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## The Reinvention of the Comprehensive School System in Finland: how do market-oriented reforms impact upon equity and equality of opportunity?

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines the changing nature of comprehensive schooling in Finland since the 1990s and focuses on analysing the impact of the changes on equity and equality of opportunity. Comparisons are made between the development of 'school markets' in the south of the country and the situation in the north of the country where the case study municipality is situated. The developments in this municipality are found to be in contrast to the situation in the south of the country, particularly in the capital Helsinki, where competitive education markets have been encouraged to develop, creating more diversity and more competition between schools for students. This suggests that the various local areas can have their own policy priorities with contrasting policy aims, reflecting, in part, financial considerations and constraints which can have very different outcomes for equality of opportunity.

This article reviews developments in comprehensive schooling in Finland since the 1990s and examines the impact of the developments on equity and equality of opportunity. First, the developments of national education policies are outlined, and, second, empirical evidence from one case study municipality in Finland based on recently completed PhD research is examined. In order to provide readers with a brief historical synopsis, attention is first of all directed to briefly discussing the comprehensive revolution which took place in Finland in the 1960s and 1970s before moving on to evaluating the 'second revolution' – the shift into a more market-oriented direction in the 1990s, and with it, an increase of 'choice and diversity' types of policies. The article then moves on to discuss the outcomes of the recent reforms on equity and equality of opportunity – which still remain official aims of Finnish comprehensive

education – and focuses on empirical findings from research carried out between 2003 and 2007. A brief discussion concludes the paper.

Equity is defined as fairness according to one of its standard definitions (e.g. the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993). This can refer to fairness or unfairness of admissions policies, for example. Equality of opportunity, on the other hand, is defined as the rights of all children from all socio-economic as well as more marginalised backgrounds across all regions to have high quality education of equal standards in equally good schools. This composite definition thus recognises regional and socio-economic factors as well as the rights of children with SEN and children of immigrant backgrounds to equality of opportunity. Although issues relating to gender are important when assessing equality of opportunity in general, gender issues are not going to be specifically focused on in this study.

### **The Comprehensive Revolution**

The 1960s saw much heated and often ideologically based debate in the Finnish Parliament and various committees that deliberated on the possibilities for educational reform. It had become apparent that the existing educational system was patchy, diverse and inequitable, and furthermore, was not sufficient to produce the needed workforce for a growing economy (e.g. Nyberg, 1970; Rinne & Vuorio-Lehti, 1996). Political parties had opposing views on the best way to introduce changes and while the left-leaning parties favoured the comprehensive school idea, which they had done since the 1940s, the political Right, supported by the grammar school front, was strictly against the ‘socialist solution’. The supporters of the grammar schools raised concerns about declining standards if the parallel education system were to be reformed along the comprehensive lines. However, the Government gave its proposal for a Comprehensive School Bill to Parliament in 1967. The following parliamentary discussion marked a finalised change of view among the political Right towards comprehensivisation, and the comprehensive revolution was given a go-ahead (Kiuasmaa, 1982; Nurmi, 1989).

The Comprehensive School System Act 1968 was far-reaching in its aims since the idea of educational equality of opportunity was one of the cornerstones in the reforms alongside a concern for broader societal equality (e.g. Ahonen, 2002; Aho et al, 2006). A basic underlying premise of the Act was that all children should benefit from highly uniform and inclusive basic education regardless of their social and economic background and their place of residence. It was argued that an important role of education was to produce equality, and that this should be done through the equalisation of differences that derive from different background factors of children (Education Committee, 1974). Equality of opportunity was to be achieved through introducing a 9-year-long comprehensive school structure for 7-16-year-olds, with a divide at the age of 13 to separate primary from secondary education. A highly uniform curriculum and standards of teaching would aim for the

realisation of regional and social equality that was lacking in the old parallel system of basic education. Although ability setting in some topics was maintained at secondary level until 1984, mixed-ability teaching was the norm. The basic idea was to provide all school-aged children with equal facilities as well as with teachers who were trusted in their professionalism.

It may seem surprising that after a long battle for a consensus and a complete overhaul of the old dual basic education system, the institution of the comprehensive school was rather short-lived in its original form. From the late 1980s onwards the comprehensive school has been increasingly subjected to attacks from outside forces, and with it, claims for modernisation. Such ideological movements as the New Public Management movement and the neo-liberal movement found their advocates and started to build up a case for another reform in state education (Rinne et al, 2002).

