coincidence of teacher-education reform and the General Degree Reform of Higher Education.

The reform in teacher education was planned in close connection with the Comprehensive School Reform of the 1970s. The 1971 Act on Teacher Education transferred primary-school teaching to the universities. However, the degree programme was still on a three-year basis and on the Bachelor's level, i.e. at the level of a lower university degree. It is remarkable that there were no state-committee or other authoritative texts proposing the elevation of primary-school-teacher training to the Master's level before 1978. On the contrary, a late-stage teacher-

³ The only exception relates to kindergarten teachers, whose training was moved to the Bachelor's level in early 1990s.

education committee (KM, 1974, KM, 1975) headed by an influential professor of education suggested in 1975 that even the four-year degree model should *not* incorporate Master's-level studies in education.

It was only the coincidence with the General Degree Reform of Higher Education launched in 1977-80 that brought teacher education up to the Master's level, and this was also a coincidental consequence of the abolishment of the Bachelor's level⁴, with a few exceptions, from Finnish universities. Since 1979 primary-school teachers have completed their MA studies in four to five years, with educational science as their major. What is remarkable here is that the final decision was made as part of the General Degree Reform of Higher Education, and the thousands of pages of committee reports and memoranda written since the late 1960s by specialists in teacher education were ignored (Simola 1995, p.184-185; 1993).

This gives us reason to conclude that this clearly essential decision behind the popularity and status of the Finnish teaching profession was apparently realised due to the contingent coincidence of the General Degree Reform of Higher Education with the implementation of the reforms in teacher education (Simola, 1993; Simola & al., 1997).

5. High-trust culture

The former social-democratic head of the National Board of Education, Erkki Aho, the main driver of the comprehensive-school reform between 1973 and 1991, made a statement that it was in his period, in the 1980s that the belief and high trust in schooling became a consensual belief in Finland: *"The gradual shift toward trusting schools and teachers began in the 1980s, when the major phases of the initial [comprehensive school] reform agenda were completely implemented and consolidated in the education system. In the early 1990s, the era of a trust-based culture formally began in Finland."* (Aho & al. 2006, p.12, p.132)

To anyone familiar with Finnish schooling this definitely sounds too lofty and too smug to be true. There is clear counter-evidence, too. Perusal of the thousands of pages of state committee and memoranda material between the 1860s and 1990s, and since the implementation of the Comprehensive School Reform in the 1970s, revealed only one exception in which classroom teachers were *not* seen as the very obstacles to developing education and thus as the objects *par excellence* of the reform (Simola 1995).

It is true, however, that the supervision of work done in Finnish schools is minimal by international standards. All traditional forms of control over the teacher's work had disappeared by the beginning of the 1990s. The school inspectorate, a detailed national curriculum, officially approved teaching materials, weekly timetables based on the subjects taught and a class diary in which the teacher had to record what was taught each hour—all these traditional mechanisms were abandoned. Furthermore, Finland has never had a tradition of nationwide standardised testing at the comprehensive-school level. Indeed, according to a Eurydice report (2004), Finnish teachers at comprehensive schools seem to have the greatest freedom from evaluative control among their European colleagues. All this can be interpreted as very high trust in the work of teachers and the culture of schools, which may legitimate the rare rather autonomous position of the semi-profession of teachers and school welfare institutions (Rinne, Simola, Mäkinen-Streng, Silmäri-Salo & Varjo, in press).

One should nevertheless keep in mind that the aim of the reform in the 1990s was not to free teachers but rather to restructure the steering of education. Traditional means of normative control were to be replaced by evaluation, realised by the municipal and national authorities. This was clearly expressed by the then Secretary General of the NBE: evaluation is a pivotal element

⁴ The Bachelor's Degree was re-introduced in Finnish universities in the late 1990s because of the Bologna process but, understandably, there was no real discussion on lowering the qualification demands of teachers at that time, although the whole idea behind the Bologna process was in that direction.

in the new steering system since it “replaces the tasks of the old normative steering, control and inspection system” (Hirvi, 1996, p.93).