### **The Second Revolution**

In 1990 an important event took place in the Parliament: a wide parliamentary debate was launched based on the 'Report of the Cabinet' by the Finnish Government about the state of affairs of the Finnish education system (Council of the State, 1990). The debate can be seen as a watershed in marking the introduction of a new type of education policy in which a more consumerist and decentralised approach would play an important role. Among the issues discussed was the question of equality of opportunity. The Report of the Cabinet argued that equality of opportunity, although still a central concept for Finnish education policy, should entail recognition for differing talents and predispositions of children, and their entitlement to receive education that would take their individual talents into consideration. Furthermore, successful education policy would need to be flexible in order to be able to adjust to changes in society and the world at large. At the level of schools this could entail schools developing their own unique characteristics, and at the secondary level, increasing options for students to choose what they want to study (*ibid.*).

In educational management reform one of the first, and most far-reaching of changes of the 1990s, was that of the funding system. Where previously funds received by the municipalities from the state to finance welfare services were ear-marked to ensure equality of provision across the country, from 1993 they were based on a lump-sum funding (Moisio, 2002). Municipalities now had the right to use the money between different sectors such as health and social services, and education according to their own wishes (Vulliamy & Nikki, 1997). In the field of education this meant that municipalities could and can, in practice, decide what type of formula to use in allocating money received from the state to the school-level (European Commission, 2000). The formula can be based on pupil numbers or other criteria as decided by the local authority – in Helsinki the formula has recently become student number based (The Board of Education of the city of Helsinki, 2007). Subsequently, the link between funding following the student has been strengthened, enabling the development

of a stronger school market in the area. Schools may have added incentives to compete for the custom of children and parents to attract more funding.

Educational legislation introduced during the 1990s made it clear that the comprehensive school as it had existed since 1968 had been overhauled. There was a distinct move from a centrally prescribed national curriculum towards school-based curricula, which was made possible by the radical curriculum reform in 1994 (Norris et al, 1996). Schools were now allowed to take steps to move into the direction of specialisation (Seppänen, 2003), and decision-making powers at the level of schools were greatly enhanced to support this aim. The implementation of the Basic Education Act 1998 represented a next significant step towards a more market-oriented education policy: such concepts as parental choice, diversity of provision and an increased emphasis on assessment and evaluation were now officially a part of the Finnish educational discourse and legislation. The 1998 Act spelled out that the municipalities were still required to allocate school places to all children living in their area of jurisdiction and to ensure that travel to and from school must be 'as safe and short as possible' (Finlex, 2004). However, providing that there were free places left after this, these places could be allocated to children from outside the catchment area (Seppänen, 2001; Finlex, 2004). Parents and children were thus able to apply to other than the allocated school. Furthermore, specialist classes were in effect allowed to by-pass this requirement by relying on entrance tests to select an intake of children. The municipality *could decide*, however, that a priority in allocation of school places is given to children living in the local area – this also applies to specialist classes (Finlex, 2004).

### **The Development of School Markets in Finland**

Some research has been carried out in Finland investigating the impact of the creation of school markets in the largest cities where 'choice policies' have taken off. As discussed above, the Education Act 1998 stipulates that municipalities have to offer parents the option of requesting a school other than the local school for their children if they so wish. In practice, however, the situation can be different because choice is only possible if certain criteria are met. There have to be a relatively large number of schools in a given locality for parents to be able to 'choose' alongside some diversity of provision. In sparsely populated rural or semi-rural areas this is unlikely to be the case – parents have no option other than to send their children to a local school (Nyyssölä, 2004). In addition, municipality policies vary and the introduction of measures to encourage competition of schools is unlikely to be a priority in many municipalities that are struggling to make financial ends meet. The problematic state of municipality finances has been recognised as a nationwide dilemma, and many municipalities have been forced to cut educational services, for instance by closing down schools leading into decreasing possibilities for parents to exercise choice (Kiander et al, 2005).

School choice in three large cities in Finland has been investigated by Seppänen (2001, 2003) and in five large cities by Seppänen (2004, 2006) who found that there had been some polarisation in terms of opinion and ranking of the comprehensive schools in the areas studied. In addition, diversity had increased as a result of schools specialising in some subject areas and becoming partially selective. This development can be argued to be a direct result of municipalities encouraging schools to specialise – in Helsinki, for example, authorities have decided to draw such small school catchment areas in the centre that schools are able to ‘select in’ a large intake through competitive admissions procedures. Some schools have become mostly ‘selective’ as most students are from other than the local catchment area (Seppänen, 2003). The requirement, by the Education Act 1998, that choice is only possible after children from the local area are admitted is thus surpassed.

Seppänen’s research also indicated that parents had developed polarised opinions of schools: some parents surveyed ranked 22-40 per cent of the schools as being ‘particularly unpopular’ whereas in two of the cities surveyed there were schools that were ranked ‘very popular’. The most popular and sought after schools were those that had one or more selective specialist streams while the least popular schools tended not to have any specialist classes or had non-selective school-wide specialisms (Seppänen, 2004). In addition, it was found that a clear social class bias was present – those parents who most actively utilised their ability to choose were from higher social strata (Seppänen, 2001). The more highly educated parents also applied for a place at the popular schools more frequently than average and, in general, were overrepresented in living close to these schools as well (Seppänen, 2006).

Regional variations in student attainment have emerged between northern and southern Finland as highlighted by researchers such as Jakku-Sihvonen and Komulainen (2004) and Kuusela (2006). Indeed, it has been pointed out that the existing legislation, by design, allows far-reaching practices to emerge because flexibility constitutes one of its underlying principles (e.g. Luhtanen, 1999; Rinne et al, 2002) and as such, there is no indication as to where these kinds of developments are heading and where they are going to end.

There are questions about the implications of these developments for equity and equality of opportunity although, as international evidence has shown, Finland is still a highly equal country in terms of student achievement (OECD, 2004, 2007). This has been recognised by authors like Kuusela (2006), who has alluded to the fact that the equal education system, by international standards, hides within it unequal elements through policy solutions adopted by municipalities. It is clear that there is considerable autonomy for municipalities to design education services in different local contexts governed by different circumstances and development priorities which can lead to regional disparities. The autonomy of local authorities is an important factor explaining why some municipalities such as those in the south of the country have gone further down the road towards introducing schools markets than other areas including the

case study municipality examined in this study – local authorities can, if they want, develop school markets in their areas.

Financial considerations and constraints are likely to either foster or hinder developments in education policy and practice at the local level. Empirical evidence from the case study municipality suggests that the issue of finance is indeed an important component when considering how and why certain kinds of developments have taken place in the domain of schools and educational decision-making (Ylonen, 2008). Choice and diversity policies in educational services require extra expenditure while a limitation of parental choice and school diversity, found to have taken place in the case study municipality, is likely to be financially a cheaper option. Taking into consideration the long-term fiscal constraints in the municipality examined, it seems logical that a school market has not been given a go-ahead in the local area. This and other related issues are discussed in more detail next.

### **Specialisation, Diversity and Choice in One Municipality: limitation of the ‘school market’**

What has happened in the case study municipality over time in terms of specialisation, diversity and choice issues and how these trends are linked to the wider national education policy trends and priorities is interesting. It is evident that although, broadly speaking, the national and local levels are clearly interlinked, developments can take place at the local level which are unique to that situation and reflect local developments, finances and policy priorities. In what follows interviews carried out in the case study municipality – at the Local Education Board and the Education Office and four case study schools (City primary, Millpond primary, Hillside secondary and Parkview secondary schools – fictional names) – along official national and local policy documents provide the main sources of evidence.

At the national level the school diversity, choice, quality and effectiveness agenda has prevailed as a development trend in the most recent Development Plan *Education and Research 2007-2012* drawn by the Ministry of Education (2007) and approved by the Government. The latest educational legislation and policy which have an impact on development trends at the local level are the Basic Education Act 1998 and the National Framework Curriculum 2004 – more attention has subsequently been focused on the development of the ‘undivided’ comprehensive school through, for example, integration and inclusion (of special educational needs children and children of immigrant backgrounds), a more individual approach to teaching and learning, and to a local tripartite curriculum structure (municipality/area/school levels). Thus, in terms of specialisation of schools – first introduced by the National Curriculum reforms of the mid-1990s – there is still freedom for municipalities and schools to decide how to design education services at the local level, and municipalities can decide to give more weight to school-based curricula arrangements instead of municipality and/or area-based curricula.