Then something unexpected and stunning happened again. The recession of 1991-93 heralded the deepest peacetime crisis in Finland’s economy. It is widely accepted that without shifting decision-making to the local level the municipalities could not have been required to cut spending as much as they did during the recession. Thus the new decentralised and deregulated mode of governance was moulded around the economic principles of savings and cutbacks. The process of decentralisation and deregulation started in the late 1980s, but in the thick of the recession the new legislation radically increased local autonomy and strengthened the judicial position of the municipalities⁵. The decentralisation level of educational administration in Finland became one of the highest in Europe (Temmes & al., 2002, p.129, p.92).

The radical decentralisation and deregulation spawned two competing coalitions in the national Quality Assurance and Evaluation (QAE) field of compulsory schooling, neither of which has real normative power over the municipalities and schools. On the one hand the Ministry of Education (ME) and the National Board of Education (NBE) consider QAE from the perspective of the education system and the associated legislation, and on the other the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA) and the Ministry of the Interior – often accompanied by the Ministry of Finance – see it in terms of municipal service production and legislation. Both of these coalitions have attempted to assume the leading role in determining the discourse of evaluation in the context of education.

The frustration seemed to be most evident among the officials from NBE in the interviews, which we made for Finnish education politicians and officials in one of our study (Simola & al. 2009). our interviewees, whereas in AFLRA there appeared to be a kind of complacent acceptance of the predominant situation. One high-ranking NBE official explains his/her feelings: “[...] *we have no jurisdiction to touch anything, we have no legislation about it, we have no mechanisms, we have nothing. This, in a nutshell, is our biggest weakness.*” (Simola & al., 2009, p.171)

Given that all these proposals were directive rather than obligatory, it is no wonder that their implementation on the municipal level varies widely. The Finnish Parliamentary Committee for Education and Culture concluded in 2002: *“The evaluation work done has had very small effects at the level of municipalities and schools. Nation-level evaluations have been implemented to a creditable extent, but there is no follow-up on how these evaluations affect the actions of the evaluated and the development of the schools. [...] Many municipalities are at the very beginning in the evaluation of education.”* (CEC, 2002)

Therefore we venture to suggest a dimension of contingency here, too, although different than before. In this case an intervening conjunction – the deep economic recession and the radical municipal autonomy linked to it – circumvented and extinguished the reform intentions. Ironically enough, it seemed to create unintended side effects: trust and freedom.

6. Contingency as freedom and *Spielraum*

We have outlined the uncertainty side of contingency: contingency as coincidence and conjunction. There is also a freedom dimension: contingency as free will and *Spielraum*. The very first version of this article was presented in Finnish in Spring 2009 at a seminar involving the most eminent policymakers in Finnish education from the 1970s to the 1990s. It was a surprise that almost all of them sharply rejected all references to coincidence and conjunction: in their eyes it was all part of the purposeful, hard-headed, rational and also successful struggle to implement a consciously and carefully planned educational policy. There was no room for accident or coincidence.

⁵ Act on Central Government Transfers to Local Government (Law 707/1992) and the Local Government Act (Law 365/1995).

The policymakers found it hard to understand that accepting a certain randomness in life did *not* necessarily lead to the abandonment of a certain amount of freedom for the actors, rather the contrary⁶. By way of illustration we might ask, for example, what the freedom or *Spielraum* of the policymakers was and how they capitalised on it in these three historical cases. Let us just sketch out two notions.

First, there were different *levels of conjunction*. In the first case three historical processes (change in the occupational structure, the expansion of mass education and the construction of the welfare state), which 'normally' happen with certain time lags, were crammed into a very short period of time. In the second case two relatively separate reforms in the different educational sectors (Teacher Education Reform and the General Degree Reform in Higher Education) coincided. In the third case three reforms in different policy sectors (comprehensive-school governance, municipal autonomy and tightness of economy) were concurrent. What is common to them all is the fact that these conjunctions were not planned or foreseen by the contemporary actors, and the consequences were unexpected.