But why did schools in the municipality specialise when this was still a clear development trend in the mid-1990s? Research findings suggest that the four case study schools had decided to introduce specialism largely as a response to external requests rather than the schools themselves initiating the introduction of specialism. A distinction between official and unofficial specialisms can be made which also explains the main policy drivers to a large extent as discussed below.

The foundations of official specialisms which had been conceived in the official sphere outside schools clearly drew attention to external policy drivers – official specialisms were offered to schools rather than the specialisms emerging from within schools. These were in direct contrast to unofficial specialisms which highlighted internal policy drivers as the main motive for the introduction of a specialism at the level of schools. Unofficial specialisms were created within schools and had little to do with the external domain of educational decision-making. Hillside secondary school and its classless teaching pedagogy was found to be the only specialism in the case study municipality that had begun as a response to a *strong* internal policy driver.

What can be concluded from the fact that external policy drivers were found to be the most common rationale for schools to specialise?

Since a majority of specialisms among the case study schools examined began as a response to an external request, in one way or another, it appears that schools' own motives had a secondary role to play in the developments. It cannot be concluded that schools would have introduced specialist classes merely in order to bolster popularity because, as seen in relation to external policy drivers, the initial decision did not emerge from inside the schools. At City primary school, for example, external policy drivers have been paramount since none of the school's specialist areas were introduced as a result of teachers' or the principal's interest areas.

Clearly, though, as discussed above, the educational legislation of the 1990s was aimed at encouraging schools across the municipalities in Finland to become different from one another, and in this sense some of the motives for schools to take on official specialisms can be related to wanting to become unique and different. However, in the case study municipality this was inseparably intertwined with external circumstances and external pressures – the educational decision-making domain with the Local Education Board and the Education Office that often offered specialisms to schools.

There were a number of factors which helped to explain where official specialisms were based. A school's location and size were the most important external rationales for basing certain official specialisms at schools. The city's music classes and English-speaking classes at City school and Hillside school, for example, were initially placed at these schools because they were located close to the city centre with good transport links. Paradoxically, the issue of location also turned out to be an important factor when deciding which schools were to be closed down in the municipality due to ongoing financial difficulties.

Both City and Hillside schools were destined to be closed because they were located at the most valuable central sites.

The main motives for schools to introduce specialisms at the case study schools tended to combine different kinds of rationales, but external drivers were by far the most common. It is clear that reasons which could be assumed to be important under a more competitive educational market-place played an insignificant role in explaining motives for specialisation at the case study schools. In this sense some of the developments in the case study municipality were more in tune with the national education policy trends prior to the reforms in the 1990s, for example by embracing traditional liberalism instead of neo-liberalism. There were more prominent rationales influencing the development of policy priorities in the case study municipality and schools – some of these issues are examined next.

The creation of the 'area-model' in the municipality was one particularly interesting issue which emerged and which was related to a local interpretation of national education policies and priorities. The area-model limited parental choice in the municipality by increasing control at the Education Office and the Local Education Board, since it meant that children were directed to certain schools within their areas in a manner that grouped a number of primary schools around one secondary school. Furthermore, municipality and area-curricula were emphasised instead of school-based curricula. The underlying issues surrounding the introduction of the area-model were found to be far from simplistic, however, and can be seen to be linked to a number of different factors. First, as suggested above, the education legislation set to establish an undivided comprehensive school system highlighting integration and inclusion of all children, or different kinds of learners, within the system to be seen as a continuum from the beginning to the end of compulsory education. This was seen to be one background factor which influenced the creation of the area-model in the case study municipality. Equity and equality of opportunity can be seen to have been enhanced due to limitations on parental choice while an increased emphasis has been placed on the idea of a local school and inclusion and integration of immigrant children and SEN children within mainstream schools. Evidently, the situation in the case study municipality is very different to that in municipalities in the south of the country, like the capital Helsinki, as researched by Seppänen (2001, 2003, 2006).

Statistical evidence from the case study municipality showed that the municipality had faced long-term ongoing financial difficulties. But did economic considerations have any impact on the establishment of the area-model? It appears that although some elements under the area-model initiative were introduced, partly, because there were thought to be more economical, the issues are not straightforward.

The integration and inclusion of SEN children within mainstream schools is one area where there are clear signs that financial considerations have been guiding policy, yet equity and equality of opportunity have also constituted background rationales. Similarly, in terms of the area-model itself, economic



rationales appear to play a part alongside equity and equality of opportunity considerations. The Education Board had made a decision in 1998 to limit schools in the municipality expanding by removing financial incentives if they exceeded their defined optimum size – a decision which can be seen as a predecessor to the area-model. More control has been thus directed to the Local Education Board and Education Office and measures have been introduced which discourage parental choice, for example by making it necessary for parents to self-finance travel to a non-allocated school. At the same time, the emerging inequities between schools in terms of school-based curricula and weekly lesson hours also seem to be behind the motives for the introduction of the area-model. The ex-principal of Millpond school commented that ‘children living in different parts of the same city received a noticeably different amount of teaching within the same academic year’, while the ex-Chair of the Board pointed out that ‘when schools were responsible for compiling their own curricula, [the curricula] became extremely colourful – everyone did as they pleased pretty much...’. What fuelled the development of the area-model thus combines both economic considerations alongside the aim of enhancing equity and equality of opportunity for all children in the municipality. What is clear, though, is that because economic difficulties have been long-standing in the municipality, they are thus likely to constitute important background factors to any policy development in the local sphere. No policy would be likely to be introduced if it was more costly than already existing practices. This realisation was brought up by many interviewees, directly or indirectly, who saw the prevailing economic difficulties as having a clear, and often severe, impact on education services in the municipality.

A common factor which united the views of many interviewees was a belief in the success of Finnish comprehensive school system – without market-oriented reforms like the introduction of competition between schools, which many of the people interviewed saw as a negative development. It appears, on the basis of these findings, that a majority of the interviewees’ views were more in tune with the political left or centre left/right – indeed only one interviewee expressed views which were more conservative in nature. Another interesting issue which emerged in relation to interpretations of values was the individuality/communality dichotomy. The changing educational legislation of the 1990s meant that there occurred a change in the underlying values from communality and group values towards notions of the rights of individuals – including the rights of more talented children, children with special educational needs and children from immigrant backgrounds to receive education suited to their needs. Specialisation of schools can be seen as an element of the individualisation agenda of the comprehensive school – the provision of more diversity to cater for differing needs of different children and their parents.

It emerged that many interviewees had incorporated the concept of individuality within that of communality. This is significant because it suggests that the comprehensive school ideology, represented by the concept of communality, with all children studying side by side in mixed-ability groups,

has been modified in many people's minds following the increasing individualisation of the common school. The issue of the rights of more talented children to receive education suited to their needs was raised by many interviewees. However, as pointed out above, a great majority of the interviewees still believed in the common school and what it represents – inclusiveness and regional and socio-economic equality of opportunity. This, then, alludes to tensions between the perceived rights of individuals, like the talented, and those of groups and/or communities whether on socio-economic or regional grounds – does the focus on individuals' rights undermine the rights of groups and communities? A teacher from Hillside school, for example, thought that

the basic idea of the comprehensive school ideology is that all students should be provided with the same starting conditions and opportunities to learn. In this sense extensive specialisation might not be necessary...but on the other hand specialisms in music or sports, for example, could be something that enrich life...I have nothing personal against specialisation or differentiation...

Furthermore, a belief that that special needs students and students from immigrant backgrounds have a right to be educated alongside their peers in mainstream classes where possible can be seen to represent the rise of individualisation.

From the point of view of equity and equality of opportunity, these two groups of children have benefited from the emphasis placed on inclusion and integration although this motive appears to have been accompanied by financial motives. It appears that the integration and inclusion of special needs students in the case study municipality was partly introduced because it was seen as a cheaper way to teach SEN children in the municipality – the issue of equality of opportunity becomes therefore less clear. At the same time, however, the development trends in terms of inclusion and integration in the municipality are in line with national policy recommendations as well as the broader values and aims of educational legislation and National Curriculum guidelines. Again, this alludes to a specific interpretation of the national context within the local decision-making arena where economic problems have been long-standing, and inescapable, background factors to policy development.