Secondly, the policymakers *reacted differently* in all these cases. The 'great conjunction' in post-war Finland was considered by many contemporary politicians to be a state of emergency: in a poor, semi-agrarian society it was to find place for the 'Big Age Groups', born after WW2. The scale of the problem was huge. It was seen as an even bigger task than the recent settling of 450,000 refugees, more than 15 percent of the population, from the part of Karelia that was lost to the Soviet Union in WW2. The storage function of schooling, its capacity to keep part of the age group away from the labour market, was actualised in Finland in a drastic way. The policymakers reacted decisively and the late but quick expansion of the education system began. In the second case of Master's-level teachers, the policymakers were rather passive and finally agreed to the decision made by the higher decision makers as a part of a bigger higher-education reform. The implementation of evaluation-based governance in comprehensive schooling was quite similar. The policymakers concerned did not see any alternatives as long as the decision on municipal autonomy was beyond their jurisdiction. What is similar in all these cases, however, is that there was certain freedom or *Spielraum* for the policy actors.

Conclusion

Our aim in this article was twofold. On the one hand we emphasise the importance of 'truths' - i.e., consensual taking for granted and self evidence - in understanding the political history of education, and on the other we highlight the concept of contingency as fruitful theorisation for analysing the emergence of these truths.

We have argued, first, for an interpretation according to which no understanding of Finnish comprehensive schooling is possible without taking into account at least three deep-rooted national beliefs: the belief in schooling as an essential source of welfare, the belief in teachers as rather solid and stable suppliers of this common good, and finally the belief in schools as institutions that deserve a certain autonomy, trust and industrial peace free from trendy quality-assurance and evaluation systems. Secondly, we have tried to show that these beliefs have been constructed through historical processes in which both rational actors and coincidental factors have always met, converged and intertwined.

Hans Joas' construction of the ambiguous concept of contingency⁷ as dialectics between uncertainty and freedom, coincidence and *Spielraum* is useful. From the point of view of the actor, awareness of contingency means, on the one hand, that things are increasingly not necessary or impossible, and on the other that it is precisely this that not only makes the change possible but also acts for it. Thus and paradoxically, the concept opens up the field of meaningful

⁶...or these senior policymakers simply may represent the generation that never became familiar with the 'organised uncertainties' of risk management in the present-day world; see e.g., Power, 2007

⁷Franz Josef Wetz (1998) has presented seven different readings of contingency.

action in today's seemingly chaotic and intricate world. One could even say that it may 'save' the agency in these complex and late-modern times. In this sense, it could be seen as essential within the neostructuralist project, a channel through which to bring subjectivity, history and meaning back to the discussion in the wake of postmodernist and poststructuralist nihilism (Frank, 1989; Heiskala, 2003).

What can we say, then, about the concept of contingency in relation to its Siamese twin comparative education research - under-theorisation and the unbearable narrowness of the national view - outlined at the beginning of this chapter? We could conclude that linear and causal explanations are not enough to enhance understanding of deviant trajectories in policy and politics, for example, not even in the case of one single nation state. Operating through functionalist and system models only, whether emphasising transnational or national trends and efforts or focusing solely on rational decisions and choices, does not give theoretically adequate instruments for comparative research.

Are the contingent events and conjunctions not exactly the facts and realities that, by definition, are incomparable in the strong sense implied at the beginning of this chapter? Yes, indeed. Therefore, contingency shall not be seen as an explanation but rather as a concept that should always be taken into account: there may always be an element of coincidence and freedom in human action. Elsewhere (Simola et al, 2011) we have tried to vitalise standard conceptions of comparative study such as path dependency and convergence by bringing in contingency. It seems that contingency may really have a certain analytical power in linking and bonding the dimensions of structure and agency in particular. This might not be as radical as it appears. It may merely be reminiscent of Bismarck's words, "Politics is the art of the possible", or the slogan of an ice-hockey coach, "Only the good teams are lucky"?

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