### **What Has Happened to Equity and Equality of Opportunity in the Case Study Municipality?**

A question can be raised about whether specialisation of schools is a phenomenon which is broadly in line with equity and equality of opportunity. This dilemma can be approached by focusing on the issue of selection and what has been happening at the case study schools following specialisation. Since space does not allow all of the case study schools to be examined here, attention below is focused on Millpond primary and Hillside secondary schools.

Millpond school and the development of its English-weighted classes provide an interesting case study of how policies can dramatically change from within the school to a more equitable direction.

At the beginning of the English-weighted specialism at Millpond in the early 1990s only a small proportion of the children beginning their primary education at the school were enrolled in the programme since only one new class each year was part of the 'experiment'. This meant that the majority of the schools' student population was studying as 'normal' while another part was following the specialist language teaching pedagogy. As there were more children wanting to start in the specialist stream than there were places available, admissions policies had to be used. The school experimented with the use of such criteria as siblings who already were enrolled in the programme, random lottery methods and 'first come, first served' type of selection. To coincide with difficulties in relation to admissions criteria there was an unforeseen problem with the way that the existence of the specialist stream created internal polarisation within the school. A division of students into two categories emerged: the more demanding special needs students typically at the non-specialist classes, and the more able students at the English-weighted classes. The emerging polarisation within the school reflected two distinct issues. First, a lack of spaces for the specialist class meant that not all who applied could be given a place and, second, the more demanding curriculum in the English-weighted classes meant that those with some special educational needs requirements would not opt for entry to the specialist classes. According to the ex-principal of the school, 'there were signs that those children who already had problems with language development and other difficulties too did not apply to the English-weighted class whereas those who were talented did apply. And as a result the [ability] levels of these two parallel classes started to diverge'. Inequalities of access were thus apparent.

Signs of polarisation of the student population into distinct categories resulted in elitist interpretations emerging among teachers at the school, and it was reported that they had emerged among local parents too. This development became a cause for concern for a part of the teaching body and resulted in a thorough review of existing policies and evaluation of possible options for reform. The end outcome of a decision to expand the programme to cover the whole school meant that all forms of selection were abolished, and thus, equity of access was enhanced. This shows that concerns about equity and equality of opportunity issues remained important considerations for many teachers – Millpond school became more equitable as a result.

Of the two secondary schools, the fate of Hillside school was particularly interesting. Hillside school's specialism through the non-selective classless teaching pedagogy among other official specialisms can be linked with a rise in the number of applicants to the school in the 1990s, and an expansion of student numbers. In addition to the school's popularity, the strong ethos that emerged at the school appeared to combine both the concepts of individuality and communality to a larger extent than other schools in the city. Aspects of

individuality were enhanced by the school's classless teaching pedagogy, which allowed a more individual approach to student learning, for example through individual curriculum plans and a possibility to progress faster or slower than average. Community, on the other hand, can be seen to have been enhanced by the presence of a relatively large immigrant student community as well as the overall ethos that was built around inclusiveness and tolerance. The ex-principal of the school pointed out that:

We had an ideology whereby we were aiming to serve different kinds of learners – we had many optional courses...and these were aimed at ensuring that those who had interests and abilities in certain things could take this direction accordingly. We aimed at proving basic education, the common courses, and then you could go to which direction you want with these optional courses.

As discussed previously, these concepts were interpreted as being important by many of the people interviewed in the case study municipality. Furthermore, this model – combining individuality with community – was seen as something that should be enhanced and developed further in future. If this type of approach is genuinely believed to be the future for schools, as something that schools should aspire to achieve, then Hillside school might represent a 'prototype' of a school where individuality meets community. In the light of these considerations it would appear very unfortunate that Hillside school was closed down in 2007.

On equality of opportunity grounds Hillside school presented an interesting case. The classless teaching pedagogy was a non-selective specialism, but contributed to a rising popularity of the school as compared to other secondary schools in the area. Can this be seen as an inequitable development? And were local decision-makers right in adopting the area-model which meant that students were allocated to local schools whereby parental choice was limited and Hillside school was not allowed to take on as many students as before?

It can be argued that if equity and equality of opportunity remain important aims of educational planning and decision-making then it is fair to say that parental choice, and creation of diversity between schools perhaps leading to an emergence of a local school market, should be limited. As discussed, despite the fact that Hillside school's classless teaching specialism was always non-selective the fact that parents could express preferences meant that the school had more applicants than it could take. If allowed to expand, under more market-oriented education policies, the school could have become elitist and the introduction of competitive admissions policies may have become an inevitable end-result. The creation of the area-model therefore has increased equality of opportunity for all children – albeit the fact that this had negative consequences on Hillside school which became smaller in size. It may be that if the comprehensive school ethos is desired then schools should not be allowed to become very different from one another in terms of taking on specialist

features that can lead to some schools becoming more popular than others – the case of Hillside school serving as a good example.

### **Discussion**

The research findings which have emerged from one case study municipality in Finland have indicated that the development of the local 'school market' represents unique circumstances prevailing in the municipality examined (Ylonen, 2008). The developments in the case study municipality have been seen to be in contrast to the situation in the south of the country, particularly the capital Helsinki, where more competitive education markets have been encouraged to develop creating more diversity and more competition between schools for students. This suggests that different local areas can have very different education policy priorities with contrasting policy aims, reflecting, in part, financial considerations and constraints.

Lack of financial resources can have an impact on equity and equality of opportunity issues at the local level affecting availability and coverage of services for SEN children and children of immigrant backgrounds for example – as empirical evidence has indicated – but it can also enhance equity and equality of opportunity for all children by forcing local decision-makers to limit school diversity and parental choice. As seen, in the case study municipality the school market in operation was very limited and, importantly, the policy of parental choice has not been encouraged. Furthermore, as evidence from the case study schools themselves indicates, specialisation occurred largely as a response to external policy drivers and hence had little to do with incentives to become different from the rest in attempts to attract children and parents. It is evident from the findings that the local authority, and in some cases schools, possess considerable autonomy which enable them to design education services suited to particular local needs and priorities.

It can be argued, on the basis of the research findings, that selection of students through admission policies and the policy of parental choice are both problematic on the grounds of equity and equality of opportunity. Selective admissions policies are likely to have inequitable outcomes whereas parental choice is problematic since, by design, it serves to differentiate and categorise schools that parents can then choose. Even without any selective measures being present at schools parental choice can still be seen to pose problems if equity and equality of opportunity remain aspirations. The ideal of the comprehensive school requires that all schools are equally good, and hence, that parents have no need to 'choose' schools.

This model of equality of opportunity thus suggests that the creation of considerable diversity between schools should be discouraged and that there should be non-selective admissions policies. Local authorities should allocate children to schools in the nearby areas, and subsequently, discourage the policy of parental choice. If there is a need for specialist services, these should still comply with the above – in other words, only school-wide specialisms would

be possible whereby there is no need for selection of students, and the allocation of students to schools would be done on residential basis. As far as services for SEN and immigrant children are concerned, the state should provide adequate resources to finance services for these children in municipalities, which in general, are becoming more heterogeneous due to integration and inclusion policies – a lack of funding can have a negative effect on equity and equality of opportunity for the more marginalised groups of children. In areas where residence-based allocation of school places could be negatively affected by residential segregation – likely to be the case in some parts of larger cities in Finland – additional funding to schools in the more disadvantaged areas could help to alleviate some of the prevailing inequities and inequalities. All schools should, of course, be of equal high standards under this model of equality of opportunity.

Overall, it is clear that these issues require much further investigation and further studies. It is important to find out what kinds of education markets have developed across municipalities in Finland since this has far-reaching implications for equity and equality of opportunity whether in terms of regional or socio-economic considerations, or integration and inclusion debates. There are potentially significant opportunities for much research under the umbrella of why and how certain types of policies have been adopted by schools and municipalities in different parts of Finland. Comparative research, ethnographic research and policy studies, for example, could be potential areas for further studies.

If equity and equality of opportunity remain important considerations for the Finnish education policy and the comprehensive school system at large, it is clear that the types of policies which have developed in the case study municipality in terms of the local 'school market' should be encouraged while the types which have emerged in cities in the south of the country should be discouraged and limited.

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